

A Literary Love for Cluj.
– A Review of Petru Poantă's "Interwar Cluj" –

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When perusing the well-known book, published in 2013 at Eikon¹, by literary critic and essay writer Petru Poantă, it is quite hard not to cast your mind to the fashionable type of campaigns promoting cities or countries through a “loving”-type of discourse. More precisely, such a discourse refers to using a specific expression, otherwise familiar within an intimate setting and within an inner landscape: *I love*. I love Cluj-Napoca, I love Alba Iulia, I love Turda, I love Milano etc. English ensures universal intelligibility and contributes to the transformation of love in an excellent marketing product. Pascal Bruckner’s observation, namely that Postmodernist love is becoming interesting for theory, complements the fact that the comeback of love is a massive phenomenon, both at the level of high culture, and mass culture. Love seen as text, as the background canvas of good intentions and beautiful feelings, permeates contemporary society and is harder and harder to obviate because of its explicitness.

Petru Poantă’s book is a love declaration to his city, Cluj-Napoca. It is a sort of *I love Cluj*, intellectually refined if compared to the standard discourse types. The main similarity consists in the fact that the text uses feeling as the main means of highlighting ideas, or in other words, as strategic way to deliver information about a city by placing love above other feelings. The immediate consequence is a blurred image of the text, from the validity standpoint of its argumentation and illustrated facts. Stylistically, the rough surfaces of reality are softened, so that the history of Cluj is *lovingly* tamed. A first clue of this in-love type of discourse can be found in the book’s subtitle: *The Anatomy of a Miracle*. The miracle does not so much belong to Cluj, as it belongs to the eye which scrutinizes Cluj. The word miracle cannot be a valid, objective descriptor for the history of any city, or at least not for a history understood traditionally, which does away with objectiveness completely and which utterly blocks subjective views. Of course, this eye which hovers above interwar Cluj belongs to the person who lives in Cluj at the present moment.

There is a great difference between, on the one hand, Petru Poantă’s love, expressed not as such but discreetly, and, on the other hand, the love found in any promotion discourse mentioned above. This mechanism involves the way in which love is built, beyond shallowness. If main-stream discourse is based on isolating some images

¹ Petru Poantă. *Clujul interbelic. Anatomia unui miracol* (Interwar Cluj. The Anatomy of a Miracle) (Cluj-Napoca: Eikon, 2013), 199p., ISBN 978-973-757-873-0.

(textual, visual) of the current city (be it Cluj, Paris, Milano), Petru Poantă's book brings various other aspects in the limelight: old images, instantaneous shots brought back from cultural memory (which is not easy to reproduce), stored in documents and books, shrouded in dense history. Photographing the present moment, the things which the people make available in sight is a lot simpler, and requires less effort than the photography taken by the literary critic, a photography taken *in* the past. The images that Petru Poantă offers its audience are brought back from the past, more or less reconditioned, researched for (by studying the documents, the necessary sources for supplying relevant information) and engaging writer's talent. Therefore, by choosing the "I love Cluj" pattern, the writer deconstructs it, through complexity.

Before starting the work itself, Petru Poantă devotes a couple of lines to his explanation of the book's objectives and its affiliation to one field or another. The main purpose is the description of one of the first cultural models or patterns which are well anchored, "a detailed culture and civilisation project"¹, started when, after the 1918 Great Unification (of Romania), Romanian administration takes over Cluj. In those times, the nature of the written act became problematic in terms of discourse affiliation. Poantă is well aware of this aspect, stating that his work *wavers* in what concerns its nature: essay, cultural study history, but above all, a manifesto. We are not told what the manifesto is for, as we are not told what it rises against. In the end, if historical facts, well highlighted, can prove that Cluj has become "a model of Western democracy"², a city which, once under Romanian administration would know how not to repeat the mistakes of Hungarian "conquistadors", blend and accept the ethnic and cultural differences, we might wonder why a manifesto is needed. We might wonder why the mere disclosure of things, as they happened, is not enough, and the literary critic feels the need to lay extra stress, a manifesto one, to the reality he himself reveals.

This manifesto is dual at the level of artistic realisation and announces both the author's originality and the trap he decides to take on with him. His originality resides in the way in which he interiorizes his love for Cluj and in the way he filters its excess (any type of love which does not follow a pattern has a very good chance of becoming ridiculous) through a historical-literary and cultural methodology. However, the trap has a nagging nationalistic hue. The *idealization* which Petru Poantă accepts ("it describes, maybe a bit idealistically"³) is that of a Cluj where Romanians and "being-Romanian" function as magical, alchemistic elements, which purify the city from the old Hungarian ruling. The wonder and delight produced by the Romanians' *miraculous* ability to re-enact the Romanian culture once more, after being oppressed for a long time, to make it flourish in a European style, but in agreement with the Romanian tradition as well, which underpins, but also exposes it to the risk of conservatory tendencies, might bother the Hungarian audience of the book. This is not because the representation of interwar Cluj is not well documented or extremely rich in detail, but because the author is an advocate of depicting the relation between Romanians and Hungarians in black and white.⁴ To be more correct, what gets highlighted in the book is a Romanian principle

¹ Ibid., 5.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 52.

and a Hungarian principle of governing the country, the Hungarian-Romanian conflict not being mentioned at all or deconstructed through the depiction of some instances of successful and peaceful co-habitation, for example when Romanians rented or were lodged by Hungarians: “many Romanian families, arriving here from other regions, rent Hungarian homes. The two ethnicities dwell under the same roof, sharing family intimacy, which some will keep in mind as the image of society’s idealism”.¹ Petru Poantă seems to anticipate that his readers might sense his nationalistic strain and tries to explain that he does not agree with the post-December devaluing of nationalism, which has become a sort of taboo.² Truth be told, as any thorough reader of Poantă’s book will notice, for the literary critic, nationalism is not a proper word to start Xenophobia, but, once more, a means of loving your own culture, your national language as superior instrument which can build and strengthen high-culture, even if Poantă is interested in mass culture forms like interwar publicity or sports. It is equally true that at least a part of the risk of nationalistic accusations can be undermined, if we read the last chapter of the book: “In my attempt to restore an image of interwar Cluj, I refer almost exclusively to the Romanian community, but without ignoring the fact that the city is cosmopolite and that the Hungarian population or, more exactly, the Hungarian speaking population, remains a majority until the end of the 30s”.³ It should be noticed that Petru Poantă’s image of Cluj is not holistic, but deliberately partial.

This love for Cluj is energetic because of the fascinating depiction of the city, Romanian in most of its details, and of some details which would have otherwise risked becoming boring. For the author, this energy presupposes the freedom of depicting and focusing. Throughout the book, Petru Poantă states that his work permanently sifts through the aspects under discussion and that he does not want a holistic description of interwar Cluj: “What I managed here is merely a collage of economic Cluj and not a full picture. I don’t provide extensive accounts, but, instead, I try to describe a moment of exemplary crystallization of Romanian civilisation”.⁴ In the same vein, the author makes use of excessive words and hyperbolae, as a sign of his love for Cluj: “You cannot but emphatically evoke this peak moment which is the equivalent of a genesis. A new world is born: clearly articulated and coherent, consistent with itself from the very beginning. It’s the dawn of a new age, of a mature world which is proficient from the moment it becomes aware of itself. And this is due to the fact that its founders are exquisite intellectuals of the time”⁵; “All of this induces a magic euphoria, which the Memorandum advocates Nicolae Balotă sustain”⁶; “the university is created anew. All of its departments are absolute creations”⁷. Imagination often recreates a socio-natural environment: “Let us imagine for a moment the linden-scented street and in this solemn landscape the black countess, Nemes”⁸.

¹ Ibid., 22–23.

² Ibid., 119.

³ Ibid., 169.

⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁷ Ibid., 59.

⁸ Ibid., 24.

The reader will find interesting things about how instrumental the cultural heritage of interwar Cluj was. Petru Poantă repeatedly underlines the fact that the interwar period led to social, cultural, economic and demographic development which made Cluj an authentic European city without losing Romanian specificity. First-rank cultural personalities become influential in Cluj. These are the people who come back to Cluj after having studied in Vienna, Budapest or Graz. What is immediately apparent is the ferocious collective will, which seeks to fully benefit from Romania's regaining of Transylvania. This will was accelerated by the massive interiorization of the national principles intrinsically tied to recognizing culture as main drive in the organic functioning of a nation. Petru Poantă insists, on the one hand, on the non-barbaric behaviour of Romanians¹ who do not assume a conqueror's position, and, on the other hand, on going beyond the expectations of the age, regarding the ability to make things work in both administration and culture. As the author points out, this does not mean that Hungarians will be thrown out of administrative positions, on the contrary, there are fields of work where the number of Hungarians exceeds the number of Romanians. We learn that banks benefit from a skyrocket development, just like the urban geography of Cluj develops *imagination and taste*² and, last but not least, a sense of *organicity*³, among the great buildings of the time being included the Orthodox Cathedral, the Academic College (The House of Academics), the Botanical Garden museum, the Medical Clinic II, the Princess Ileana Girls College (Mihai Eminescu College), Albina Bank (House of the Army) etc. The infrastructure work is paramount: street pavement and public electricity. As such, the streets of Cluj are the place where all form of segregation is appeased, the place where Romanian children learn Hungarian from their peers and vice versa. The economic development leads to Transylvania being less rural. The Tobacco Factory, The Railway Workshop, the Match Factory, the Dermata factories (an avatar of the great corporations nowadays which offer endless facilities for their employees), the many banks, are just a few of the sources which generated thousands of work places. Even commerce-wise, Poantă notices that national specificity overlaps with rural specificity, which is evidence of the fact that the citizens already know how to exploit their particularities. Cluj is a city which is as refined (the jewellery industry is overwhelming), as it is expensive. It is not, however, so expensive to deter people from going to the theatre or the opera, even though the actors are poorly paid. Both the Theatre and the Opera flourish under the lead of the extremely talented doctor Victor Papilian. There are many plays which capitalize on national feeling, although not devoid of aesthetic meaning. For example, the author shows that Romanian opera plays benefit from an average level of enthusiasm compared to non-Romanian plays, because, bit by bit, the feeling of being a patriot becomes less powerful.⁴ The Opera is the place where "all national adversities melted away in a brotherhood of feeling and emotion".⁵

The best chapters of the book refer to the academic life in Cluj. These chapters, which are better documented than the rest, highlight the interpretative talent of the

¹ Ibid., 13, 16.

² Ibid., 18.

³ Ibid., 22.

⁴ Ibid., 169.

⁵ Ibid., 161.

author. A very good analysis is written on Lucian Blaga's relationship with the academic environment in Cluj. Extremely intelligent and well known, Sextil Pușcariu's protégé (University Dean at some point), Blaga makes his dream of teaching at the university after 15 years. The 15-year wait is due to the tensions established between him and another interwar personality Gheorghe-Bogdan Duică, who taught at the university before Blaga and who was the first Dean of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy. However, this is only the surface truth, which Poantă deepens, by moving the conflict from an interpersonal level to a cultural level. To be more precise, Blaga represented a modern culture for which the traditionalist city of Cluj was not yet prepared: "He, the Modernist, does not match the classic tendencies of Cluj".¹ From the way the role of the university is presented in interwar Cluj, it is obvious that, for Petru Poantă, culture and education are the royal paths to be followed if development and evolution are desired, no matter what the outreach of evolution is: individuals, community, city, country. When analysing the ideas from the inaugural lecture held at the University by Vasile Pârvan, on the 3rd of November 1919, Petru Poantă seems to agree with his elitist, educational non-utilitarianism. Education, Pârvan and Poantă claim, should not be reduced to a sterile piling of knowledge, as education "must initiate and essentially seek the purification and transformation of the individual, and, by extension, of the nation".² Nevertheless, the way in which the author renders the role of the university does not fully overlap with that of Pârvan, Poantă noticing that, following in Pârvan's footsteps, the university might become an instrument of creating heroes or super-humans.³ His admiration for such projects, despite their utopian flare, is evident in the text of the book. The literary critic manages to offer a vivid portrait of the academic world and of its cultural annexes (literary-cultural magazines, libraries), with its inherent problems which can still be encountered to this day (financial difficulties, late payment of wages, etc.) and its major success (the founding of new departments, public conferences for promoting culture for the masses, etc.)

In conclusion, the true character in Petru Poantă's book is interwar Cluj itself, which Petru Poantă scrutinizes with his camera lovingly. Sometimes the author's own persona sifts through, whenever he recalls his days as student and the continuation, under one form or the other, of some interwar ideas. The book should be read both by those who seek for their roots in Cluj and Transylvania, but also by all persons who are curious or who seek to know more, by historians and letter people alike. The book's discrete pedagogy is that the literary love for a city, which lacks the narcissistic mirroring of a love declaration, stands above the hearts in promotion clips.

¹ Ibid., 71.

² Ibid., 75.

³ Ibid., 78.