

**Irina Petraș, Contemporary Romanian
Literature. A Survey**

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Published by Ideea Europeană Publishing House in 2008, the book of Irina Petraș, *Literatură română contemporană. O panoramă* (Contemporary Romanian Literature. A Survey) contains, according to the author, a personal history of reading contemporary Romanian literature; a thousand pages about a thousand books published during six decades (1947–2007), comments on almost four hundred authors, at least five literary generations.

The pages of the book contain texts from the personal archives of a literary chronicler – texts written in the course of several years – in a diachronic diversity of approach methods: literary chronicles, reviews, notes, greetings, portraits, critical sketches, and gendranalyses.¹ Some authors receive a more detailed critical commentary on one or several of their works; others get only a brief, but not at all superficial glance. The predominant element is the pleasure of reading, doubled by the joy of interpretation. “As a literary chronicler,” confesses Irina Petraș, “I read by choice (...). I take a book from the heap of offers, I taste it on the tip of my tongue, I pass it on towards the roof of my mouth as if it were a liqueur, and I wait for it to transmit an impulse to me. (...) I can write well (?) when the pleasure of reading does not surpass by far the pleasure of interpretation.”

The plurality of approach methods reflects a generous plurality of the reading perspectives. For, before being a survey of writing, the book of Irina Petraș is a survey of reading, a history of her own readings

¹ Translation of the Romanian word *genosanalize* created by Irina Petraș to serve as a subtitle for one of her books (*The Femininity of the Romanian Language*). (The translator’s note.)

performed “with pencil in hand”. Besides the effervescence, savour, and elegance of the critical act – invariants which coagulate the impressive display of efforts –, the evolving play of the “glasses” through which the books are read also acts with the same passion. This play is subtly plasticized in the complicit dialogue of the writer’s glances made timeless in the three photographs on the back cover. Thus, the first, honestly acknowledged readings, “with their more solemn, more arid air”, supporting “their fragility with bibliographical buttresses”, are accompanied by newer, “more natural, more open” readings, the “haughtiness” of which “has been diminished by the strata of reference acquired in the course of time, which have humanized them”, and the statement of which, “seemingly paradoxically, has been made relative”.

We have to deal, therefore, with an original palimpsest of contemporary Romanian literature, the constant golden rule of which remains the plea for the pleasure and freedom of reading, protected by the abolishment of several things. First of all chronology as an ordering principle of any literary history is abolished, the authors being arranged alphabetically. This alphabetic order is not determined only by practical reasons, but, in equal measure, by a permanently confirmed inclination to playfulness. The perspective of Borgesian simultaneity is, however, turned by the author into its opposite through the model of encapsulation offered by a matryoshka game. “But a game,” specifies the author, “which is legitimised by the belief that my successive ages are not present in my actual age, which is their result.” On the other hand, the simultaneizing perspective is the direct result of a certain type of memory, which acts as a coagulant and not according to the logic of successive exclusions; a memory which – as the author says in the introductory fragments – “stubbornly works against the fashions of the day. (...) Above the successive centuries/generation of writers belonging to the world to which I have access, my memory elevates *equal* names to a timeless terrace, which rather presuppose than exclude one another. Therefore: in *poetry*, for me Ioan Es. Pop’s excellent poems from the village Ieud are closely related to Mircea Petean’s excellent poems about the noble Jucu, and they would feel at home in *La liliaci* (The Lilacs), Sorescu being a lasting canonical writer in my opinion; I also remember Claudiu Komartin, Floarea Țuțuianu, Ruxandra Cesăreanu. In *prose*, (...) I go with Gabriel Adameștanu, Radu Cosașu, I add emphatically Ana Blandiana, I keep close Cărtărescu, Agopian, D. Țepeneag, and also Simona Popescu or Aura Christi. In the *diaries/memoirs/analyses*, written from the perspective of an author ready to confess with a

‘shamelessness’ not too often met before, the lack of inhibitions is the most evident new mark: Gabriel Liiceanu, Mircea Cărtărescu, Ioana Bot, Matei Călinescu, Nicolae Breban and also Dorli Blaga, Alexandru Mușina, Radu Mareș. For *essays*, which I read with the greatest delight, I enumerate briefly and incompletely Ion Vartic, Andrei Cornea, Ștefan Borbély, Corin Braga, Sorin Adam Matei, Ilina Gregori, Magda Cârneli.”

Canonical elements, the “elites” are also abolished, to the consecrated values being added, in a surprising, democratic neighbourhood, writers with a “smaller surface” (in Irina Petraș’s polite formulation), forgotten writers and young writers, who are in the same category of visibility. By this the hierarchy of values is not questioned; the landscape of a literature, where the relief is made spectacular by the complementary nearness of “valleys” and “heights”, is rather reshaped by this opening of perspective. However, the Bloomian canonical requirements of a perennial work (which Petraș recalls in one of the introductory fragments) are respected in the selection of authors: cognitive acuity, linguistic force, and inventive power. Petraș is convinced that the rearrangement of values, beyond the canonical strives of the various lists, is a natural phenomenon, a “continuous process, which can be supported, commented on, critically seconded, but it cannot be imposed on. (...) The past requires time and much patient understanding in order to escape without help from emotionality and conjuncture.”

The uniqueness of perspective is also abolished, being substituted for the polymorphism of reading (at the level of approach methods and with regard to the permanent change of hermeneutical emphases). Many texts, however, serve the “obsessive metaphors” of the essayist – “the science of death”, “the femininity of the Romanian language”, “gendranalyses” –, and this is only one of the motives for which the author communicates to the reader, in an extensive introduction, the keys of reading to her critical devices. The almost one hundred pages collected under the title *Despre lumea literară. Fragmente (aproape) polemice* [On the Literary World. (Almost) Polemical Fragments] are a substitute for a synthetic, monolithic introductory study. They resort to the postmodernist formula of fragmentariness and contain answers to investigations, interviews, questionings, tending towards a prolific digression on the margin of literature, on the margin of residing (another word dear to the author) in the ontologically assumed space of writing and reading.

As a literary critic, Irina Petraș shares in the general condition of our age, when the loss of the general view results in the increase of the relativity dose. The decline of big narratives triggered, in the field of criticism, the decline of the former critical authority. The critic, as the author observes in the introductory fragments, “has no longer access to the Big Story, he cannot encompass everything. He is no longer the wise man of the village and no longer holds *the truth*, which becomes dangerously fragmented.” Consequently, according to the author, only two edifying strategies remain for the critic: on the one hand, “sober and pedantic inventories (chronological histories concerned with documents and data accumulation, updated dictionaries, overviews, systematic works on ever wider sections of the literary phenomenon, etc.)” and, on the other hand, “intelligent partial, subjective, and unidirectional glances (which we call literary criticism, essay, critical study, monograph, etc.).” The two strategies impose, in fact, two models of reading/ordering history/the past: *the cathedral* and *the labyrinth*, to use the terms in the sense given to them by Mona Ouzouf and Pierre Nora, the former requiring a concentrated, chronological, unidirectional, constraining effort in construction, the latter, the freedom of using “irreverently, in zigzag” the literary past. The two models coexist as the working methods of the present *Survey*, the seemingly zigzagging approach offering, under the surface, powerful support to a history of contemporary Romanian literature being under construction.

The book is, in its subtext, an attempt to make a self-portrait, the autobiography of a passionate reader in the first place, and then, a somewhat confessional autobiography of a writer by virtue of its declared bibliomorphism. The temptation of self-defining is visible and perfectly assumed everywhere. The fragment entitled *I, the Critic*, with which the introductory series ends and the survey of authors and books begins, offers a key to the reading of the critic Irina Petraș’s portrait, which, though subjectively outlined, is supported by objective opinions: “I am *criticizing*: ‘Who has followed Irina Petraș’s chronicles is familiar with the polemic spirit which animates her always original and biting literary comments. (...)’ (Gabriel Adameșteanu); *unserious*: (...) Mircea Mihăieș numbering me among those ‘present day critics who write *for the spectacle*, allowing themselves to make pirouettes and to throw *confetti* and garlands of flower towards the spectator-reader in the midst of the most difficult literary dissection. It is a risk taken with complete lucidity which transforms the critical discourse, now and then, into real literary passages’; I am also damned tempted to *make* everything

relative, (...) I do not like fierce battles either on themes in which subjectivity is a permanent guest, and value is determined by the passing of time. I write exactly what I think about books, I criticize, but I make an effort to find the thrilling qualities when the text is not altogether bad: 'she is able to enjoy other people's books (...), her excellence being due, on the one hand, to the enthusiastic flexibility she approaches each text with, and, on the other hand, to the radical suppression of negativisms' (Ștefan Borbély)."

Going through the pages, you have the irrepressible sensation of an attentively and skilfully orchestrated concert, the sensation of an alluring polyphony of readings, of the critical act seen as an act of mediation, the sensation of an appetite for reverberating, revealing formulations, of the comfort of intimacy shared with the text. For Irina Petraș the critical act is an assumed existential act, the author being convinced that "the awfully sober and reserved style, working only with already checked, known, consecrated instruments, admitting none of the blood that was running through your fingers when you wrote and between your eyelashes when you read, therefore admitting none of the thrill you felt before a book, cannot be named literary criticism."

All the more savoury are the passages resulting from the free "running of the pen", the digressions "applied" with a formula by the reader/writer (according to the principle that "all the constraints which occur when you read a book with a pencil in your hand are cured through digressions"), mainly when the book or author confirms her own intuitions [for example, the discussion of Liiceanu's envied formulation from *Ușa interzisă* (The Forbidden Door), "the discipline of finitude"]. Or the moments when the reading is filled with biographic and autobiographic elements in which life readjusts the work with "fine harmonies". To this effect the sequence of epiphanic "Happenings" experienced besides Ioana Em. Petrescu is memorable: the meeting with the old man followed by a tree with suns. Or the revelation of Liviu Petrescu's "humanization", his becoming free of ceremoniousness in small gestures.

The pleasure of the following formulations also remains memorable: Emil Cioran's "privilege of being in despair"; "the superb impudence of an Elias Canetti or an Alain Bosquet" which she discovers in Radu Cosașu; "simoneity" – the name given to the interior coherence which Simona Popescu "cultivates with a vertical stubbornness as a gardener"; Mircea Petean – "an exemplary poet of *habitation*"; "Ștefan Borbély has reached an art of dissecting ideas similar to the skill of the

legendary surgeon able to slip the lancet in interstices and to cut, to loosen, to reveal mysteries without causing bleedings”; Cristina Tudor Popescu [in *Trigrama Shakespeare* (The Shakespeare Trigram)] “combines the alert-lengthy style with the ticking-conquering haste; she is a little bit blasé, with whims and frowns, with an ironic and grave reserve, sometimes even pathetically affected...”, and many others.

The Contemporary Romanian Literature confirms, in essence, a creed formulated by the author in *Panorama criticii literare* (A Survey of Literary Criticism): “To write literary criticism does not mean to institute formulas (liked by those who wish to obtain knowledge fast, to know what the text is about, to economize the energy of understanding), but exactly the opposite, to dethrone them, to replace them with the dominion of complexity and *infinite* explanations.”

Translated by Ágnes Korondi