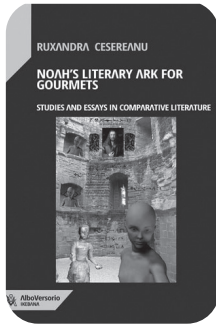


Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Noah's Literary Ark for Gourmets. Studies and Essays in Comparative Literature*, Milano, Edizioni AlboVersorio, 2023



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**“CLOSE CRITICISM”:
A PERSONALISED APPROACH
TO STUDYING FICTION**

The ability of creating immersive fictional worlds is one of literature's most impressive and enduring characteristics. As the title of Ruxandra Cesereanu's book suggests, this collection of studies and essays transports the reader on a journey similar to the one undertaken by Noah in his ark, where imaginative universes, such as those created by C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, coexist with worlds marked by totalitarian trauma, like in the case of Franz Werfel or Ludmila Ulitskaya, and with the posthuman experiments and anxieties of Alasdair Gray or Marie Darrieussecq. Impressive not only because of the variety of authors, genres and themes Ruxandra Cesereanu approaches, the studies also manage to maintain a careful balance between a scholarly, academic analysis of these topics and a personal, unique interpretation of each of these works. Consisting mostly of writings published across the previous two decades, some of them collected in the book *Lumi de ficțiune, lumi de realitate* (Tracus Arte, București, 2022), the volume includes an important addendum in the form of a study which analyses two films by Andrei Tarkovsky and Lars von Trier, thus expanding this collection beyond the realm of strictly literary criticism. The author herself confesses that she was fascinated by these creative individuals and by their faith in the power of art and literature, and hopes that at least some of her passion will be transferred to the readers of these essays.¹

The volume is divided into five parts and, correspondingly, into five moods or

states of mind generated by the themes handled by that particular set of authors and further developed by Ruxandra Cesereanu in her hermeneutical exercise. As such, each section consists of essays concerning writers who can be placed in a certain category by the function their fiction serves.

The first series of essays, entitled “Zones and Witnesses”, presents different types of worldbuilders and the worlds they offer the reader as an invitation towards exploration and immersion. Sei Shonagon’s aesthetic garden paradise, essential for the artistic aspirations of the Japanese court society, stands in stark contrast to the ruined landscape of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and of C. S. Lewis’ Narnia ruled by Jadis, the White Witch. Both Eliot and Lewis investigate the tension between barrenness and fertility, death and revival in the modern world, providing two distinct perspectives that share features of a return to a spiritual worldview. In her essay on Tolkien, Ruxandra Cesereanu coins the term “fantasy complex” in order to describe the imaginative healing power of fantasy fiction in the context of the contemporary disenchantment with reality, a power which is transmitted to the reader through Tolkien’s imagination-driven heroes. The complex structure of David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*, on a narrative as well as stylistic level, turns the novel into a globalized atlas of fiction generating a seemingly endless number of possible worlds.

Although the styles of these authors and the historical contexts in which they write differ widely, they can still be described as “witnesses” of the spaces and times they live in, creating fictional worlds adhering to or criticising the worldviews

of their contemporaries. For example, Sei Shonagon admires the artistic lifestyle of the Japanese nobility, distinguishing the high culture of the imperial palace from the lack of aesthetic imagination among the plebeians,² while London is for both Eliot and Lewis the epitome of the bleakness typical for the despiritualised modern world.³

In order to position themselves for or against the world they inhabit, these writers develop what Corin Braga calls a *mundus* or *imago mundi*, a picture of reality filtered through their own convictions and ways of thinking. This means that, although the “real historical world” is axiologically neutral, the *mundus* can gain positive or negative values in the mind of the author.⁴ Even if the works Ruxandra Cesereanu discusses in these cases are not utopias or dystopias (with the possible exception of Mitchell’s novel)⁵, Corin Braga’s concept (created for theorising these literary genres) could prove useful outside the field of utopian studies as well. Thus, the reader of *Cloud Atlas* finds himself travelling while always inhabiting a non-place, which indicates Mitchell’s perception of the postmodern, globalised world where identity is no longer tied to a stable, physical space, since new zones can always be generated through the fictionalising process.⁶ On the other hand, as already mentioned, Sei Shonagon idealises the aristocratic status of the Japanese court, while Lewis and Eliot write their works in response to what they perceive as the dehumanising and degrading effects of the modern industrialised world against which they project a return to an ancient, vegetal and mystical environment.⁷ Tolkien follows this line of thought to a certain extent, but infuses his characters with

what the author calls a “fantasy complex” in order to counterbalance the devastating consequences of a disillusioned view of the world with a renewed sense of wonder⁸ that may lead to a positive change in the individual and, eventually, in society as a whole. Thus, Ruxandra Cesereanu manages to highlight how these writers are simultaneously products and producers of their time, responding positively or negatively to the direction they feel their world is heading in.

The two following studies, placed under the label “Marginality and Revelation”, centre around the marginal as they are represented in the writings of Venedikt Yerofeyev, Alexander Zinoviev and Roberto Bolaño. Ruxandra Cesereanu utilises theories about the marginal members of society in order to illustrate how beggars, drunkards, homeless people and poets can have experiences that others will never be able to live through. After all, the minority represents one of the prime sources of innovation and transformation in society, being able to provide unique solutions outside the system which are inaccessible for the majority.⁹ For instance, in Yerofeyev’s *Moscow-Petushki*, Venitchka’s alcoholism is tied to his poetic ability, serving an escapist as well as creative function, as the character becomes a martyr of a totalitarian regime through the various trials he is forced to pass through.¹⁰ Additionally, as Ruxandra Cesereanu mentions in another article on Roberto Bolaño, the Chilean novelist manages to translate “street art into literature” in *2666*, a novel that theorises the manners through which the peripheral can become the new centre inside an “aesthetically valid literature”.¹¹ Bolaño also wishes to turn a marginal literary genre into a central one,

since the noir novel is often disregarded due to its genre fiction status, a rigid category he hopes to surpass and expand in his works.¹² All of these authors create and use marginal characters in a subversive manner, bringing them to the forefront in order not only to include them in a new type of aesthetics, but also to have them experience revelatory and ecstatic moments that may remove part of the stigma they are associated with.

The complex relationship between literature and history is the overarching topic of the next essay cycle, “Trauma and Resistance”, focusing on different means of survival in a totalitarian regime. The writers chosen by Ruxandra Cesereanu illustrate the various possible responses to violence, censorship and tyranny. Franz Werfel fictionalises and mythologises the Armenian resistance against the Ottomans in an epic-like narrative of a people’s fight for survival, whereas Patrick Mondiano writes a type of documentary fiction with autobiographical elements in which Dora Bruder’s search for her identity gains an initiatory function in the writer’s quest for his own paternal figure.¹³ Ludmila Ulitskaya’s novels are a prime example of the contexts in which fiction can become more real than history, especially when the latter has been “revised” through the party’s propaganda, since literature, thanks to its subversive character, can play a key role in the resistance against totalitarianism.

Furthermore, these studies explore the different functions of memory. For instance, in *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, Bagradian experiences a process of metanoia which helps him reconnect with his Armenian identity, thus transforming the road to identity into an essentially religious

process.¹⁴ Ruxandra Cesereanu uses Marianne Hirsch concept of “postmemory” in order to describe the relationship between memory and a traumatic experience in the context of Patrick Mondiano’s *Dora Bruder*. Postmemory implies two distinct but related dimensions. On the one hand, trauma becomes a transgenerational psychological phenomenon that requires a reconciliation with a violent history. On the other hand, this transgenerational transmission turns postmemory into a testimonial which can bring to light a past trauma in the eyes of the younger generations, ensuring that personal and collective tragedies will not be forgotten through the passing of time.¹⁵ This last function is also fulfilled by Mondiano’s novel in Ruxandra Cesereanu’s view, although she acknowledges that its testimonial value is partially contested by some critics.¹⁶ In Ulitskaya’s writings, history as a narrative of truth has become unrecognisable because of the propaganda machine of the USSR, which leads her to the conclusion that subversive literature has become the only remedy to this falsification of the past.¹⁷ Consequently, literature becomes an authentic preserver of memory and manages to maintain a testimonial character in spite of its non-factual nature. For example, the description of Stalin’s funeral in *The Green Tent* functions as “the most visible and poignant metaphor for the Gulag”.¹⁸ Thus, Ruxandra Cesereanu illustrates how a historical context marked by violence and oppression engenders an intimate link between memory, identity, survival and resistance.

In the next section, aptly named “Posthuman Binocular”, the author of the volume borrows a posthuman lens in order to decipher the predictions, hopes

and concerns of Alasdair Gray, Will Self and Marie Darrieussecq. The often-comic narratives of grotesque metamorphoses, although seemingly absurd at first, have the purpose of exploring the relationship between humans and their own alterity. The changes taking place inwards, in the individual, as well as outwards, across society, may create the impression that the end of humanity is in sight. However, following other theorists of posthumanism, Ruxandra Cesereanu argues that such radical transformations do not actually prophesy the destruction of the human being, but in fact indicate the necessity of redefining what it means to be human.¹⁹ As Katherine Hayles notes, the posthuman condition is incompatible with the “liberal humanist view of the self”²⁰, since it posits that “[m]astery through the exercise of autonomous will is merely the story consciousness tells itself to explain results that actually come about through chaotic dynamics and emergent structures”.²¹ For Hale, the embodied nature specific to human beings is what differentiates us from machines, but also what generates our peculiar traits and behaviours.²² This may be one of the reasons why Will Self and Marie Darrieussecq choose to exaggerate the manifestations of human sexuality in order to use them as a cornerstone of their satire.²³

The next essay focuses on Andrei Codrescu, described as an “anarchetypal writer” by the author, and comments on his latest critical-essay books which always surprise the reader through their unconventional treatment of literary topics. The term “anarchetype”, coined by Corin Braga, refers to an anarchic configuration of elements that seems to refuse any well-defined structure.²⁴ However, this

does not signify that an anarchetype lacks any form of organisation. Instead, it means that it is not built around a solid centre, but embraces its decentralised and multipolar nature which offers it a freedom lacking in archetypal structures.²⁵ Ruxandra Cesereanu argues that Andrei Codrescu can be characterised as an anarchetype writes because of his interest in “decentering and anarchy, which he endeavors to put forward not necessarily as a model, but as a creative structure”.²⁶ This manifests itself in the various styles and genres he is able to write in: from the “trickster-dictionary”²⁷ *The Posthuman Dada Guide. Tzara & Lenin Play Chess* to his journal concerning a creative writing workshop he taught, published as *The Poetry Lesson*,²⁸ and to the “anarchobook”²⁹ *Whatever Gets You Through the Night. A Story of Sheherezade and Arabian Entertainments* as well as the “Bildungsromanessay”³⁰ *Bibliodeath. My Archives (With Life in Footnotes)*, his chameleonic ability impresses even his most avid readers. In this way, Ruxandra Cesereanu extends the use of the term “anarchetype”, used by Corin Braga to theorise a framework in relation to structures of the imaginary, to describe a type of creative process an artist can engage in.

The “Cinematic Addenda” consists of a study about two related but still distinct affects, nostalgia and melancholia, as they appear in the cinematography of Andrei Tarkovsky (*Nostalgia*, 1983) and Lars von Trier (*Melancholia*, 2011). Starting from a psychological and artistic overview of these states of mind, Ruxandra Cesereanu examines the similarities and differences between them in terms of time and space, from the perspective of the individual and the collective, finally exemplifying how

these theoretical considerations reflect themselves in the work of the two filmmakers, both of whom have engaged with these affects in a complex and personal manner. Thus, the author approaches these spiritual crises and the mutations of their meaning across time in a truly interdisciplinary manner, creating a canvas on which Freud’s psychoanalytical theory regarding melancholy and mourning is complemented by paintings authored by Albrecht Dürer or John Everett Millais and by evocative and highly symbolic scenes from the films of the two directors. Although the critic places von Trier in Tarkovsky’s filiation, she highlights the key ways in which he distances himself from the sensibilities and worldview of his symbolic father, infusing his films with new meanings and innovative images.

As already mentioned, Ruxandra Cesereanu’s volume makes audible not only the voice of a researcher with an academic and hermeneutic interest in these authors, but also the voice of a passionate reader and viewer who has internalised the ideas and worlds of these artistic figures. She closely follows the authors and texts she discusses, choosing to employ various concepts and theories that may help her in formulating viable interpretations, but never sacrificing her personal lens in order to prove the validity of an external theoretical framework. Since it is clear that these essays and studies were written foremost as an attempt of understanding the worldviews and creative processes behind these works, they are suitable and gripping for connoisseurs, gourmets and amateurs alike, offering an excellent opportunity for (re) discovering these authors from new and interesting perspectives.

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NOTES

1. Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Noah's Literary Ark for Gourmets. Studies and Essays in Comparative Literature*, Edizioni AlboVersorio, Milano, 2023, p. 9.
2. *Ibidem*, pp. 15-16.
3. *Ibidem*, p. 24.
4. Corin Braga, "Lumi ficționale. O taxinomie a genului utopic", in Corin Braga (coord.), *Morfologia lumilor posibile. Utopie, antiutopie, science-fiction, fantasy*, Tracus Arte, București, 2015, pp. 39-40.
5. Cesereanu, *Noah's Literary Ark*, p. 70.
6. *Ibidem*, pp. 69-70.
7. For Ruxandra Cesereanu's complete demonstration, see the chapter "The Fertility-Sterility Dialectics in *The Waste Land* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*" in *Ibidem*, pp. 23-41.
8. See the author's discussion of C.N. Manlove's concept of *wonder* in *Ibidem*, p. 47.
9. Gilles Ferréol and Adrian Neculau, "Prefață", in Gilles Ferréol and Adrian Neculau (coord.), *Minoritari, marginali, excluși*, Polirom, Iași, 1996, p. 10.
10. Cesereanu, *Noah's Literary Ark*, pp. 80-81.
11. Ruxandra Cesereanu, "Roberto Bolaño - 2666 și teoria minoratului", in *Transilvania*, no. 7, 2017, p. 73.
12. Cesereanu, *Noah's Literary Ark*, pp. 89-90.
13. *Ibidem*, p. 113.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 100.
15. Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2001, pp. 5-37, pp. 8-10 apud Cesereanu, *Noah's Literary Ark*, pp. 112-113.
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17. *Ibidem*, p. 118.
18. *Ibidem*, p. 119.
19. *Ibidem*, pp. 136-137.
20. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1999, p. 287.
21. *Ibidem*, p. 288.
22. *Ibidem*, pp. 283-284.
23. Cesereanu, *Noah's Literary Ark*, p. 149.
24. Corin Braga, *De la arbetip la anarhetip*, Polirom, Iași, 2006, pp. 277-278.
25. *Ibidem*, p. 280.
26. Cesereanu, *Noah's Literary Ark*, p. 157.
27. *Ibidem*.
28. *Ibidem*, p. 161.
29. *Ibidem*, p. 164.
30. *Ibidem*, p. 165.