

DIALECTIC OF ATTENTION: THE REVIVAL OF THE SONNET IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL CAPITALISM

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Abstract This article theorizes the “dialectic of attention” as a central framework for understanding the resurgence of fixed poetic forms – particularly the sonnet – in contemporary Romanian poetry. Against the backdrop of digital capitalism’s cognitive regimes, the dialectic unfolds as a tension between the accelerated, fragmented rhythms of platform-mediated attention (e.g., TikTok’s micro-narratives, Instagram’s scroll logic) and the sonnet’s formal imperative to arrest, compress, and restructure perception. Focusing on Florentin Popa’s sonnets, the study argues that the sonnet’s rigid geometry operates dialectically: it simultaneously mirrors the brevity and modularity demanded by digital interfaces while subverting their linear, consumption-driven temporality. Through quantitative analysis of Popa’s evolution from expansive, open-form verse (2013–2017) to hypercompressed, procedurally stabilized sonnets (2021–2024), the article demonstrates how poetic form absorbs and critiques the infrastructural pressures of semiocapitalism. Popa’s sonnets, with their “tabular simultaneity,” demand a mode of attention antithetical to platform aesthetics: rather than simulating speed, they spatialize time, inviting readers to perceive structural wholeness amid informational chaos.

Keywords Sonnet, fixed forms, attention economy, procedural form, political formalism, semiocapitalism, digital aesthetics, ideology of form.

In recent years, something curious has happened in contemporary poetry: the quiet return of fixed forms. In a field long dominated by the expansive, the autobiographical, the freely associative, we now find a growing number of poets turning back to constraint – to the sonnet, the villanelle, the ghazal – not as nostalgia, but as symbolic necessity.¹ While this reading centers

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¹ “Diane Seuss won the Pulitzer [2022] in poetry for *frank: sonnets* [2021]. The award racks up yet another win for small but mighty Graywolf Press, a Pulitzer powerhouse. Seuss is a celebrated Midwestern poet

Florentin Popa's sonnets, it aims to extrapolate structural pressures on form under platform capitalism, not assert a universal model.

The recent re-emergence of fixed forms in Romanian poetry, particularly the sonnet, has taken a curious turn with the appearance of a short-lived but intensely concentrated phenomenon: Mafia Sonetelor. Active between October 2021 and December 2022 (the website has since been taken offline yet remains partially accessible via archival platforms), this collective initially appears to engage in ludic experimentalism. Yet it describes itself, significantly, as "an independent journal of formal poetry" publishing both "retro-formal creations" (sonnets, sestinas, ghazals, rondels, terza rima, duplexes, poems with iso- and heterometric verse) and "experimental formal innovations" (algorithmic poetry, procedural works, etc.).² The editorial group includes Mihnea Bălici, Ioan Coroamă, Andrei Doboș, Florentin Popa, and Vlad Moldovan. In this essay, I focus on the work of Florentin Popa, with particular attention to the function of the sonnet in three overlapping dynamics: (1) the internal evolution of Popa's oeuvre; (2) its position within the contemporary Romanian literary field, especially in relation to dominant trends of the last two decades such as minimalist biographism and neo-expressionism (as mapped by Mihai Iovănel); and (3) the ideological and economic structure of digital capitalism, understood in its restrictive sense as the historical shift from industrial modes of production to cognitive, immaterial, post-Fordist labor regimes.

How should we interpret this shift? Can the sonnet be reduced to a formal shell, repurposed for postmodern experimentation (the postmodernist hypothesis³)? Is it merely a retroactive pastiche, a stylized reprise driven by aesthetic retromania (the Reynolds hypothesis⁴)? Or does this movement signal something deeper: a symptom of epistemic fatigue, revealing both the exhaustion of the biographist paradigm and the waning power of "open form"

trained as a social worker; this book was described by the committee as 'a virtuosic collection that inventively expands the sonnet form to confront the messy contradictions of contemporary America, including the beauty and the difficulty of working-class life in the Rust Belt.'" Neda Ulaby, "2022 Pulitzer Prizes in Arts and Letters Go to 'Fat Ham' and 'The Netanyahus,'" *NPR*, May 9, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/09/1097566167/2022-pulitzer-prizes-in-arts-and-letters-go-to-fat-ham-and-the-netenyahus>.

² Mafia sonetelor, "Despre noi," archived October 19, 2021,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20211019194124/https://mafiasonetelor.com/despre/>.

³ "Trecutul, cum scrie Eco, nu mai poate fi recuperat cu candoare, ci cu ironie. Istoria, tragică inițial, prin repetare devine farsă. Iluzoriul postmodern, tocmai în calitatea lui de irealitate, este ironic, implicând strategii ludice mergînd de la paștișă la glosolalie, de la autocitare la intertextualitate. Postmodernul nu creează, ci mimează, ia în derîdere, fantazează. Nu există pentru el valoare stabilă și inatacabilă." [The past, as Eco writes, can no longer be recovered with candour, but with irony. History, initially tragic, becomes farce through repetition. The postmodern illusory, precisely in its quality of unreality, is ironic, involving playful strategies ranging from pastiche to glossolalia, from self-quotation to intertextuality. The postmodern does not create, but mimics, mocks, fantasises. There is no stable and unassailable value.], Mircea Cărtărescu, *Postmodernismul românesc*, ed. 2 (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2011), 101.

⁴ See Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011).

to structure contemporary experience (the Fisher hypothesis⁵)? Should we begin to speak of an unstable ecology of genres, in which every formal return is also a mutation – each recurrence both repetition and reinvention (the ecologist hypothesis⁶)? Is this simply a careerist maneuver, a strategic use of the sonnet's transhistorical cultural capital for literary distinction (the Bourdieusian hypothesis⁷)?

To understand the cultural moment in which Mafia Sonetelor emerges, we must consider a threefold transformation in literary production and reception. First, there is the decline of literature as a central cultural practice, under pressure from new media and new entertainment formats. This trajectory, beginning with cinema and later television, reflects a broader exhaustion of literature's social energy. After a full day of labor, mental or physical, industrial or post-industrial, consuming a twenty-minute sitcom requires far less psychic investment than reading a complex modernist poem. As Slavoj Žižek argues in his reading of sitcom laugh tracks, "Even if I do not laugh, but simply stare at the screen, tired after a hard day's work, I nonetheless feel relieved after the show, as if the soundtrack has done the laughing for me."⁸ Literature, by contrast, has not yet invented a mechanism that reads itself on behalf of the exhausted subject; except, perhaps, the passive audiobooks that accompany gym workouts or household chores. Yet these are not acts of reading; they are auditory simulations of reading.

In the Romanian context, Costi Rogozanu has shown that this decline in literaturocentrism dates back to the 1970s, during Ceaușescu's regime, when literature gradually lost its propagandistic function in favor of more broadly consumable media forms.⁹ The technological progress of the past decades – the democratization of access to digital communication, the rise of video platforms like YouTube, the serialization of cinema via streaming services, and the dopamine-driven structure of TikTok and Instagram Reels – has only accelerated the displacement of literature as a viable entertainment format. As a result, modes of artistic production have grown increasingly hybrid, producing a new kind of blurring between high literature and mass culture. The mediating category, as Fredric Jameson might suggest, is postmodernism itself.¹⁰

⁵ See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

⁶ Daniel Weston, "Contemporary Poetic Ecologies and a Return to Form," *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings* 4, no. 1 (2016): 5, <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.5>.

⁷ See Libbie Rifkin, *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 112.

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 23.

⁹ Costi Rogozanu, "Postmodernismul românesc s-a născut din tezele din iulie și din crizele petrolului" [Romanian Postmodernism Was Born from the July Theses and the Oil Crises], *Transilvania*, no. 2 (2024): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2024.02.012>.

¹⁰ "Postmodernism in architecture will then logically enough stage itself as a kind of aesthetic populism, as the very title of Venturi's influential manifesto, *Learning from Las Vegas*, suggests. However we may ultimately wish to evaluate this populist rhetoric, it has at least the merit of drawing our attention to one fundamental feature of all the postmodernisms enumerated above: namely, the effacement in them of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture, and the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the forms, categories, and contents of that very

Second, this decline is tied to a deeper transformation in reading support and attention architecture. From print to screen, from the tabular visualization of text on a page (which activates both horizontal and vertical ocular motion) to screen reading, where verticality is reduced to scrolling and horizontality becomes linearized, the act of reading has been reformatted. While critics like Mark Bauerlein¹¹ (*The Dumbest Generation*) and Nicholas Carr¹² (*The Shallows*) argue that digital culture reduces our capacity for sustained attention, others, like N. Katherine Hayles, propose a more nuanced view: that cognition and media evolve together in a process of technogenesis, in which each epoch reorganizes the psyche through its technological substrate.¹³

Third, the rise of digital media has produced an imperative of transmedialization. Literary texts are increasingly shaped not only for page-bound coherence, but for potential migration across media: into video-poems, games, and screen adaptations. Mihaela Ursa has called this the “adaptive plasticity of literature,”¹⁴ where literary production is increasingly structured by the possibility of cross-platform expansion.

I.

Within the existing body of scholarship on the sonnet, critical attention has rarely been directed toward the political affordances of fixed poetic forms. With a few notable exceptions – such as readings of Shakespeare’s erotic sonnets that trace an implicit emulation between erotic attachment and economic exchange¹⁵ – scholarly approaches have tended to privilege thematic

culture industry [...]”, Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 2.

¹¹ See Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don’t Trust Anyone Under 30)* (New York: Tarcher, 2008).

¹² See Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010).

¹³ “I found *The Dumbest Generation* intriguing and infuriating in equal measure. The book is valuable for its synthesis of a great deal of empirical evidence, going well beyond the 2008 NEA report in this regard; it is infuriating in its tendentious refusal to admit any salutary effects from digital reading”, N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 57.

¹⁴ Mihaela Ursa, *Indisciplina ficțiunii. Viața de după carte a literaturii* [The Indiscipline of Fiction: The Afterlife of Literature] (Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2022), 13. See also page 155: “transformările actuale ale tehnologiilor de acces la narațiune, care obligă la secțiuni transmediale prin sisteme narative, produc adaptări” [the current transformations in narrative access technologies, which require transmedia sections through narrative systems, produce adaptations]

¹⁵ See Manfred Pfister, “Love Merchandized: Money in Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” *Critical Survey* 30, no. 3 (2018): 56–70, <https://doi.org/10.3167/cs.2018.300305>, Andrew Wildermuth, “A Thing Apart: Sonnet Poetics and Radical Politics in Claude McKay’s Harlem Shadows,” *aspeers* 14 (2021): 15–31, <https://doi.org/10.54465/aspeers.14-03>.

interpretation over any sustained analysis of the dialectical interplay between form and content. This tendency reflects a broader symptomatic gesture: what might be called the *ideological alibi of thematicism*, whereby formal determination is evacuated in favor of content, reducing poetics to a vehicle for pre-inscribed meanings rather than a site of contradiction and aesthetic production.

Against this backdrop, even what is conventionally labeled “formalist” analysis has often operated within a narrow technical framework: an obsession with metrical regularity, rhyme schemes, and formal deviation that, as Ioana Bot aptly notes in her work on fixed forms, masks the sonnet’s social ontology and historical embeddedness. Her study—anchored in both international critical discourse and Romanian poetic practice (Țepeneag, Foarță, Eminescu)—underscores the degree to which the dominant authority in theorizing fixed forms has historically resided in linguistic formalism.¹⁶ Such approaches, while analytically rigorous, became the object of critique in the latter half of the twentieth century,¹⁷ precisely because their positivist zeal, at times bordering on the numerological, obscured the mediatory function of form itself. What is occluded in these accounts is the ideological labor of the sonnet as a historically situated form: not merely a vessel for lyrical content, but a structured mediation of social contradictions, a formal apparatus through which subjects are interpolated, relations aestheticized, and power reproduced or contested. In contrast to both structuralist reductionism and thematic impressionism, recent contributions from scholars such as Ioana Bot and David W. Huntsperger (Assistant Professor of English, University of Washington) have begun to recuperate the sonnet as a site of ideological inquiry. Their work resists the bifurcation of form and content, attending instead to how poetic form operates as a dynamic matrix in which ideology, affect, and historical time sediment and resurface.

To approach the ideological history of fixed forms, particularly the sonnet, requires more than a purely technical taxonomy or a thematic inventory. It necessitates a theorization of how *form itself* becomes the bearer of meaning, affect, and belief across changing epistemic regimes. In this regard, Ioana Bot offers a significant contribution by identifying three dominant semantic paradigms historically associated with fixed form: the numerological fascination with proportion and measure, the esoteric view of form as a vessel for hidden or initiatory knowledge, and the Orphic ideology that conceives poetic form as a medium of cosmic resonance and

¹⁶ Ioana Bot, *Sensuri ale perfecțiunii: literatura cu formă fixă ca încercare asupra limitelor limbajului* [Meanings of Perfection: Fixed-Form Literature as an Inquiry into the Limits of Language] (Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2006), 12-18.

¹⁷ P. N. Medvedev / M. M. Bakhtin, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, trans. Albert J. Wehrle (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 59-63; Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 48-49; Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 31: “Structural explanation does not place an action in a causal chain nor derive it from the project by which a subject intends a world; it relates the object or action to a system of conventions which give it its meaning and distinguish it from other phenomena with different meanings. Something is explained by the system of distinctions which give it its identity.”

metaphysical totality.¹⁸ These are fully developed aesthetic ideologies, in which form operates as an ontological and epistemological principle rather than merely serving as a structural constraint or rhetorical ornamentation of poetic discourse. What unites these three ideologies is their investment in form as *transcendental order*, a locus where language is purified, harmonized, and lifted beyond the contingency of historical time. Whether through Pythagorean precision, hermetic secrecy, or Orphic unity, poetic form is imagined here as a medium of access to the real, a structure through which the poetic subject touches the ineffable or the eternal. In each case, form is not instrumental or decorative, but foundational, a model of the world in miniature.

Yet what Bot's study unearths genealogically, it does not fully develop dialectically: namely, the paradox of subjective freedom achieved through formal constraint, a formulation that echoes Ștefan Augustin Doinaș's insight into the "rigor that grants freedom."¹⁹ This is the paradox that dislocates the liberal ideology of the free, expressive subject. Rather than viewing fixed forms as restrictive vessels, it is precisely their constraint (structural, rhythmic, and historical) that enables a dialectical poesis, one that stages the tension between form and lived temporality. This paradox, I argue, invites a turn toward psychoanalytic economy, where the "fixed form" operates analogously to a structure of desire: that which constrains is precisely that which enables the articulation of subjectivity (a logic aligned with Lacanian structuralism and its literary afterlives).²⁰ One must also resist the temptation to reduce the ideological valence of form to a matter of authorial intention or collective functionality. While it is, of course, analytically legitimate to trace how specific literary groups or poetic generations attribute particular functions to the sonnet – what Bot calls the functionalist horizon of poetic communities²¹ – this alone cannot account for the sedimented ideological history of the form. To do so would be to evacuate the sonnet's *longue durée*, its historically overdetermined repertoire of aesthetic and ideological uses. A sonnet by Florentin Popa, for instance, *cannot* (and I stress the modal force of *cannot*) operate under the same ideological regime of relevance (to borrow Tihanov's term²²) as a sonnet by Eminescu: "Serial and procedural forms have their beginnings in the postmodern era because they reflect an understanding of conditions that the

¹⁸ Bot, *Sensuri ale perfecțiunii*, 37.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Tracy McNulty, *Wrestling with the Angel: Experiments in Symbolic Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 259: "The constraint offers a way of molding and shaping the subject's subjection to the signifier, making a potential prison a provocation to creative freedom." The paradox of creativity through constraint also appears in Mafia Sonetelor's *credo*: "Dacă asumăm că atenția pentru formă este o constrângere, în niciun caz nu este o constrângere negativă și resentimentară, ci o constrângere generativă și creativă, care poate duce la soluționări ingenioase și inedite pe mai multe paliere ale textului, precum cel sintactic, cel ritmic/prozodic, sau cel ce ține de construcția imaginarului." [If we suppose that attention to form is a constraint, it is by no means a negative and resentful constraint, but a generative and creative constraint, which can lead to ingenious and novel solutions on several levels of the text, such as syntactic, rhyme/prozodic, or that which is related to the construction of the imaginary.]

²¹ Bot, *Sensuri ale perfecțiunii*, 45.

²² See Galin Tihanov, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

poet of the fourteenth century in Italy or the late eighteenth century in England could not have had.”²³ But this difference is not reducible to content or worldview; it is embedded in the very socio-historical logic of form.

What I propose here is a theoretical synthesis: a *political formalism* that integrates the historicity of form (as in Bot’s “historical semantics”) with a Marxist attention to ideology, function, and aesthetic mediation. In this sense, we might align Jameson’s concept of form as “the sedimentation of content” with the structuralist-functionalism latent in Bot’s account. Yet unlike Bot—who remains, in the end, within the intraliterary frame of intertext and hypertext²⁴—I argue that fixed poetic forms articulate a broader phenomenological relationship between subject and History. Instead of stemming from a poetic *credo*, this articulation arises as an after-effect of the mutual determination of ideology and form, a logic that reveals itself only through retrospective, symptomatic analysis.

In this respect, David W. Huntsperger’s 2010 monograph on procedural forms is particularly instructive for the ways in which it articulates an ideological reading of fixed form, most notably, in its inaugural analytic chapter on Berrigan’s sonnet and its embeddedness within postwar, postindustrial America. For Huntsperger, as for myself, political formalism is not merely an exercise in classification, but rather constitutes the very horizon of *explanation*, i.e. the condition of possibility for understanding how a form emerges and operates in relation to processes of subjectivation and ideological articulation under late capitalism. As Huntsperger succinctly (and evocatively) claims: “History is always intrinsically in the work itself.”²⁵ In short, Huntsperger’s intervention suggests that the procedural form of postwar American poetry functions as a site that transcodes the “intellectual labor” of the writer within a society increasingly dominated by white-collar work and the ascendancy of the service economy over commodity production. What is at stake, then, is that the “cultural memory” encoded in the fixed or arbitrary form, far from obfuscating the conditions of literary production (as was the case in the tradition of literary organicism, to which I will return), actually makes visible the mode of production of the writer.²⁶ However, Huntsperger’s position (much like the arguments advanced by Kornbluh in her book *Immediacy*²⁷) ultimately falls into the trap of a reductive Marxist mechanism, implicitly positing procedural poetry as a direct and unmediated reflection, a transparent symptom of postindustrial capitalism.

²³ Joseph M. Conte, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 16.

²⁴ Bot, *Sensuri ale perfectiunii*, 63.

²⁵ David W. Huntsperger, *Procedural Form in Postmodern American Poetry: Berrigan, Antin, Silliman, and Hejinian* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁷ Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy: Or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2024), 18: “immediacy presses to be interpreted as a symptom, an unavowable but irrepressible truth routed through forms of expression or stylization that at once avoid and announce it. In this ambivalent structure, immediacy style alludes to a desire for mediation while also ideologically enjoining us to enjoy our devastation.”

In contrast, the critical orientation advanced here, drawing upon the theoretical trajectories of Freud, Macherey, Lyotard, Eagleton, Williams, and Jameson²⁸, decisively rejects the notion of a simple or transparent relation between economic base and ideological superstructure. Rather than conceiving of literature as an unmediated mirror of the capitalist real, my argument foregrounds the necessarily mediated and structurally overdetermined exchanges that transpire between the distinct spheres of social reality. Within this framework, the relation between capital circulation, the economy of signs, and the poetic regime should not be conceived as a mere specular transaction or mimetic relay, but as a complex conceptualization of literature's imbrication in History. Literature, then, becomes a privileged locus for the recognition of indirect influences and structural correspondences between discrete social levels, without subordinating literary phenomena to any single ideology or technological determinism. In this paradigm, literature is apprehended as a privileged mode of response to the sociohistorical context, a distinctive "psychic economy" through which the literary subject processes, structures, and *textualizes* phenomena of perceived reality.

II.

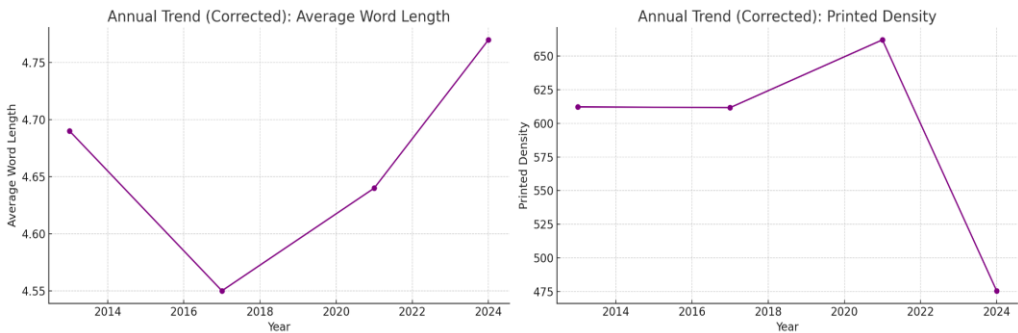
Before proceeding to the formal close reading of Florentin Popa's sonnets—through which we will examine the relations between sonnet structure, its ideological affordances, and the ideologemes through which Popa's poetry articulates, in a singular fashion, the general ideology of digital capitalism—I propose a moment of critical distance: a diachronic perspective on the evolution of Popa's poetics, from his 2013 debut to his most recent publication in 2024. Over this decade of stylistic elaboration, significant historical, political, social, and technological shifts take place, shifts whose traces, I contend, are materially registered in the forms assumed by Popa's poetry. To frame this investigation, I undertook a quantitative analysis of Popa's four poetry collections: *Trips, heroes & lovesongs* (Casa de Editură Max Blecher, 2013), *Efrafra* (Charmides, 2017), *Dezintegrare* (OMG Publishing, 2021), and *Sutta* (OMG Publishing, 2024).²⁹ My methodological procedure involved the digitization and subsequent "cleaning" of the poem corpus in order to extract quantifiable metrics using Microsoft Word's internal tools: number of characters (excluding spaces), number of words, number of lines, and number of pages. It is important to underscore that the page count, while included, does not yield reliable comparative

²⁸ See Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (London: Penguin Random House, 2023), Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 2006), Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*, new ed. (London: Verso, 2006), Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism*, (London: Verso, 2020), Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002).

²⁹ Florentin Popa, *Trips, heroes & lovesongs* (Bistrița: Casa de Editură Max Blecher, 2013); *Efrafra* (Bistrița: Editura Charmides, 2017); *Dezintegrare* [Disintegration] (Alba Iulia: OMG Publishing, 2021); *Sutta* (Alba Iulia: OMG Publishing, 2024).

data due to the distinct editorial formats and typographic conventions employed by the three different publishing houses.

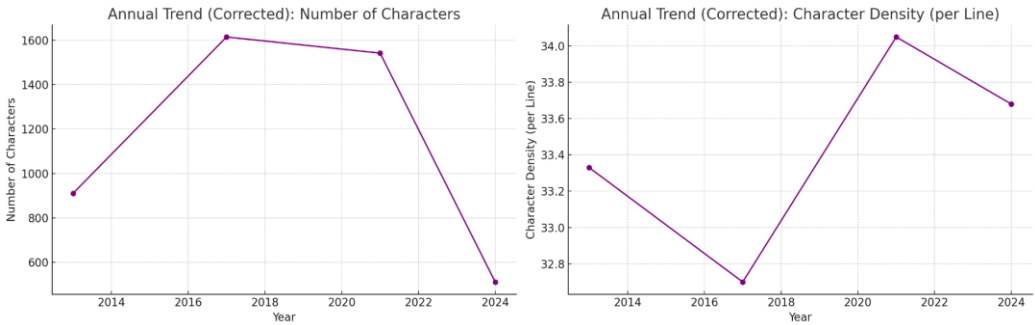
From these primary metrics, I derived several secondary variables to map formal and stylistic tendencies across the decade. First, I calculated *poem density*, defined as the ratio between number of words and number of lines, as a way of capturing the degree of syntactic and semantic compression or expansion within individual poems. Second, I derived the *average word length* (characters per word) as a potential proxy for lexical complexity or simplicity. Third, I computed *printed density* (the number of characters per page) to approximate visual saturation, bearing in mind once again the relativized nature of this measure due to heterogeneous page formatting. Finally, I constructed an original metric that I term the *homogeneity coefficient* of a given volume. This measure is intended to reflect the formal uniformity or variance within a collection, based on the distribution of short versus long poems. Conceptually, this coefficient seeks to register the degree to which a volume adheres to a consistent structural rhythm, or, conversely, whether it embraces internal dispersion and textual heterogeneity.



What the graphs show—and what becomes clear once we align them with the structural logics of the digital present—is that poetic form is increasingly shaped by the evolving infrastructures of cognition, capture, and compression. The twenty-first century is not simply postmodern; it is post-attentional.³⁰ And under such conditions, the sonnet is no longer just a constraint. It becomes a medium that absorbs and remediates the pressures of a technological unconscious. Take the collapse in character count by 2024. This is not only about poetic minimalism. It coincides with the rise of platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Threads) that have radically shortened the bandwidth of linguistic attention. What does poetry do in such a landscape? It shrinks. Not because it follows fashion, but because the conditions for legibility

³⁰ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), 124: “24/7 presents the delusion of a time without waiting, of an on-demand instantaneity, of having and getting insulated from the presence of others. The responsibility for other people that proximity entails can now easily be bypassed by the electronic management of one’s daily routines and contacts. Perhaps more importantly, 24/7 has produced an atrophy of the individual patience and deference that are essential to any form of direct democracy: the patience to listen to others, to wait one’s turn to speak.”

themselves have changed. The long poem begins to sound like spam. The sonnet, or its geometric variants, reappear as cognitively legible units of attention capture. But that reappearance comes at a cost. The increased density (Car/Vers) around *Dezintegrare* (2021) suggests that form must now work harder. More meaning, packed into less space. The poetic line becomes an algorithmic object: short, modular, optimizable. The poet begins to write for the scroll, even if unconsciously. Here, poetry mirrors what Berardi calls the shift from semantics to syntax: content is secondary; what matters is the rhythm, the hook, the structure.



Average word length rises across the decade. A paradox? Not entirely. While interface culture simplifies language, it also stratifies it. Long words become markers of resistance, or differentiation. In a linguistic economy dominated by simplicity and frictionlessness,³¹ lexical difficulty becomes a sign of value. Poetry reasserts itself as a site of cognitive drag, where time slows, and the subject (re)thinks. And finally, the visual field. Printed density registers both quantity and spatial presence. *Dezintegrare* (2021) peaks, then *Sutta* (2024) collapses. Fewer characters, more white space. The page, like the screen, becomes ambient, closer to interface design than to literary ornament. We might read this as a new phase in poetic mediality: the influence of UX (User Experience) logics on poetics. How much space does a poem need to breathe? How much whitespace does a reader require before they swipe away?

If the previous metrics allowed us to trace the historical pressure points of poetic form (its expansion, compression, lexical shift) another layer emerges when we ask not how long poems are, or how dense, but how stable the system itself is. What kind of formal logic regulates

³¹ "Instagram, unlike twitter and its text-based platform, involves a different kind of interaction with language as captions, hashtags and comments are written and combined with images to form multiple presentations in a single post (Lee 2020). Here the language is less formal and is more geared towards creating an ad and as such compliments the visual content; this is synonymous with the platform's curating of lifestyles and personal influence. The two platforms show how technological contexts impact on linguistic decisions and are part of the include/discuss the formation of norms and practices in technogenic in online communication.", Ahsan Mukhtar and Tanveer Fatima, "Digital Communication and the Evolution of Language: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Online Interactions," *Migration Letters* 21, no. 3 (2024): 1447, <https://migrationletters.com/index.php/ml/article/view/11110>.

an entire volume? How much variance does a poetic ecology tolerate before its coherence collapses? To answer that, we introduce a new metric: *the coefficient of homogeneity*, an index constructed from the deviation of poem length (in characters and lines) within each volume. It does not measure meaning, or complexity, or style. It measures distribution. It is, in essence, a morphology of literary variance. The *coefficient of homogeneity* captures more than formal tendency; it indexes a deeper logic of abstraction. As Marx showed, value under capitalism arises through the homogenization of labor-time, abstracting qualitative differences into a common metric.³² In parallel, the stabilization of poetic distribution measures the temporal regularization of aesthetic production under semiocapitalist conditions, where attention, too, becomes an infrastructural rhythm, and variance is absorbed into patterns of circulation. And what it shows, across Florentin Popa's four collections (2013–2024), is a striking movement from exploratory variation to algorithmic stabilization. A trajectory that maps uncannily onto the infrastructural logic of digital capitalism.

The debut volume sits at the threshold: moderate deviation, relatively contained variance. The poetic system allows exploration but within a coherent framework. This is the moment of calibrated flexibility, typical of the early-2010s Romanian literary field: still print-dominant, still partially resistant to platform capture. The formal system reflects this: variation without rupture. An ecology of testing, not yet fragmentation. By 2017, the system explodes. We see the highest average character count and longest lines across the four volumes, with a deviation that suggests poetic extensivity without constraint. This is the high-water mark of discursivity: block-like structures, narrative forms, associative collage. In Moretti's terms, this is when the genre system "bloats" and becomes less selective, more absorptive.³³ This corresponds with a shift in the global media system: the triumph of the feed, the dominance of the scroll, and the peak of what Yves Citton calls attention economy (*Économie de l'attention*).³⁴ Efrafa writes from within that system, not against it. Its formal saturation mirrors the saturation of attention.

³² "With the disappearance of the useful character of the products of labour, the useful character of the kinds of labour embodied in them also disappears; this in turn entails the disappearance of the different concrete forms of labour. They can no longer be distinguished, but are all together reduced to the same kind of labour, human labour in the abstract." Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume I, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 128.

³³ "With respect to the dominant historiographical models, the relationship between means and ends is precisely reversed: the tools, the concrete technical possibilities, are everything; the project, the ideology, the poetics — nothing. And this, let it be clear, is not a defect. Quite the contrary. Because plans and poetics function (perhaps) when inside a stable formal paradigm: in times of 'normal' literature, so to speak. But if paradigms are shifting they are a waste of time, because change is not planned: it is the fruit of the most irresponsible and free — the blindest — rhetorical experimentation. Poetics plod along behind this, often far behind. They certainly do not guide it, and usually do not even really understand it. The most famous invention of the twentieth century — the stream of consciousness — will provide us with a splendid example." Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez* (London: Verso, 1996), 19.

³⁴ See Yves Citton, *Pour une écologie de l'attention* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2014).

In *Dezintegrare*, the numbers fragment. Median and mean poem lengths diverge sharply. The standard deviation in character count hits its maximum—1,644. This is no longer poetic variation; it is disintegration. The form mirrors the infrastructure. Pandemic collapse, geopolitical anxiety, platform fatigue. The poetic system splinters into extremes: micro-poems and massive texts cohabiting the same volume. There is no equilibrium. *Dezintegrare* is the point where the literary system registers, not a style, but a crisis. And then, silence. Or nearly. *Sutta* is the most homogenous volume. Short poems, low deviation, stabilized line length. If *Dezintegrare* was entropy & asphyxiation, *Sutta* is control & breathing. A poetic system regulated, as if by external constraints. Religious reference, spiritual minimalism, or algorithmic optimization? All are plausible. However, the coefficient tells us this much: the system has closed. Where the early volumes allowed variation, *Sutta* permits almost none.

III.

In a recent interview, Florentin Popa remarks that to write a sonnet is to be *obligated* to say what must be said in very few words:

Pentru că e un exercițiu de disciplină: dacă ai ceva ce merită spus, atunci va încăpea în 14 versuri – nu mai mult, nu mai puțin (spuse el cu ipocrizie, și începu să scrie cicluri de sonete ca workaround încercând să eludeze limitarea asta). Cei trei ani în care am scris aproape exclusiv sonete m-au ajutat enorm să-mi controlez gândurile, precizia exprimării, proprietatea termenilor – și în același timp să-mi găsesc o libertate în interiorul formei, să văd până unde mă poate purta și cum pot explora și “fenta” regulile.³⁵

It is a formal imposition that transforms poetic expression into a process of radical condensation, an incision across the hypertrophy of discourse characteristic of late capitalism. In this sense, the sonnet does not merely conform to the rhythms of the attention economy; it interrupts them. It cuts diagonally through the inflationary semantics of the digital age, extracting from the noise a form of minimal, compressed significance. In this moment of semiotic excess—what Franco Berardi has called the regime of semiocapitalism³⁶—meaning becomes less about

³⁵ [Because it's an exercise in discipline: if you have something worth saying, then it will fit in 14 lines - no more, no less (he said hypocritically, and started writing sonnet cycles as a workaround to try to circumvent this limitation). The three years in which I wrote almost exclusively sonnets helped me enormously to control my thoughts, the precision of expression, the propriety of terms - and at the same time to find a freedom within the form, to see how far it could take me and how I could explore and “break” the rules], Péter Demény, “Florentin Popa: ‘Volumul ăsta e un tribut, o celebrare, dar și locul unde plec singur la drum în propriile explorări’” [Florentin Popa: ‘This Volume Is a Tribute, a Celebration, but Also the Place Where I Set Off Alone on My Own Explorations’], *Matca Literară*, accessed April 25, 2025, <https://matcaliterara.ro/florentin-popa-volumul-asta-e-un-tribut-o-celebrare-dar-si-locul-unde-plec-singur-la-drum-in-propriile-explorari/>.

³⁶ See Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation* (London: Minor Compositions; distributed by Autonomedia, 2009).

content and more about speed, recurrence, and saturation: “‘Chaos’ is defined here in terms of speed, of acceleration of the info-sphere relative to the slow rhythms of reason and of the emotional mind. When things start to flow so fast that the human brain grows unable to elaborate the meaning of information, we enter into the condition of chaos.”³⁷ Platforms demand constant output, infinite scrolls, and frictionless readability. Against this backdrop, the sonnet re-emerges as a dialectical counter-formation: brief without being fleeting, dense without dissolving into dispersion, and charged with more than nostalgic residue. The volumes published by Popa after 2020 (post-pandemic, post-proximity, and fully inside the infrastructure of mediated life) may at first appear formally homologous with platform aesthetics: short, fragmentary, highly concentrated. Though, here a critical distinction emerges. The brevity of the sonnet is not the brevity of the TikTok. The latter operates through accelerated narrativity: a fast sequence that simulates instantaneity through rapid movement. The sonnet, by contrast, produces a tabular simultaneity: a structure to be perceived whole, in a single unit of attention.³⁸ One mimics speed to mask linearity; the other halts movement to reveal structure. What the sonnet stages, then, is a formal dialectic of attention. Its strict geometry imposes limits, but in doing so, generates intensity. As we have seen in the last two graphs, when the printed density contracts, the stylistic & lexical density expands. It contracts space in order to expand semantic resonance. Constraint becomes the condition of excess. In the field of platform-driven semiosis, where expression is flattened into streams of optimized micro-content, the sonnet enacts a refusal: a refusal of expansion, of fluidity, of affective surplus. It reintroduces breathing where the system demands chaos.

Let us not fall into mathematical sublime or abstractions. To grasp the sonnet’s function today, we must place it within the formal history of 21st-century poetry, where **open form** (narrative,³⁹ first-person, affective, anti-formalist) has become the dominant paradigm.⁴⁰ In Romania, this corresponds with the post-’80s lineage: 1980’s poetry discursivity, 2000’s confessionalism, and the “the authenticity model—the ‘true voice of feeling’ or ‘natural speech’ paradigm”⁴¹ Originally oppositional, this form has become culturally hegemonic, mirroring the

³⁷ Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2018), 47.

³⁸ Bot, *Sensuri ale perfecțiunii*, 74.

³⁹ “Prose poems conduce to immediatism because the pieces strive for integration rather than break, for flow rather than disruption, for continuous consumption rather than punctuated production, for metonymy rather than metaphor [...] Prose poems trouble the steadfast opposition associating prose with the merely worldly and situated, and poetry with ancient forms and timelessness. Dispelling the expectations of both poetry and prose, prose poems undo genre, disassembling rules and hierarchies and established forms of production and consumption, and immanentizing language fullness.” Kornbluh, *Immediacy*, 105.

⁴⁰ “First personalism in the novel is an overarching mutation, a gutting of literary objectivity, an event of epic proportions for which serious explanation is due.” Ibid., 80.

⁴¹ Marjorie Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 3–4.

fluid temporality and expressive surplus of individualism.⁴² The open form (or, naked poetry) is defined by a poetics of spontaneity, organicism, and immediacy.⁴³ Rooted in mid-century American experimentalism and carried forward into contemporary biographist and confessional modes, it treats the poem as a direct extension of the poet's energy, or, what Charles Olson famously called an "energy-discharge."⁴⁴ Form, in this model, is not an autonomous structure but the physiological trace of breath, nerve, and perceptual rhythm; it follows content rather than shaping it, under the axiom that "form is never more than an extension of content."⁴⁵ Rejecting rational construction, metric discipline, or aesthetic premeditation, the open form values instantaneity and reader accessibility: the poem should transmit perception as immediately and transparently as possible, without formal interference. Its temporality is "kinetic" and sequential, privileging speed, continuity, and emotional flux over compositional architecture.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, the open form now appears formally and ideologically exhausted. At this stage, the reappearance of the sonnet can be understood as the reintroduction of a highly legible formal unit into a literary field structured by excess and dispersion. Its circulation operates as a

⁴² Adriana Stan, "Post-Socialist Realism: Authenticity and Political Conscience in the Romanian Literature of the 2000s," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 64, no. 1 (2021): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2021.1908946>.

⁴³ "Everything we thought to ask about their formal qualities has come to seem more and more irrelevant, and we find we are much more interested in what they say, in their dreams, visions, and prophecies. Their poems take shape from the shapes of their emotions, the shapes their minds make in thought, and certainly don't need interpreters. In any case, we soon grew bored with our original plan to discuss the theory and practice of what. Our job, we now see, was to imagine the anthology (for there was nothing like it), put it together, and get out of the way." Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey, eds., *Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), xi.

⁴⁴ Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 387.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ The implicit poetics of open form can be found in Mircea Cartarescu's definition of the 1980s poem in his doctoral thesis. Obviously, it applies only to a certain sector of the poetry of that period: "Dimpotrivă, semnele imediat vizibile ale poeziei optzeciste 'standard' erau oralitatea lejeră, împinsă pînă la familiaritate, a expresiei, ironia și umorul, ludicul pervaziv — de la nivelul jocului de cuvinte la cel al situațiilor 'dramatice' —, caracterul narativ al poemelor, care puteau evolua de la aspectul de mici anecdote pînă la adevărate romane în versuri, și imagismul artificios, ca de desen animat, al textelor, pline de obiecte și personaje. Stilul 'jos', de cultură 'populară', era totuși contracarat de o superpusă 'comedie a literaturii' ce aducea ecouri metatextuale, distorsionate bizar, din cele mai neașteptate zone literare și culturale." [On the contrary, the immediately visible signs of the 'standard' 1980s poetry were the light orality of expression, pushed to the point of familiarity, irony and humour, the pervasive playfulness - from wordplay to 'dramatic' situations -, the narrative character of the poems, which could evolve from the appearance of small anecdotes to true novels in verse, and the artificial, cartoon-like imagery of the texts, full of objects and characters. The "low" style of "popular" culture, however, was counterbalanced by a superimposed "comedy of literature" that brought metatextual echoes, bizarrely distorted, from the most unexpected literary and cultural areas.], Cărtărescu, *Postmodernismul românesc*, 371.

form of cultural capital (Rifkin hypothesis⁴⁷), as a mechanism of differentiation within the attention economy. In a market saturated with formless or loosely structured texts, the sonnet's visibility increases; its recognizability becomes an asset. What once promised liberation has become the default aesthetic of semiotic oversaturation, perfectly aligned with the logics of immediacy and affective visibility. It is important to clarify: the sonnet's compact form does not simply echo the logic of fast consumption dominant in platform capitalism. While its scale might resemble that of a TikTok video or a summarized headline, its formal architecture generates a distinct mode of readerly engagement, one that resists frictionless absorption. As Huntsperger notes, literary forms can "complicate or even undermine the absorption of content."⁴⁸ The sonnet, with its patterned symmetry and syntactic density, invites a mode of perception grounded less in consumption than in reflection. This shift is particularly significant after decades in which poetry has been dominated by a biographist, narrative, and affectively minimalist mode.

In the Romanian literary field, this mode is strongly associated with the 1980s and 2000s generation aesthetics, where the poem acts as a direct extension of perception or autobiographical flux, stripped of formal scaffolding and committed to the surface realism of the everyday. While this model has enabled a rich vein of postconfessional writing, it has also aligned with the broader rhythms of semiocapitalism: speed, accessibility, emotional transparency. What is now resurfacing, however, is a different formal logic that reclaims difficulty as a poetic value. The "posthuman dispersal" theorized and contextualized infrastructurally by Iovănel⁴⁹ has created the conditions for a renewed attention to the form's interruptive force. Where the biographist paradigm privileges fluidity and ease of access, the procedural or fixed form introduces structural tension, i.e. slowing reading, redirecting perception, and making language temporarily unfamiliar.

1970, Roland Barthes, in *S/Z*:

Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader. This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness — he is intransitive; he is, in short, *serious*: instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading

⁴⁷ Libbie Rifkin interprets Ted Berrigan's sonnets through a sociological lens shaped by Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, arguing that the return to the fixed form operates as a tactic of symbolic accumulation. Far from a purely aesthetic gesture, the sonnet becomes a vehicle for consolidating cultural capital, strategically deployed in response to career imperatives and the poet's reflexive pursuit of lasting legitimacy within the literary field. See Huntsperger, *Procedural Form*, 44.

⁴⁸ Huntsperger, *Procedural Form*, 9.

⁴⁹ Mihai Iovănel, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990–2020* [The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990–2020] (Iași: Polirom, 2021), 618.

is nothing more than a *referendum*. Opposite the writerly text, then, is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the *readerly*.⁵⁰

Having mapped the quantitative shifts across volumes, we now move from formal abstraction to a dialectic of poetic forms. The ideology of a form cannot be fully grasped in isolation; it must be read within the chain of signifiers that compose the unity of the volume. If the poet engages consciously with fixed and procedural structures, we must assume that the volume itself functions as a compositional totality, where forms interact, contradict, and generate meaning relationally. We begin with *Dezintegrare* (2021) which is a volume still marked by open-form writing, yet where the sonnet first emerges. Its presence is fragmentary, tentative, and it introduces formal constraint into a field of dispersive flux. Here, we see not just variation, but the beginning of a formal conflict. This moment constitutes a transition toward a poetics defined by internal contradiction, where form registers ideological tension rather than aesthetic variation.

Let us consider, for instance, the title poem of the volume, *dezintegrare*.⁵¹ Spanning five pages and comprising 142 lines, the text exemplifies an open form poetics, where stanzaic organization is replaced by a topographical logic of distribution. What unfolds is not syntactic progression but spatial accumulation: a catalogue of places, objects, and referents, assembled through a poetics of enumeration and objectual saturation. The method is hyperrealist, each fragment generating the potential of the next in a fractal cascade of semantic proliferation. Popa's approach is one of thick semantic layering, marked by lexical excess and unfiltered referential exposure. The formal density of the poem is matched by a syntactic one: nearly every place is introduced through apostrophic invocation (prosopopée) – “oh, you...” – and the poem culminates in a liturgical chain of parallelisms, repeating structures such as “o sută de...” [a hundred...] in a rhythmic escalation.

Formally saturated and syntactically expansive, *dezintegrare* also operates as an allegorical charting of historical dislocation. Its open form corresponds to a world fractured by post-industrial decline, where the spatial and symbolic coherence once sustained by centralized production has given way to dispersion and discontinuity. Factories, wagons, rural schools, that are institutions formerly embedded in the logic of collective labor, reappear here as debris, as affectively charged ruins. The poem's catalogic accumulation mirrors this disintegration: the form spreads across the page through the logic of listing and enumeration, mimicking infrastructural collapse at the level of poetic structure. These remnants evoke a nostalgic temporality. The adult voice gazes upon them with a subdued reverence, filtered through the lens of childhood memory. The fine mechanics plant, the paper mill – objects once central to the material base of socialist production – are now rendered as iconic rather than functional, transformed into static images where meaning is residual, embedded in texture rather than utility. Later in the volume, this shift becomes explicit: the poetic figures appear as programmers,

⁵⁰ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller, preface by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 4.

⁵¹ Popa, *Dezintegrare*, 17-21.

IT workers, representatives of a symbolic economy where labor produces data rather than goods. Production gives way to code, and space dissolves into abstraction.

A particularly striking image captures this historical slippage: a derelict train sleeper repurposed into the DIAMOND GENERAL STORE, stocked with oil, biscuits, coffee. The reconfiguration is jarring, symbols of circulation and logistics now house minor commodities, no longer embedded in a collective system of utility or exchange, functioning through a different register altogether. These objects do not circulate economically (“nothing can be a value without being an object of utility”⁵²); they persist emotionally. The smell of whey, the hearth, the childhood pretzels, such details operate as affective markers, carriers of experiential density in the absence of functional purpose. The poem’s final gesture (“*Visez și mă năruî cu voi.*” [I dream and crumble with you]) folds memory and material into the same temporal collapse. The speaker identifies with ruin, not metaphorically, but structurally. The self decays with the world it remembers, and that decay becomes the final unit of meaning the poem offers.

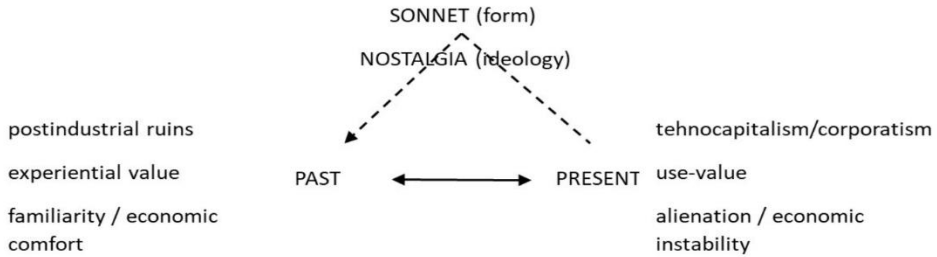
As we move into the section of the volume that gathers the ten sonnets, a corresponding shift takes place both thematically and affectively. The temporal focus relocates from the melancholic residues of a lost industrial past to the precarious textures of the contemporary moment, marked less by nostalgia than by diffuse anxiety and subjective alienation. The past had an aura, however fractured; the present appears exposed, uncertain, and informationally overdetermined. These sonnets chart a condition in which reality has forfeited even the minimal enchantment of memory. Professional instability, the precarity of IT work, the fragmented routines of the corporate subject—all are rendered through a language of exhaustion and abstraction. Where once factories and train depots symbolized material coordinates of collective life, we now find “prin podele vitrificate ale mall-urilor” [glazed floors of shopping malls]⁵³ juxtaposed with rural homes in decay, inhabited by elderly people dying amid fragments of hemp bedding (“în ele, bătrâni mor în saltele de câlți”⁵⁴). The social body appears spatially and economically divided, and these divisions register at the level of affect. Interpersonal relations are mediated through networks, screens, and data streams. As one line puts it: “mă întrebi ce mai fac: nu știu, nu m-am interesat” [you ask me how I am doing: I don’t know, I haven’t taken an interest].⁵⁵ What we confront here is the externalization of the very structure of self-awareness, now rendered dependent upon informational inputs whose source lies irreducibly outside the immediacy of the body itself.

⁵² Marx, *Capital I*, 131.

⁵³ Popa, *Dezintegrare*, 86.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.



In this chain, the fixed form of the sonnet plays a complex role. On one level, its symmetry and formal regularity suggest an effort to contain or structure the disarray of contemporary experience, or, a way of organizing what increasingly evades cohesion. The return to sonnet form can be read as a symbolic attempt to stabilize affect, to make legible the contradictions between a class identity caught between urban middle-class comfort and rural precarity. The poem becomes a frame, an architecture under pressure, holding together images of childhood simplicity with the volatile surfaces of the present. Yet this return also carries ideological ambivalence. Within this configuration, the sonnet operates as the signifier of a nostalgia that is itself ideologically overdetermined, i.e. a retrospective impulse that channels the past through the filtering lens of idealization. Its formal brevity corresponds to the abbreviated temporality of contemporary perception, yet its internal logic reveals a Romantic reaction-formation: a drive toward order, memory, and psychical continuity, emerging against the backdrop of systemic fragmentation. To grasp the function of the sonnet in *Dezintegrare* requires a reconceptualization of fragmentation: not perceived as rupture or absence, but as an incessant overflow, a proliferation of data, signs, and affect that exceeds the subject's capacity for synthesis.

With *Sutta* (2024), a decisive shift materializes, manifest in the reduced character count of individual poems and, more fundamentally, in the transformation of semantic construction itself. As previously noted, the sonnet imposes a tabular configuration, activating a mode of instantaneous perception, in stark contrast to the long, river-like poems of *Dezintegrare*, which unfold through linear, sequential logic. The narrative scaffolding of those earlier texts, based on syntactic fluidity and imagistic development, is now systematically reduced. One immediate consequence is the reorganization of syntactic disposition. The sonnet's formal constraint inhibits the open discursivity characteristic of long-form biographist poetry and limits the accumulation of continuous imagery. Narrative progression gives way to image fragmentation, or what Andrei Doboş identifies as *amalgamare* [collage]: a recombination of signifying units according to "apneic, discontinuous rhythm of emissions and pulsions."⁵⁶ The result is a

⁵⁶ Andrei Doboş, "Obiectul Kintsugi" [The Kintsugi Object], *Matca*, 2024,

disjunctive poetics, where causal logic is suspended, and the textual field is governed by pulse rather than flow. This fragmentation is not accidental; it is intrinsic to the form. The sonnet, as configured here, becomes a modular surface: less a vessel of meaning, more a grid for the registration of intensities.

Consider the poem *săgetător* [sagittarius].⁵⁷ Each quatrain stands as an autonomous perceptual unit, organized through paratactic juxtaposition. This modular construction expresses a broader aesthetic logic in which fragmentation functions as an interface. The reader processes poetic information through discrete, high-intensity blocks of attention, disengaged from sequential immersion. The first stanza establishes the central figure, namely a paradoxically passive yet overstimulated subject, through a series of images that collapse bodily vulnerability into the surreal logic of intoxicated consumption. The proverb inversion (“nu bagă mâna-n foc... doarme cu ea-n foc”) suspends conventional meaning, redirecting the proverb’s moral clarity into hallucinatory stasis. Substance use (“faxe,” “fum”) and digital displacement (“teleportat la filtru”) evoke a body detached from volition, captured in compulsive loops of sensation. The second quatrain shifts from physiology to affective performativity. Language drawn from digital commerce – “dă click acum,” “ultimul produs din stoc” – mobilizes the rhetoric of scarcity typical of platform capitalism. The anaphoric “e... e... e...” [iteration of the verb to be] simulates the hypnotic rhythm of algorithmic repetition, while the line “campionul triplu fără titlu” encapsulates the contradiction of digital labor: constant performance, no recognition. A subject constituted through processes of interface and feedback, rendered measurable yet remaining unacknowledged within its own experiential frame. Put differently, the poetic subject ceases to act from the depths of self-consciousness and emerges instead as a byproduct of the circuits that enmesh it, a fatigued, data-saturated entity, relentlessly subjected to evaluation while remaining ontologically unacknowledged. In the first tercet, the tone pivots. The imagery cools. Absence enters. The departure of the central figure congeals space: “crâșma se face iglu.” The line introduces coldness as relational affect. Dependency is metaphorized as structural instability (“bețe de cort”) while ambivalence and control (“recul de colt”) suggest an underlying logic of unpredictable violence. Here, intimacy is coded through architectures of tension. The final stanza collapses the semantic field into a typographic metapoem. “Poem de-o literă” evokes radical minimalism, yet this is immediately contradicted by visual excess: “font de 300, ultrabold, în word.” Meaning is generated through visual inflation, with semantic development displaced. The punchline crystallizes the paradox of the contemporary poetic regime: content undergoes

<https://matcaliterara.ro/obiectul-kintsugi/>.

⁵⁷ Popa, *Sutta*, 44. Here is an English translation of the poem poem *săgetător*: “doesn’t stick his hand in fire, he sleeps with it in fire/ he takes a drag – and teleports into the filter/ he’s got handcuffs, litre-dose fax machines/ at Easter, he smashes the egg while you tap it // he’s sticky like a hangover after cider/ click now – it’s the last product in stock/ it’s 3D chess-hopscotch, not just a game/ and he’s the triple champion with no title // when he left, the bar turned into an igloo/ and in his grip we’re tent poles –/ ambivalent like a tiger’s stripes // as easy to control as a Colt’s recoil/ a one-letter poem – and the only one of the cycle/ typed in 300 font, ultrabold, in Word.”

compression while the signal expands. What remains is a semiotic object constructed for display, detached from traditional forms of expression.

As we move deeper into *Sutta*, the ideological richness of the volume resides in the structural logic that unifies these seemingly disparate discourses (be it Zen Buddhism, anarchist revolt, ecological ethics, or digital existentialism). The sonnet functions as the infrastructure of coherence, serving as the compositional mechanism that organizes a fragmented perceptual world. Contradiction remains unresolved, yet is inscribed and stabilized through form.

Rather than isolating the specific contents of the ideologies at play, that is to say care ethics, contemplative withdrawal, posthuman solidarity, stoic minimalism, what emerges as central is a shared structural commitment to love-as-persistence, a nurturing, non-possessive form of relationality that cuts across doctrinal difference. This cross-ideological insistence on care, fragility, and interdependence forms the affective and political substrate of the volume. In this context, the sonnet's formal constraint intensifies these discourses. It becomes the frame that makes legible a poetics of *responsibility*, a recurring geometry that mirrors *the return of ethical commitment across traditions*. This "structure of feeling" reaches full clarity in poems like *ahimsa*, *lying flat*, or *berbec*, where vulnerability is aestheticized as a mode of active moral relation, in Judith Butler's sense.⁵⁸ The ethical force of these texts emerges through their rejection of abstraction. Their movement unfolds through gestural accumulation: hands held, spines arched, mouths closed, touch enacted without domination. These micro-acts operate as counter-images to institutional violence, offering poetic equivalents to what Butler terms the "force of nonviolence," understood as the affirmation of interdependence through embodied action.

Seen through this lens, the sonnet does not merely index formal return; it performs a new function: it binds affect, ideology, and form into a single structure of attention. In an environment shaped by cognitive overflow and fractured legibility, this form demands deeper forms of attention, that is a willingness to linger within abstraction, to decipher tension without immediate resolution. Attention, then, must be reconceived not quantitatively, but apophatically: not by *how long* we stay with a text, but by *how deeply* we are willing to enter its difficulty. *Sutta* makes this wager. Presenting short texts that are dense, resistant, and ideologically charged, the sonnet presses against both the sensory apparatus and the ethical imagination.

Yet there remains one final turn in the dialectic of form and content – one that destabilizes the very stability we might have attributed to the sonnet across *Sutta*. While the number of lines remains largely consistent (fourteen, with few exceptions) the internal architecture of these sonnets is anything but fixed. What appears uniform at first glance

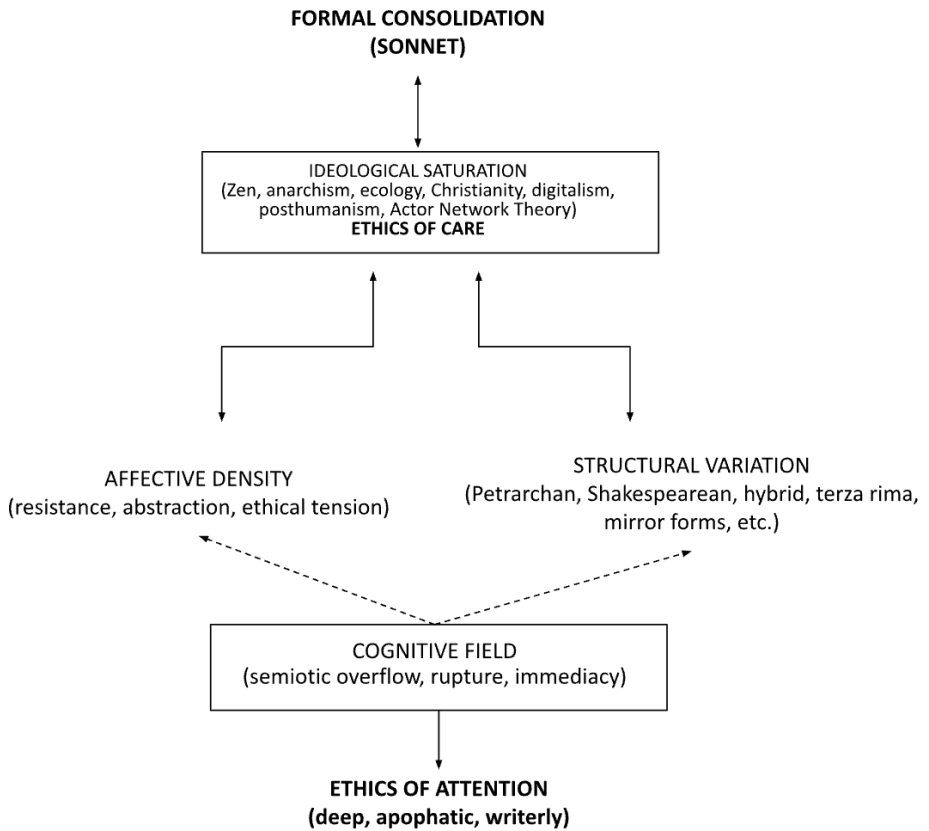
⁵⁸ "The relational understanding of vulnerability shows that we are not altogether separable from the conditions that make our lives possible or impossible. In other words, because we cannot exist liberated from such conditions, we are never fully individuated." Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020), 46.

dissolves, upon closer inspection, into a mosaic of structural experiments.⁵⁹ Some poems adopt the classical Petrarchan division (*muladhara*), others mimic Shakespearean pacing; some invert traditional sequences (*nepenthe*), while others interlace envelope rhymes across quatrains (*taur, octombrie*), or open with terza rima only to end in full reversal (*măntreb*). We encounter blank sonnets (*sati*), sonettessa hybrids (*chipul*), and recursive mirror-forms (palindrome-like) that collapse symmetry into a vertigo of echo and distortion. What emerges is a paradox: structural multiplicity within procedural consistency. These are not pastiches of form, nor postmodernist games of fragmentation. Rather, they articulate a deeper coherence: a unity-in-plurality, a compositional ethic that mirrors the ideological and philosophical pluralism within the volume itself: “When chaos is swallowing the mind (including the social mind), we should not be afraid of it, we should not strive to subjugate chaos to order. That will not work, because chaos is stronger than order. So, we should make friends with chaos, and in the whirlwind we should look for the superior order that chaos brings in itself.”⁶⁰ Just as *Sutta* traverses Zen, stoicism, anarchist politics, ecological ethics, Christian compassion and digital disillusionment, the sonnet becomes the container capacious enough to hold them all, precisely because it refuses to stabilize as a single form. The sonnet, then, does not resolve contradiction; it absorbs it. The variation in structure is not a break in formal discipline. Strictly speaking, it is the visible trace of a deeper principle: persistence through difference. Or, to borrow the words from *muladhara*: “sunt făcut din frânturi străvezii și obscure / pe care pielea abia dacă le ascunde / ochi compus, poliedric, de inimi. sunt sute – / fiecare din ele deprinsă să-ndure” [I’m made of shards, both translucent and obscure / barely hidden beneath the skin’s contour / a compound eye, polyhedral, of hearts. hundreds – / each one trained in the art of endure].⁶¹

⁵⁹ For a history of detours from the sonnet algorithm see T. V. F. Brogan, L. J. Zillman, C. Scott, and J. Lewin, “Sonnet,” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed., ed. Roland Greene et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1321.

⁶⁰ Berardi, *Breathing*, 48.

⁶¹ Popa, *Sutta*, 18.



The volume *Sutta* should not be understood as a thematic constellation whose significance derives from the accumulation of ideologies and philosophical vocabularies. Such an additive logic assumes that complexity emerges from mere semantic proliferation. This reading, however, misapprehends the structural principle at work in the volume. The argument advanced here is that Popa's sonnet articulates a mode of formal mediation, where the sonnet functions as a structural procedure rather than a container for heterogeneous content. Through this operation, the dynamics of the *attention economy* are rendered coherent, though without closure, giving rise to an *ethics of attention*.