

**THE OBSERVER EFFECT:
TSEPENEAG'S VAIN ART OF THE FUGUE AND THE ILLUSION OF
MOVEMENT, THE ILLUSION OF SELF
(The Observer Effect: *Vain Art of the Fugue*)**

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Abstract: As Schrodinger's Cat proved the absurdity of the oversimplification of quantum states by early quantum theorists, Dumitru Tsepeneag's Vain Art of the Fugue attempts to prove the absurdity of realist writers attempting to measure reality through language (through the disguise of the conventions of narrative). Tsepeneag, instead, calls attention to this absurdity by constructing a text that eschews any and all such conventions. He attempts to illustrate the impossibility of constructing or "measuring" reality through narrative discourse, through language. Similar to Derrida's concept of plural dimension thought, he rejects any linear movement and the concept of a unified, stable self. In this way, the structure of the text relies not on linearity but on repetition—just like the structure of a fugue—and instead of a single, unified subjectivity, the text presents a subjectivity that constantly changes—just like the multiple voices that form a fugue. Tsepeneag shows us how the observer of reality—the author of "realist" texts—will always alter the system they are observing, because the instrument of measurement—language—cannot accurately measure a reality that is more complex than the instrument itself and more chaotic than any observer can ever hope to bear witness.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Post-structuralism, Derrida, Saussure, Language

I. Introduction

Imagine you have a cat. His name is Erwin. Imagine you have a box. Inside the box is a radioactive substance. This substance may decay in one hour—or it may not. Imagine you place Erwin the cat inside the box. Now imagine one hour passes. You don't open the box. Imagine what has happened to Erwin the cat. Is he still alive? Is he dead? You cannot know *until* you open the box—until you observe the state of Erwin the cat yourself (Mann).

This is the basic premise of Erwin Schrodinger's famous thought experiment which he developed to illustrate the absurdity of early interpretations of quantum mechanics (Baird). In early theories of quantum mechanics, quantum particles were theorized to exist in a "superposition of states at the same time" (Baird). These particles, early quantum theorists believed, only collapsed down to a single state upon being observed (Baird). Schrodinger believed this concept was absurd—that quantum mechanics was too complex to simplify in such way—and he used his cat-in-a-box thought experiment to illustrate such absurdity. Of course, Erwin the cat cannot be in a superposition of states, both alive and dead at the same time (Baird). The cat is *either* dead or alive, independent of the observation of the cat's state (Mann).

Nonetheless, the concept of the "observer effect" has continued to have applications both in and outside the realm of quantum mechanics (Dent). In physics, for example, the

observer effect is defined as a disturbance of an observed system by the act of observation (Dent). To illustrate, imagine you place a thermometer into a bucket of cold water (Dent). The thermometer, the instrument of measurement, will raise the temperature of the water it was meant to measure; you will not know the temperature of the water prior to the thermometer being placed in the water, because the instrument alters the state of the system (Dent).

The observer effect has also been applied outside the natural sciences (Dent). Human beings, for example, adjust their behavior when aware they are being observed (“Observer Effect”). Indeed, the observer effect seems particularly applicable to narrative—in particular literature that purports to reflect reality. Just as certain systems cannot be measured without the system being altered by the observer’s instrument of measurement, reality (as a system) cannot be measured by narrative because the instrument of measurement—language—will always alter the system. In other words, when a writer wishes to “measure” or “observe” (or capture or reflect) “reality” through narrative, they will always fail to be 100% accurate, because the only instrument they possess, language, limits meaning rather than expands meaning (Saussure 13-15). Most writers—especially those working in traditional modes of narrative, such as “realist” or modernist writers, including Socialist Realist writers—attempt to disguise this fact through certain conventions and narrative strategies, including, but not limited to, hegemonic discourse, cause and effect logic, linear movement through time, a clear beginning, middle, and end, and a stable and unified subject. In other words, these writers try to accurately “measure” or reflect reality through narrative sleight-of-hand. But like the thermometer, the instrument of measurement, language, alters the state of reality during such measurement. These “realist” writers—these observers of the system of reality—therefore, will always alter the system they are trying to accurately measure.

As Schrodinger’s Cat proved the absurdity of the oversimplification of quantum states by earlier theorists, Dumitru Tsepeneag’s *Vain Art of the Fugue* attempts to prove the absurdity of realist writers attempting to measure reality through language (through the disguise of conventions of narrative). Tsepeneag, instead, calls attention to this absurdity by constructing a text that eschews any and all such conventions. He attempts to illustrate the impossibility of constructing or “measuring” reality through narrative discourse, through language. In the text, he rejects any linear movement and the concept of a unified, stable self. Instead, the text relies on repetition, variation, and a consciousness or subjectivity that is repeatedly reborn depending on the circumstance. He shows us how the observer of reality—the author of “realist” texts—will always alter the system they are observing, because the instrument of measurement—language—cannot accurately measure a reality that is more complex than the instrument itself and more chaotic than any observer can ever hope to bear witness.

II. The Prelude: Socialist “Realism” and the Oniric Response in Romania

Before moving into a deeper discussion of *Vain of the Fugue*, let us situate the text and the author to “observe” how the text reacts to the conventions of strict social order, narrative “realism,” and the human construction of reality through hegemonic discourse.

Born in Bucharest in 1937, Dumitru Tsepeneag was raised in post-World War 2 Romania. During the war, Romania was originally a member of the Axis powers and participated in the German invasion of the Soviet Union (Horgaa and Stoica 14). After the war, the Allies, in particular the Soviet Union, forced Romania to sign the Paris Peace Treaty as a defeated enemy state (Horgaa and Stoica 15). As a result, Stalin demanded extensive reparations; Romania quickly fell under the influence of the powerful post-war Soviet Union. Communism soon flourished in Romania, becoming the dominant political party in 1947 (Horgaa and Stoica 16). For the next fifty years, the country became a totalitarian socialist society based on Marxist principles and (initially) Stalinist ideals (Horga and Stoica 17). National banks and businesses were established, religion was restricted, and everything that was a threat to the state was purged, including any works of art that did not depict the greatness of socialism (“Socialist Realism”).

Indeed, this type of state-sponsored art was known as Socialist Realism, which purported to be a “mirror of life” not unlike the earlier Russian realists, such as Tolstoy and Chekov (“Socialist Realism”). Nonetheless, Socialist Realism was also meant to be idealistic, to “mold the consciousness of the masses” by showing the “utopianism of communism” (“Socialist Realism”). So, while the “genre” purported to reflect “reality,” *in reality*, most of the works produced were propagandistic, showcasing one (biased) version of so-called “reality.” In other words, the observers (the writers of Socialist Realism) altered the state of the system (reality) through the instrument of hegemonic language, a one-sided, partisan, optimistic view of the socialist state, replete with “dauntless, purposeful, well-muscled, and youthful” characters or “heroes...strikingly alike in their lack of lifelike credibility” who inspire the working class to greater collective heights (“Socialist Realism”). Of course, as with other “realism” in literature, the writers of Socialist Realism also relied on traditional conventions of narrative realism, including cause and effect logic, linear movement through time, and a single, unified self.

In Romania (and indeed in much of the Soviet bloc), literature beyond Socialist Realism was often censored or altogether banned (Apostol). Dumitru Tsepeneag himself said in an interview, “[O]ne could only publish things that were to the Party’s liking” (Apostol). Of course, this did not stop intellectuals and writers from writing. Indeed, in the 1960s, a group of Romanian writers formed a literary group known as the Oniric group—a name which stems from the Romanian word *oneiros* which means dream (Apostol). This group, of which Tsepeneag was a core member, wrote surreal, experimental works, including *Vain Art of the Fugue*, as an act of rebellion against the communist regime and Socialist Realism (Bako 2). At the same time, the group sought to incorporate surrealism and dreams into their work to subvert established literary aesthetics and narrative patterns, as an act of rebellion against the then-dominant literary mode of realism (Bako 4-5).

While the group was initially deemed benign by the Romanian state, their work was eventually censored, and the word “oniric” was banned (Bako 2). The members of the group scattered across Europe (Apostol). Tsepeneag himself had his Romanian

citizenship revoked, and he was forced to live and write in France until the Romanian Communist Party was overthrown during the Romanian Revolution in 1989 (Horsley).

III. The Subject: Dumitru Tsepeneag's *Vain Art of the Fugue*

During his time in France, Tsepeneag finished his draft of *Vain Art of the Fugue*, which he had begun in Romania (Bourhis). In 1973, he published a French translation of the text; he could not publish in Romania as the text was considered anti-Socialist Realist (Bourhis). Indeed, the text does seem to rebel against the central conceit of Socialist Realism. There is no idealization of the communistic state or emancipation of the proletariat. Instead, the novel revolves around a single event—a man carrying flowers while running to catch a bus to make it to a train platform, while simultaneously, a woman on a train speeds toward the same platform. This one event repeats over and over throughout the text. In this way, the novel seems to reject the ideals of Socialist Realism, and indeed, Tsepeneag has confirmed the novel contains veiled political subtext through the idea of the impossibility of movement, the impossibility of running away from your own country (Bourhis). At the same time, however, the text is more than just an act of political rebellion; it is an act of rebellion against the narrative conventions and strategies of *all* realist literature, and it operates as a thought experiment to illustrate how writers (observers) alter reality when attempting to measure or reflect reality through the flawed instrument of language.

Indeed, *Vain Art of the Fugue* contains no plot, no beginning, middle, or end. There is no cause and effect logic; everything happens by chance. There is also no linear movement through time, and there is no single subjectivity, no all-encompassing referent, no center, as Derrida would say, from which the reader can glean “meaning” in the traditional sense. Instead, the text is structured less like “realist” narratives and more like a piece of music, specifically, as the title of the text indicates, a musical fugue, which Tsepeneag himself has confirmed, “*Vain Art of the Fugue* is obviously built like a musical fugue, like a canon for two voices...the structure is never fixed, the reader is rather free of his reading, he can actively participate in it” (Bourhis). In this way, the structure of the text relies not on linearity but on repetition—just like the structure of a fugue—and instead of a single, unified subjectivity, the text presents a subjectivity that constantly changes—just like the multiple voices that form a fugue.

A. The Structure: Repetition with Variation

In music, a fugue is a “contrapuntal composition in which a short melody or phrase, otherwise known as the subject (theme), is introduced by one part and successfully taken up by others and further developed by interweaving the various parts” (“Fugue”). The fugue’s structure is based on constant repetition of the subject; the subject recurs frequently throughout the piece, but it is usually taken up with some variation, such as a different pitch or with a different voice.

With an understanding of the structure of a fugue, we can begin to see how Dumitru Tsepeneag structured *Vain Art of the Fugue*. The novel is built around a subject (or theme) of a young man carrying flowers, trying to catch a bus to get to a train station, and a woman on a train speeding toward the same station. Throughout the text’s twenty

five sections or episodes (to stay with our fugue terminology), this subject is constantly repeated. For example, while episode one and two seem to narrate the event of catching the bus and the bus ride, episode three brings us back to the beginning, back to a young man with flowers chasing down a bus, only this time, there is a variation—the weather changes, the sun emerges, and the young man knocks into a cyclist on his way to the bus (Tsepeneag 10-11).

This repetition of this single event continues throughout the text, just like a fugue—and as with a fugue, different variations continue to occur as well, not in pitch or voice, but in event or action. Some of the episodes involve the young man attempting to catch the bus. Some involve him driving the bus. Some involve the driver of the bus dying. Most involve a pig being slaughtered, a woman in black, and fish and peacocks and tortoises. Indeed, often the variations of the subject distort the subject beyond recognition. At times, we are not on the bus, we are on the train. At other times, we are on a beach or a prison cell. In each case, the episodes expand and contract the narrative—but they never really move the narrative forward; we are always somewhere in the proximity of a man carrying flowers catching the bus or a woman on the train speeding toward the platform. In this way, the narrative remains open; there is no temporal logic, no movement through time, and, therefore, no resolution or closure to the narrative. The narrative begins where it ends—with a young man carrying flowers trying to catch a bus.

This lack of linear movement—this eschewing of all linearity—is Tsepeneag rebelling against the narrative conventions and strategies of “realist” narratives, including Socialist Realism. Linearity, of course, is not just a convention of narrative; it is a convention of language. Derrida suggests that linearity, which allows “the unfolding of presence” is the result of Western metaphysics (Derrida 106). Derrida, however, believed it is possible to write and think non-linearly (what he calls plural dimensional thought), though he suggests Western metaphysics has hard-wired linear writing and non-plural dimensional thought into the Western mindset to the point Western thinkers cannot interpret anything else (Derrida 106). For example, we often see lives as a progression from Point A (birth) to Point B (death) and assume the path is linear. Indeed, linearity is coded into language, where one sign (almost) always succeeds another (James Joyce and Christine Brooke-Rose may disagree). When a writer—an observer—tries to measure reality with language, they often infuse a level of linearity—because that is how language is constructed.

What Tsepeneag seems to suggest in *Vain Art of the Fugue*, however, is that linearity (and indeed rationality) is simply an invention of the human observer. When these observers—writers—try to “measure” or reflect reality in narrative, they, consciously or unconsciously, deploy linear progression and rationality. Tsepeneag calls this out by assaulting any sense of linearity and rationality in *Vain Art of the Fugue*, and in the process exposes linearity and rationality as constructs of narrative, of language, of Western thought. As the text “progresses” through the twenty five episodes, variations abound, but the scenarios constantly repeat—we never move forward in time. Indeed, the scenarios and settings begin to conflate. Sometimes we see a man carrying flowers,

chasing a bus. Sometimes we see a man carrying flowers *on* the bus. Sometimes we see a woman in the passenger car of a train. Sometimes, we visit a beach. Sometimes we visit a prison cell. All of these scenarios and settings repeat, switching between each other with little or no transition. Unlike “realist” narratives, there is no linear progression—instead the structure resembles a fugue, repetition upon repetition with only slight variation—with no rational reason behind any such variation; variations in scenario or event seems to happen randomly or associatively, without any apparent formal cause-and-effect logic.

Moreover, the text itself constantly calls attention to the impossibility of forward movement, of linear progress. In episode 24, the penultimate section, for example, the train’s ticket collector explains the idea of Zeno’s dichotomy paradox to the train’s engineer (Tsepeneag 132-135). Like Schrodinger’s Cat, Zeno’s dichotomy paradox is a thought experiment (“Zeno’s paradoxes”). The paradox suggests that to get from any point to another, you must first pass through an infinite number of halfway points; any possible first distance can *always* be divided in half. Therefore, it is impossible to make any first movement, because there will always be another movement you have to take prior, which means travel over any finite distance can never be completed—let alone begun (“Zeno’s paradoxes”). All movement, therefore, is an illusion—and any movement is in vain.

Movement, however, is constantly referenced throughout *Vain Art of the Fugue*. The young man constantly moves toward the bus. Indeed, several episodes involve the bus speeding through the city, ignoring traffic signals and police, and in two episodes someone (sometimes the narrator, sometimes not) sprints after the bus on foot. Furthermore, there are several flashbacks to a childhood memory of a toy train, which slows down and speeds up in response to a push of the button (mirroring the train speeding toward the platform) (Tsepeneag 39). At one point, the narrator complains, “We are living through a century of speed” (34). All these references to motion and movement, however, are offset by references to inertia. The peasant on the train often recalls memories sitting still in a jail cell, which may represent confinement, imprisonment, the inability to move. The text, then, seems to suggest some counterpoint—some fugue-like contrapuntal design—between movement, on one hand (the young man constantly running after the bus), and inertia (the peasant in the jail cell) on the other. So, although Zeno’s dichotomy paradox suggests that any movement is an illusion, the text seems to suggest that we have to keep moving anyway.

At the same, however, the text also seems to suggest linear movement is not the *only* way to move. Indeed, the narrative of *Vain Art of the Fugue* never moves forward, just like the young man carrying flowers never gets to the train platform—but the narrative also never stops moving (again just like the young man carrying flowers, just like the woman on the train). The text, therefore, seems to suggest that movement (narrative or otherwise) is not limited to a single direction forward—not unlike how Derrida suggests we *can* think and write non-linearly—because reality does not move in one direction.

This idea is illustrated or concretized in episode 20, when the train's cook tells the ticket collector a story of how he caught his pet tortoise (107-108). This story corresponds to another one of Zeno's paradoxes, this time one called Achilles and the Tortoise ("Zeno's paradoxes"). In a race, according to the theory, the quicker runner (Achilles) can never overtake the slower runner (the tortoise)—so long as the slower runner has a head start. Achilles must always first reach the point where the tortoise was, at which point the tortoise will have moved further ahead. Thus, Achilles has an infinite number of catching-up to do before he surpasses the tortoise. Therefore, according to Zeno's paradox, Achilles can never catch the tortoise ("Zeno's paradoxes").

Of course, in real life, a tortoise *can* be caught. The train's cook narrates how he does—and as he does, he animates his story with gestures. He pretends to run in place, simulating the action of catching his reptilian friend, and the narrator notes, "[He] was running yet remaining on the spot, that is pretending to run. That's all we have left: to simulate" (108). The text suggests, then, this is exactly what we do in narrative—we simulate life, we simulate reality; we do not reflect it, because we *cannot* reflect it. Zeno's Achilles and the Tortoise paradox illustrates the impossibility of reflecting the world in language—because of course, a faster runner will eventually overtake the slower runner, just as the cook caught the tortoise. The paradox only occurs when we try to reduce a simple foot race to language and mathematics (math of course is also a language), and—like Schrodinger's Cat—the results illustrate the absurdity of trying to capture the complex and chaotic world in language, of trying to "observe" or reflect reality through such a flawed instrument of measurement.

In *Vain Art of the Fugue*, Tsepeneag illustrates—just like these other thought experiments—how linear movement is an illusion, a human construct resulting from language that tries and fails to capture reality. Reality is not explainable—not in language at least. The concept of progression through linear movement of time is not an accurate reflection of life; it is the author-observer's construction, measured by the instrument of language. In other words, linear progression is a simulation of life, as are texts that rely on linearity. Tsepeneag seems to suggest we have to be aware of this simulation, the illusion or futility of linear progress—yet, he also seems to suggest that we have to keep moving anyway. Indeed, in episode 24, the ticket collector explains the dilemma or *paradox*:

Let's say a child sets off from home to go to school. He needs to cover a distance of *n*...first he has to cover the distance between home and the bus stop...But to reach the end of the street, he first has to pass in front of all the houses on one side...and before that he has to leave home by the gate, that is, to pass through the garden, and in order to reach the garden he must go down the veranda steps. *There are so many distances to cover, so many movements to make.* (Tsepeneag 134; emphasis added)

Though any movement may be in vain, the text suggest we have to keep trying—because by moving we experience the chaos and danger and moment-to-moment excitement of life. Indeed, during one of the beach episodes, the narrator watches children playing with a model train (another reference to movement) a few inches away from the high-tide mark. The narrator says, "A bigger wave could come along at any moment and it

was probably this constant danger that excited them more than anything” (82). Life is dangerous, full of chance, variations, random acts and encounters—but that is the risk we take to live, to move, to dream, and not to remain inert. Any movement might be in vain, but we cannot stop moving.

B. The Voices: Multiple Subjectivities

Most fugues opens with the theme—the subject—which is taken up by different voices in succession (“Fugue”). The different voices repeat the subject with variations in pitch, developing the subject throughout remainder of the piece. A fugue, by definition, contains at least two voices, but many fugue’s contain several voices, such as the fugues of Johan Sebastian Bach (“Fugue”).

In *Vain Art of the Fugue*, Tsepeneag once again steals from the concept of a musical fugue and provides multiple “voices” in the form of multiple subjectivities that take up the subject or theme of the text. Throughout the text, there is no referent. At times, we are in the consciousness of a third-person narrator following a man carrying flowers. At other times, we see the world through the first-person perspective of a man carrying flowers. Still, at other times, the narrator seems to inhabit other perspectives—a woman on a train, a peasant carrying an army bag, a ticket collector armed with philosophical theories. The perspectives shift without transition, changing in response to the ever-evolving scenarios and variations of events. In this way, Tsepeneag illustrates how the concept of a single, unified self—a single voice, a static consciousness—is a byproduct of the observer effect; once again, the human observer alters reality through the instrument of measurement—language.

Indeed, when measuring or examining (or trying to capture in writing) the concept of subjectivity or the self, the observer (the writer) must rely on language, which, of course, is a system of finite signs (Saussure 14). As a result, language limits meaning. When we categorize a subjectivity in language, we automatically narrow the scope of such subjectivity. We define the subjectivity as male or female. Masculine or feminine. Young or old. Worldly or naïve. Me or you. Them or I. These classifications—many of which are binaries—serve only to narrow the subjectivity, placing the subjectivity into pre-defined categories of meaning. This limiting construct necessarily occurs, of course, in narratives of all types throughout Western history. Indeed, in Socialist Realism and other works of realistic literature (including modernism), limits to the subjectivity are used to concretize fictional characters by giving them specific and defined traits to differentiate them from other characters or to make them feel more rounded, more real, more true to life.

But does such narrow-tailoring really reflect reality? What would happen if you turned a fictional character into a real person? Likely, they would be the most one-dimensional person you have ever met. Even someone like Leopold Bloom would feel like a cardboard cutout—because of course we only witness his thoughts over the course of a single day. Those thoughts, and his subjectivity, never have the chance to evolve or respond to different sets of events other than those that occurred in less than

twenty four hours on June 16, 1904. How would Bloom's subjectivity change on June 17, 1904? How would his subjectivity evolve over a lifetime?

Let's look at the other end of the spectrum: What if you took the characters from a Socialist Realist novel and turned them into real people? You would probably have an army of "well-muscled" and "youthful" male inventors or scientists who believe in the beauty of work and the emancipation of the proletariat and who salute every statue of Stalin they encounter ("Socialist Realism").

In any case, literary characters would not make very convincing real-life people, because subjectivity is more complex than narrative and language can hope to measure or capture.

In *Vain Art of the Fugue*, Tsepeneag points to this failure of the conventions of narrative discourse and the limits of language to accurately conceptualize the subjectivity. Instead, he seems to suggest that subjectivity is ever evolving, constantly reborn as we interact with the world. In other words, he seems to suggest that the self is constantly changing, constantly becoming; it is multiple, diverse, always in conflict—and anything but stable. The subjectivity changes based on interactions with the world, relationships, and other contingencies (Novy).

Indeed, this unstable, in flux, subject is represented in the text by the roaming point of view and the ever-changing perspectives. As mentioned above, both the first- and third-person point of view is deployed. In episode one, for example, the perspective of a young man carrying the flowers is narrated initially in the first person (Tsepeneag 1-3). But this first-person point of view suddenly shifts to the third without any transition or signal (4). The narration continues to shift back and forth between the first- and third-person throughout the remainder of the text, without any established pattern.

Moreover, the perspective of the narrator/narrative changes throughout the text without transition or other indication. While we initially witness the events through the perspective of the young man carrying flowers, we also witness events through the perspective of a woman on a train. At other times, we are in the perspective of a peasant or a ticket collector. We even get the perspective of another unnamed first-person at the very end of the text (more below).

Throughout the text, these perspectives constantly shift—taking up the subject like the many voices of a fugue. Indeed, at times the perspectives seem to merge or conflate with each other. The two women, Magda and Maria, become one (62). The peasant and the young man with the flowers share memories (74). At one point, the young man with the flowers *becomes* the bus driver, and someone else becomes the man chasing after the bus (106). All the seemingly discrete, seemingly whole and unified subjectivities—the young man, the peasant, Magda and Maria—merge into a complex, multiple, diverse subjectivity, linked together through the narrative discourse.

Of course, the entire idea that the subjectivities are (initially) separate or discrete is never actually established in the text. We are never given any referent; we are never given the name of the young man carrying flowers, pronouns are used to the point we cannot distinguish between characters, and each episode refuses to refer back to any

previous episode. In other words, there is no textual indication that any character or subjectivity in the text is different—nor is there an indication in the text that any subjectivity is the same. Indeed, while we get a description of a young man carrying flowers in several episodes, we are never told—nor is there any expressed indication—that this is the same young man from any previous episode. Likewise, we are never told that the peasant is the same peasant from any previous episode. That Magda is the same Magda. That Maria is the same Maria. The reader assumes they are all the same, because readers, like writers, are indoctrinated by the conventions of narrative, by language.

Indeed, the observer effect (the idea that an observer measuring a state alters the state through its instrument of measurement) seems to apply to narrative—but not just to the writers trying to “measure” or reflect reality. The observer effect also applies to the readers, who are, likewise, trying to interpret a text as a system. As readers, we participate in the narrative—but like the author-observer, the reader-observer has the same flawed instrument of measurement—language. The reader-observer applies the conventions of narrative—such as the quest for the unified subject—to the system, and in doing so, alters the system. The reader assumes that the young man with the flowers in episode one is the same young man with the flowers in episode two, and so on. So when the young man transforms before our eyes into the peasant, or when Maria’s consciousness suddenly inhabits Magda, the reader cannot make sense of it; the reader assumes, in the text, as in life, people cannot become other people.

What Tsepeneag seems to suggest, however, is that subjectivities cannot be pinned down in language. When we use language and hegemonic discourse to define a person, we limit what that and who that person is. As with the impossibility of capturing “reality” through linear movement in time, we cannot capture “true” consciousness in language; consciousness and subjectivity change too fast. With each movement, with each action, each interaction, each variation of event, we become different people. In *Vain Art of the Fugue*, the subjectivity represented in the text changes with each new episode, each new paragraph, each new sentence, each new variation on the original theme—the young man carrying flowers, trying to catch a bus, the woman on the train, speeding toward the platform. In this way, Tsepeneag rebels against the idea that a single subjectivity can exist in or outside of a text. Indeed, he seems to want to capture the diversity, the multiplicity, then ever-evolving nature of subjectivity in his text, *Vain Art of the Fugue*.

Of course, he cannot. Like all of us—writers and readers alike—Tsepeneag is an observer of the system, limited by the instrument of measurement, by language. Even his bold attempt will fail to “measure” or capture a true subjective experience. His attempt is in vain.

Still, the attempt is quite impressive nonetheless.

IV. Conclusion

At the end of a fugue, the voices return to the opening key, which is then followed by the closing material, also called a coda (“Fugue”). In the closing episode of *Vain Art of the Fugue*, the perspective changes once again. This time we have a third-person

narrator following a man in a driver's hat, preparing a pig for slaughter (136). This is a scenario we have seen in several other episodes from the perspective of a young man carrying flowers, who passes by the scene on his way to catch a bus. The third-person narrator describes the event—the man with the driver's hat, clutching the knife, the pig waiting calmly, accepting his state in life, three women in pink silk dresses, a boy playing a flute, a young man carrying flowers—before revealing that the third-person narrator is actually a first-person narrator, a “remote observer” who may or may not be the writer of the text (140).

This ties back to the observer effect. All writers, including this remote observer, including Tsepeneag himself, alter reality when they try to measure or reflect reality using the instrument of language. But reality is far too complex and chaotic to be measured with an instrument as limiting and restrictive as language. In *Vain Art of the Fugue*, Tsepeneag eschews all sense of forward movement, linear progression, and a unified subject—but even that does not bring the writer any closer to measuring the world accurately. Indeed, in the final episode, as the perspective pans around, and the first-person perspective (the “remote observer,” perhaps the writer himself) is revealed, we start to understand such futility. Through the text, Tsepeneag attempts to trace the chaos and complexity of reality in a single moment of time, a single subject, a single banal everyday scene—a young man, carrying flowers, chasing after a bus, a woman on a train, speeding toward the platform. Yet, in that final episode we see a glimpse of some of what is occurring around that one scene, around that single subject. We see the pig being slaughtered. We see a boy playing a flute. We see the observer sitting on the bed, looking down below. We see that the single scene, the single subject of the text, is but a drop of water in the ocean of life, a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of “reality.” Just as Zeno suggests we can never hope to complete a journey, the final scene makes it clear we can never hope to measure such reality.

Indeed, like Schrodinger's Cat, Tsepeneag seems to use *Vain Art of the Fugue* as a thought experiment to illustrate the absurdity of trying to accurately measure reality through language; reality is far too complex, far too chaotic. However, just as the ticket collector suggests that the futility of movement does not mean we should stop moving, the futility of measuring reality does not mean we should stop writing, stop telling stories, stop narrating. In this way, maybe the best we can do is treat each text as its own system independent of “reality.” Indeed, in an interview, Tsepeneag himself states, “There is no other reality than the one just happening in front of the reader's eyes...since each reader builds his own reality thanks to the text he reads” (Bourhis).

Of course, if that is the case, we would still be confronted with the issue of the observer effect. Every reader who attempts to interpret the text, to “measure” the system, will inevitably alter the system—because they are still armed only with the instrument of language.

In *Vain Art of the Fugue*, Tsepeneag seems to suggest that's just fine, that's just reality. We just need to be aware.

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