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LOCALIZING POSTMODERNISM IN MĂNĂȘTUR¹

The concept of postmodernism was discussed rather late in Romanian culture in comparison to other Western cultures (it is only at the beginning of the 80's that the first relevant articles on this subject are published in literary magazines). This paper focuses on determining and analyzing the evolution of theories concerning postmodernism in the limited cultural context of Cluj-Napoca, because we find here what can be called a privileged (or, in another sense, isolated) cultural space. Ironically, the Communist Party had allocated apartments for most university professors (considered simple laborers) into apartment-buildings in the working district of Mănăștur. Thus, when referring to Cluj-Napoca's professors of that time it is not wrong to refer almost exclusively to this district. Some names of literary critics or theorists that were (re)located here include: Ioana Em. Petrescu, Liviu Petrescu, Georgeta Antonescu, Liviu Cotrău, Mircea Muthu, Marian Papahagi and others.

My study will focus mainly on the works of Ioana Em. Petrescu and her husband Liviu Petrescu. The two have made a great contribution to Romanian literary theory concerning the concept of postmodernism, even though their role in this sector of Romanian culture is often neglected. For example, it is very rare in the case of Romanian theorists to associate or discuss in detail the connection between deconstruction/poststructuralism and postmodernism. For Ioana Em. Petrescu, however, deconstruction seems to be a key-concept in defining postmodernism, thus her theories are at least atypical in comparison to other works in this field. As for Liviu Petrescu, he is probably the author of the first Romanian book entirely dedicated to defining postmodernism. His book, however, is rarely quoted in later publications of other Romanian theorists.

Even though the two were husband and wife, their theoretical approaches are very different from one another and their works concerning postmodernism belong to two very different periods in Romanian culture (as I shall explain further on), yet they both prove to offer an atypical contribution to the field.

Since Ioana Em. Petrescu passed away in 1990, her work is entirely related to the Communist period of Romania, and to discuss Western concepts such as postmodernism or deconstruction in that time was not an easy task. Very few books on this subject were translated into Romanian and original editions were

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hard to find, since the Communist secret police severely controlled the circulation of Western theoretical books within the country. In 1980, for example, Adriana Babeți and Delia Șepețean-Vasilieu edited the so-called “Tel-Quel” anthology², thus publishing a series of poststructuralist texts that introduce the Romanian public to key-concepts that will be essential in the later discussions concerning the topic of deconstruction. At that time though, such topics were rather rare.

Aside from a local Romanian tendency to stay in touch with the latest Western debates, Ioana Petrescu’s works concerning deconstruction could also be explained by geographical/biographical reasons. Thus, in 1981 she obtains a Fulbright scholarship to The University of California, in Los Angeles, and, for two years, will have access to books that were totally inaccessible in Romania. Apart from reading and taking notes, Ioana Em. Petrescu managed to bring back to Romania, upon her return to Cluj-Napoca, many of these books, carefully picked-out. Some of the titles include: *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Wayne C. Booth), *The Eye in the Text* (Mary Ann Caws), *The Pursuit of Signs – Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Jonathan Culler), *Allegories of Reading* (Paul de Man), *Deconstruction and Criticism* (anthology Bloom, Derrida, de Man etc.), *Writing and Difference* (Derrida), *Theory of Criticism* (Murray Krieger), *Truth and Method* (Gadamer), *The Implied Reader* (Iser), *The Prison-house of Language* (Fredric Jameson), *Powers of Horror* (Julia Kristeva), *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-structuralist Criticism* (anthology), *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America* (anthology ed. by Wlad Godzich). As we can infer from this list, Ioana Em. Petrescu’s main interest as far as Western bibliography is concerned revolves around deconstruction or poststructuralism. It is known from her correspondence (published in 1998³) that while she was in America she planned to bring home (as she could only pack a limited number of books) those titles which were not available in Romania (neither translated nor available in their original format). Thus, by analyzing this list of books we can understand that the great theoretical gap in Romanian theory of that time was clearly related to such fields as postmodernism or deconstruction. The gap Ioana Petrescu tries to fill could not be solved only by bringing the books to Romania (or by sharing them with fellow professors and students, as was the custom in those days in the University), but also by contributing with her own articles on this matter in Romanian literary publications. Thus, one year after her return from America, in 1984, Ioana Em. Petrescu publishes an article called “Derrida’s Poststructuralist Philosophy and the Solutions of Contemporary Criticism” in (three consecutive numbers of) RITL

² Adriana Babeți, Delia Șepețean-Vasilieu (eds.), *Pentru o teorie a textului. Antologie „Tel-Quel” 1960-1971* [For a Theory of the Text. “Tel-Quel” Anthology 1960-1971], București, Univers, 1980.

³ Ioana Em. Petrescu, *Molestarea fluturilor interzisă. Scrisori americane, 1981-1983* [The Molesting of Butterflies Forbidden. American Letters, 1981-1983]. Edited by Ioana Bot, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1998.

(*Revista de Istorie și Teorie Literară*). The text consists of an austere presentation of Derrida's main concepts and ideas of the time, and acknowledges the relevance of the French philosophers' theories in the field of contemporary cultural studies.

One year later she will publish in *Cahiers roumains d'études littéraires* an even more analytical text concerning the works of Murray Krieger, trying to determine the (subtle) differences between contextualism and deconstructivist criticism: "Unlike deconstructivist criticism, contextualism admits its status of secondary art dependent on the primary art which is literature"⁴. It is pointless to say that many of the references from these articles and the following ones are from the books Ioana Em. Petrescu brought home from America, or from notes taken during her scholarship there.

As I've said before, an appetite for deconstruction was rather rare in Communist Romania, yet there were authors that (more or less) also approached the subject. A very interesting case, as far as this study is concerned, is that of Professor Liviu Cotrău (who, ironically, also lived in Mănăștur at that time). Cotrău published a first article în *Steaua*⁵, analyzing Derrida's view upon the linguistic sign. Cotrău is also present with another article concerning deconstruction (*Dis-placing and Re-placing the Center*), alongside Ioana Em. Petrescu in the same 1985 issue of *Cahiers roumains d'études littéraires*. It is not impossible that these contributions of Liviu Cotrău are also due to the books Ioana Em. Petrescu brought back from America, since the two were colleagues at the same University and had a common circle of friends.

One of the most interesting articles of Ioana Em. Petrescu's was published, however, much later, in 1988 (*Steaua*), entitled *Modernism/Postmodernism. A Hypothetical Model* (an English version of the article was also published posthumously in the literary journal *Euresis – cahiers roumains d'études littéraires*, 1995). The article has a very wide range of references, relating postmodernism to fields such as modernism, quantum physics or deconstruction. Also, we find here a few theoretical observations that provide a challenging view upon the relationship between modernism and postmodernism. If many theorists consider postmodernism as a part (a final stage) of modernism, Ioana Em. Petrescu sees it in an opposite manner. That is, modernism was only the first (naive) stage of postmodernism which was only beginning at that time to be fully recognized:

"I will therefore call *postmodernism* the cultural model which aims at a new form of synthesis by integrating the modernist crisis and even going beyond it in an effort to rehabilitate (on a dynamic basis) the individual as a category"⁶.

⁴ Ioana Em. Petrescu, "Murray Krieger's «contextualism»", *Cahiers roumains d'études littéraires*, 1985, 2, p. 133.

⁵ Liviu Cotrău, "Spațiul diferenței" ["The Space of Difference"], *Steaua*, XXXIV, 1983, 10, pp. 51-52.

⁶ Ioana Em. Petrescu, "Modernism/ Postmodernism: A Hypothetical Model", *Euresis – Cahiers roumains d'études littéraires*, 1995, 1-2, pp. 23-24.

Later in the article, Petrescu quotes Lyotard on a similar idea: “a work of art can become modern only if it is first postmodern”⁷.

Even though the article was published rather late, after the Romanian cultural context was a bit more accommodated with the concept of postmodernism, it still managed to provide an atypical approach on the subject (because of both its references to deconstruction and quantum physics). For example, in 1986 the journal *Caiete critice* publishes a special issue dedicated entirely to theorizing postmodernism⁸. Many Romanian critics and theorists from that time had contributed to this issue with diverse ideas and references related to the concept, thus providing a first major picture of Romanian literary theory on postmodernism and also encouraging future debates on this topic. Yet few of the articles mention, for example, Derrida or deconstruction. So, even two years after the publication of this number and several other studies related to the topic, Ioana Em. Petrescu’s *hypothetical model* for postmodernism still manages to be “singular”, providing a different type of approach.

Her works regarding postmodernism were published selectively in magazines throughout a period of ten years. Posthumously, these texts were gathered together in a collective book dedicated to Ioana Em. Petrescu⁹. Also, some of the ideas present in these articles were part of a major project that Ioana Em. Petrescu was working on at that time, a study that situates Ion Barbu’s poetry within the range of postmodernism. This study was also published posthumously.

In today’s Romanian cultural context, Ioana Em. Petrescu is considered mainly as one of the most important analysts of the works of the “national poet” Mihai Eminescu. Her studies on Eminescu are highly quoted and have opened this field of study to a much broader understanding. However, as a theorist of postmodernism, her contribution is often neglected, this also due to the difficult editorial history (many articles published posthumously, books published initially in a small number of copies, available mainly in Cluj-Napoca, books republished in better editions, but at a late time when theorizing postmodernism was less relevant). There has been, however, some critical response to her theories, especially from critics from Cluj-Napoca. I am referring mainly to a book written by Elena Voj, dedicated entirely to these postmodern studies of Ioana Em Petrescu¹⁰, and to Mihaela Ursa’s book on Romanian postmodernism published in 1999¹¹.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

⁸ *Caiete critice*, 1986, 1-2.

⁹ Diana Adamek, Ioana Bot (eds.), *Portret de grup cu Ioana Em. Petrescu [Group Portrait with Ioana Em. Petrescu]*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 1991.

¹⁰ Elena Voj, *Contribuția Ioanei Em. Petrescu la studiul postmodernismului în teoria literară [Ioana Em. Petrescu’s Contribution to the Study of Postmodernism in Literary Theory]*, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2006.

¹¹ Mihaela Ursa, *Optzecismul și promisiunile postmodernismului [The 80’s and the Promises of Postmodernism]*, Pitești, Paralela 45, 1999.

Unlike his wife, Liviu Petrescu was not preoccupied with postmodernism in the Communist Period of Romania. Since the 70's he was regarded as a leading, yet atypical, critic of the modern novel, which was his main interest. Some of his books, for example, include *Realitate și romanesc* (*Reality and Novelty*, 1969), *Dostoievski* (1971), *Romanul condiției umane* (*The Novel of the Human Condition*, 1979), *Vârstele romanului* (*The Ages of the Novel*, 1992). His approach, however, on the subject was not a common one among Romanian critics who were divided by an impressionistic view upon literature, in contrast with the social(ist) view¹². Petrescu was somehow neutral, as he favored what can be called existentialist criticism¹³.

It is these two topics (the art of the novel and existentialism) that were the starting point to Petrescu's theoretical shift towards postmodernism. In his book *The Ages of the Novel* (1992), the critic distinguishes between three types of modernism: a first stage focused on a scientific contamination of the arts (in general), a second stage where the individual (or subjectivity) is the main focus-point in art and, finally, a post-modern stage. After re-writing this book, focusing mainly on the importance of the last post-modern stage, Petrescu publishes, in 1996, *Poetica postmodernismului* (*The Poetics of Postmodernism*). As far as Romanian culture is concerned, this is, probably, the first book entirely dedicated to defining the concept of postmodernism. However, many critics have ignored this text in the years to follow, even in cases where such an omission can be seen as hostile. The most interesting case here is that of Mircea Cărtărescu's book *Postmodernismul românesc* (*Romanian Postmodernism*, 1999). Cărtărescu does not directly quote or even mention Liviu Petrescu's book, even though the two share, in many cases, very similar ideas. For the author of *Romanian Postmodernism* it would seem that Petrescu's book did not even exist, or, at least, Cărtărescu did not want to take it into consideration. However, at a certain point, Cărtărescu gives the following quotation from the Moldavian poet Alexandru Vakulovski:

...it was like this it's snowing outside with dilated pupils new year's ball at the Science Academy but Grigore Vieru has chosen kindergarten I am reading *The poetics of postmodernism* Liviu Petrescu my girlfriend wants to know how much [...]¹⁴.

¹² Cf. Oana Fotache, *Divanul criticii. Discursuri asupra metodei în critica românească postbelică* [*The Critics' Gathering. Discourses on Method in Post-war Romanian Criticism*], București, Editura Universității din București, 2009.

¹³ Cf. Alex Goldiș, *Critica în tranșee. De la realismul socialist la autonomia esteticului* [*Criticism in the Trench. From Social Realism to Aesthetic Autonomy*], București, Cartea Românească, 2011, pp. 269-274.

¹⁴ Mircea Cărtărescu, *Postmodernismul românesc* [*Romanian Postmodernism*], București, Humanitas, 1999, p. 474.

It is rather unusual that the only place in Cărtărescu's book where Liviu Petrescu is mentioned is in a quoted poem. Such a reference can seem hostile, especially when we are dealing with two theoretical books focused on the same topic (that of postmodernism), both published in a time when the concept of postmodernism was not entirely clarified by Romanian literary studies.

It is possible that *The poetics of postmodernism* was ignored by later theoretical texts because of the fact that Liviu Petrescu, as I've said, was not preoccupied mainly with this subject. Thus, this atypical book in Petrescu's bibliography, published quite early in Romanian culture and very late for the standards of European culture, is seen today mainly as a local attempt to understand a complex term such as postmodernism. Also, another reason for which Liviu Petrescu's book did not become a main reference in Romanian culture is the fact that his approach is similar to earlier theories that were published in articles, or later theories published in books. To be more exact, authors such as Fredric Jameson, Gianni Vattimo, J.F. Lyotard and others are of great interest to all Romanian theorists, thus, Petrescu's book might be the first of its kind in Romanian culture, but similar theories have been developed by most theorists in this branch. So, the atypical approach that defines Liviu Petrescu's criticism remains, in fact, his existentialist perspective, and this perspective is not very explored in *The poetics of postmodernism*. Surprisingly, it is the articles of Ioana Em. Petrescu that seem to give a broad and innovative approach to postmodernism, even though they were written during the Communist period.

It is without a doubt that living in Communist Romania influences the way in which a critic or theorist can work, his/ her possibilities being limited by explicit political (dictatorial) laws. However, writers have proven many times their ability to find gaps in the system, thus allowing them to continue with their work according to higher standards. This seems to have been the case of Ioana and Liviu Petrescu also, as they managed to develop new paths in literary criticism and theory (before and after Ioana Em. Petrescu's scholarship to the States) in the very limited political and cultural context of Romania. It is difficult to determine in which ways did the city of Cluj-Napoca (or, to be more specific, Mănăştur district) influence the works of Ioana and Liviu Petrescu, yet it seems more reasonable to determine the cultural context of Cluj, starting from their works. Thus, we are dealing with a cultural milieu that managed to stay in touch with Western cultural standards by originally exploring a few gaps in the system (the existentialist, deconstructivist, postmodernist ones, to be more precise). In other words, the two theorists seem to have made the best of both worlds, taking advantage of their trip to America and bringing back a few theoretical instruments that allowed them to remodel some of the rigid and local understandings of postmodern concepts.

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LOCALIZING POSTMODERNISM IN MĂNĂȘTUR

(Abstract)

The concept of postmodernism was discussed rather late in Romanian culture in comparison to other Western cultures (it is only at the beginning of the 80’s that the first relevant articles on this subject are published in literary magazines). This paper focuses on determining and analyzing the evolution of theories concerning postmodernism in the limited cultural context of Cluj-Napoca, because we find here what can be called a privileged cultural space. Ironically, the Communist Party had allocated throughout the years apartments for most university professors (considered simple laborers) into apartment-buildings in the working district of Mănăștur. Thus, when referring to Cluj-Napoca’s professors from that time it is not wrong to refer almost exclusively to the district of Mănăștur. I will analyze articles from literary magazines, Liviu Petrescu’s *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (probably, the first book dedicated entirely to the concept of postmodernism in Romania), along with several works by Ioana Em. Petrescu (one of the few Romanian theorists who discusses deconstruction in relation to postmodernism). In my analysis I will focus on the relationship between the articles or books and the context in which they were written, thus proving that biographical, political, or even geographical aspects determine key points of these theoretical texts.

Keywords: postmodernism, Mănăștur, Cluj-Napoca, Ioana Em. Petrescu, Liviu Petrescu.

LOCALIZÂND POSTMODERNISMUL ÎN MĂNĂȘTUR

(Rezumat)

Conceptul de postmodernism a fost discutat relativ târziu în cultura română, abia la începutul anilor '80 apărând primele articole relevante. În lucrarea de față voi încerca să determin specificitatea teoriilor despre postmodernism în contextul cultural restrâns al orașului Cluj-Napoca pentru că găsim aici ceea ce poate fi numit un spațiu cultural privilegiat sau, cel puțin, atipic. Un detaliu interesant din acest punct de vedere este faptul că, în perioada comunistă, Partidul aloca apartamente profesorilor universitari clujeni în cartierul muncitoresc Mănăștur, astfel geografia teoriilor clujene despre postmodernism poate fi limitată, în mare parte, la spațiul acestui cartier. Voi analiza articole din mai multe reviste literare românești, volumul *Poetica postmodernismului* de Liviu Petrescu (probabil prima carte dedicată integral teoretizării conceptului de postmodernism în cultura română), mai multe lucrări ale Ioanei Em. Petrescu (unul dintre puținii teoreticieni români care discută postmodernismul plecând de la filosofia deconstructivistă). Voi insista asupra relației dintre textele teoretice și contextul în care aceste texte au fost publicate, urmând să subliniez modul în care detalii biografice, politice și, inclusiv, geografice pot avea un rol esențial în dezvoltarea teoriilor.

Cuvinte-cheie: postmodernism, Mănăștur, Cluj-Napoca, Ioana Em. Petrescu, Liviu Petrescu.