

Delia UNGUREANU, *From Paris to Tlön. Surrealism as World Literature*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, ISBN 978-1-5013-3321-7, 332 p.

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In the context of some critics and theorists still entertaining the chimera of national literary homogeneity (the Romanian example being an eloquent one), efforts to reshape the meta-discourse of literature are a constant necessity. Bloomsbury’s collection of studies devoted to *literatures as world literature* has been launched in response to this still ossified perception of national art that seems at least inadequate in a globalised, technology-saturated world of translation and trans-mediation. But it also answers the efforts of both *Weltliteratur* and decolonialism to render visible the inner dynamics of various cultures left unattended by theory and to uncover the infinitely diverse relationships between literatures from different backgrounds: not just a study of influences, as comparative literature traditionally implied, but a lucid review of mutual transfers of information and patterns.

Following case studies of German, American or Romanian literary phenomena, Delia Ungureanu’s *Surrealism as World Literature* offers another challenge. Indeed, one might say that surrealism, with its genesis involving figures from many languages and artistic traditions, makes an excellent candidate for a *Weltliteratur* approach. And one would not be mistaken. However, it is not only the founding group in its tessellated structure that supports the choice, but also the ideological and political setting that surrealism stemmed from: a deeply nationalist France, where bourgeois values were once again on the rise alongside colonial policies. Surrealism was born in opposition to all these, taking a leftist, socialist and humanist stance. The fact that Delia Ungureanu’s book practices a *Weltliteratur* type of research, affirming the independent, though not isolated development of Latin American and Eastern European branches of surrealism and avoids treating them as extensions of the much-praised centre can only pay homage to the actual core project of the movement – freeing thought and imagination, a search for the unpredictable potentiality of the human psyche.

Among the issues proposed from the very beginning is that of surrealism's longevity and impact, in comparison to the implosion of Dada. Asking herself why surrealism managed to transcend the destiny of dead-end avant-garde movements and reinvent itself so as to transform the general perception of the world and its representation, Delia Ungureanu considers the political creed of the first surrealists: antiracist, anticolonial and antinationalist, the movement gained popularity all over the world, based on rebellion and making the national or gender category of the creator irrelevant. Surrealism did not arbitrarily come out of France and into the world, but was meant to be international and transgressive all along. Of course, Delia Ungureanu's study presents the organic process undergone by the surrealist movement – the post-WWI emergence of surrealist publications and their immediate impact, the nodal points of international interaction located in bookstores-turned-libraries, which produced social capital, the convergence of editorial, translation and distribution circuits. This contributes not only to a detailed landscape of the matrix that eventually produced and sustained the avant-garde, but also explains later critical views (Casanova's naming Paris the capital of her *republic of letters* relies on Valery Larbaud's definition of the Parisian as one who loves culture and freedom). But the analysis focuses especially on a comparison between André Breton and Salvador Dalí. These two figures are established as the poles of the surrealist spectrum, with their divergent conceptions of morality and art: Dalí's influence in the US and in visual arts is seen as a hybrid, market-oriented approach, based on his understanding of both cultural and economic capital (as Casanova would say); Breton, on the other hand, as the author of the orthodox, autonomous surrealism that impacted Europe and South America, favoured the irrational forces that irrigate dream narratives, escapist prose, and feared artistic maturity, consecration and institutionalisation.

Taking into account the idealism of this leader who excommunicates from the surrealist movement even those with whom he had an *affective friendship*, as they no longer corresponded to his idea of an *ideological friendship*, Delia Ungureanu also maintains a demystifying gaze. First, she regards both Breton and Dalí as agents in the field, inventors of strategies that would popularise their art: Breton leaving Dada for a more productive surrealist poetry is such a form of self-advertising. Judging by the way that Mario de Micheli defines the avant-garde in his work, *The Artistic avant-garde of the 20th century* (1959), stating that Dada was above all a movement

of violent disruption, Delia Ungureanu's explanation manages to complete the historical analysis of de Micheli. If Dada was meant to kill Dada and if Dadaism was not interested in the work of art itself, but in the role of its brutal reaction against tradition, then it is only reasonable to assume that Breton's break from Tzara was not only motivated by a need for autonomy, but also as a survival strategy.

The avant-garde network of concepts and aesthetic forms is, however, remarkably dense. Two of Delia Ungureanu's observations – surrealism's obsession with the comestible art object and its theoretical relation to Lacan, who defines *style* as a manifestation of the subconscious – can prompt an entire debate on the link between re-corporealisation and the international span of the movement. Using the concepts that Deleuze and Guattari would invent later in the century and the thesis of *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), it can be argued that surrealists, too, operate with *bodies without organs*, *desiring machines* and *schizophrenic subjects*: their idea of individuality is far from Cartesian unity or rationality and relies on the body as a vessel of intensities and production, a deterritorialized subject generating subversive flows of thought within apparently stable literary systems. What is more, Lacan's theory acts as a restructuring principle of literature itself, as no national boundaries of interpretation retain any credibility once we abandon the realm of sensible historical determinations. *Surrealism as World Literature* thus sets to remap the movement as a web of cultural centres engaged in a permanent exchange of various types of capital. Instead of condoning the rather simplistic epigenetic theory which explains surrealism's distribution through the activation of some mental latent structures, Delia Ungureanu documents the network of magazines, translations and personal relationships that fuelled surrealism's circulation, interpreting even Dalí's obsession for economic capital and his apolitical, amoral position as a warranty of cultural resilience. Just like a Sophist, Dalí assumed an anti-platonic, anti-truth discourse. He hailed the relative and the polymorphism of human instincts and perversions, which in turn went hand in hand with the blurring of distinct spaces and aesthetic values. It is this worldview that also informs current literary studies: back in 2001, Wai Chee Dimok had already dismissed the authority of the territory, which so often comes into play in discussing works of art as milestones of their national artistic timeline: "The space-time coordinates of any text are not only fluid when they first come into being, poorly captured by the map of geopolitics, they are also subsequently and unforeseeably revisable" (*Literature for the Planet* 177). His

statement, which still remains valid today, is similar to the conceptual sedimentation of surrealism's international spirit.

Diachronically, the surrealist object appears as a materialisation of Dadaist happenings, striving to attain the same intensity and orientation towards action. Modern art sometimes has the same approach: Erin Manning's installations, created by recycling materials used in previous exhibitions and never allowing themselves to become museum pieces, also encourage the physical contact between the viewer and the viewed object. Only so can one have a satisfactory image of the *anarchives* (the entirety of an encounter and its emotional surplus-value). Harvesting immaterial by-products of the event has become the common ground of performances in the 1920s and objects since the 1930s. The evolution of art forms is also seen from an international perspective, as America's depoliticised brand of surrealism is explained through the local understanding of art as a purely aesthetic revolution of a carefree capitalist country, whose artists had not known stark Catholicism or the violence of WWI: "What it takes for an artistic ideology to travel beyond its country of origin: creative local interpretation and a strong and visionary sense of the local market's needs" (Ungureanu 138).

In short, Delia Ungureanu assumes the title of a *detective critic*, able to retrace the censored aspects of a current, freeing the apparently chaotic elements that discipline and literary history have suppressed. Her preferred method of *network theory* faces the bewildering landscape of fluid inter-cultural borders, striving to unveil the conditions in which essential literary notions like originality were distorted in time. Her detective work on the sources of Borges's *Menard* is an impeccable example of articulating historical and literary evidence, as well as a contextualisation of what other critics have treated as an isolated phenomenon. Borges's text, *Paul Menard, Author of the Quixote* appeared in the same month as a study on Lautréamont's calligraphy, written by a real Menard. Treated by most critics as a minor coincidence, this leads Delia Ungureanu through an analysis of the letters between Breton and Victoria Ocampo, the Latin American editor of surrealist magazines, proving that Borges's access to Lautréamont would have been possible solely through the Surrealist distribution circuit and that it was Lautréamont's concept of plagiarism as a new source of poetics that inspired Borges. It is not, however, a means of *policing* the former efforts of theory, as that would only be a continuation of the same destructive patterns. As Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu and

Takayuki Yokota-Murakami show in their introduction to *Policing Literary Theory* (2018), the very principle of ideological criticism is the illusion of the critic's position outside the object of analysis – this is by all means a fallacy, they argue, as it falls into the trap of metaphysics. Delia Ungureanu's work, on the contrary, assumes no position of power. Her global, unbiased view is rejecting the idea of an exhausted field of study.

It is this ability to navigate literary and extra-literary sources that facilitates Delia Ungureanu's understanding of contexts. This becomes visible in her exploration of American surrealism, but also in articulating the reterritorializing dynamics involved in anticolonialism in the midst of European turmoil: the West was being conquered by the German expansion; thus, marginal areas, such as the Pacific Isles and Ireland were becoming central. The contact proved fruitful both ways, as seen in Breton's reinvention of the primitive object, which, given its exoticism and eroticism, could evoke the body of the desired woman, the surrealist object *par excellence*. The civilisations of Oceania, Africa and Amerindian regions provided him with a completely new understanding of nature, myth, spirituality and the subconscious. This is probably one of the most striking analyses that Delia Ungureanu authors, as she highlights how his interest in these primitive forms of art was simultaneously an anticolonial and anti-imperialistic manifesto. Indeed, as opposed to cultural appropriation, where a viewer contemplates *the other, the non-rational, instinctual savage* from inside a Plato-infused philosophy, Breton's gaze is tantamount to compensation. It is precisely the gaze that decolonialism is seeking today, when striving to recover the lost history of marginal cultures and literatures, to make them relevant, equal and visible: how does one translate and study from at a distance without distorting, without applying the European frame of thought? Solutions *have* been found. For instance, Sylvia Marcos's *Indigenous Women and the Decolonial Cosmovision* (2014) manages to trace the fundamental coordinates of Mesoamerican thought by placing herself and her readers in an uncomfortable cognitive paradigm: the use of non-hierarchical and dynamic dichotomies, of *mutually open categories* and *fluid poles*. Long before decolonial studies, Breton himself had the intuition of the paradigm shift. He was not interested in dissecting and evaluating the cultures he met: although he did use the objects he came across as the mere basis for his own artistic constructions, one of the purposes of surrealism remained, at least politically, emancipation through the reconciliation of reason and imagination. Thus, Delia

Ungureanu's network theory approach seems to be set at the intersection between Weltliteratur and a form of sub-textual decolonialism. Striving to rethink the development of surrealism nuclei around the world not as a map of centre-periphery influences, but as a new worldview with many faces, it avoids what Walter Mignolo's 2010 *Epistemic Disobedience* calls *theopolitics* and *egopolitics* – rediscovering marginal cultures, but still judging them with Western conceptual instruments. Her strategy is a double one – decolonise our perception of space, leading to a non-centred network, but also our understanding of historicity: the fact that Nerval and Novalis are part of the surrealist landscape alongside school-creators Breton and Dalí, but also contemporary novelists demonstrates time delimitations can be relative. In the end, the rethinking of space and time might function as a way of *decolonising knowledge and the being* (Mignolo's project).

It is most interesting that Delia Ungureanu describes Breton's concept of surreality as "the place where all antinomies and contradictions can be solved" (194), because surrealism did become an over-structure, a network overlapping with the world map and relativizing concepts like time and space: surrealism is not a limited phenomenon, defined by boundaries or physical coordinates, it is an abstract possibility infusing perception. This post-historical surrealist character, travelling from decade to decade constitutes the backbone of the book's last three case studies. The sixth chapter focuses on Nabokov's *Lolita* and manages the extraordinary performance of extracting yet another layer of meaning from a much-discussed novel. It is the direction of surrealist interpretation, which most commentaries simply ignore, although *Lolita* contains a whole array of surrealist themes (souls that recognise each other, prophetic poetry, cursed spaces that control their inhabitants). Investigating Nabokov's possible sources, Delia Ungureanu discovers the influence of Dalí's Dulita (a mythological and erotic figure of his childhood and the object of one of his deviant fantasies) on the novel's tone and content. This whole jigsaw of references is particularly important as Dulita is one of Dalí's metamorphic figures, being reborn in various fictional women and in his wife Gala. Considering Annabel's reincarnation in *Lolita*, the parallels are by all means persuasive and, what is more, they are fertile in terms of interpretation. Because a surrealist perspective on *Lolita* would be opposed to consecrated ones: to that of feminism, for instance. In passages where Humbert perceives the nymphet as a collection of parts, each enticing and claiming an erotic encounter, feminism obviously reads the diminishing of the

woman and her objectification. For Breton, on the contrary, the fragmentation of the beloved body generates what he calls *spectral beauty*, capable of even transforming the landscape.

The last chapter is centred on the reverberations of surrealism in postmodernist prose, specifically in the works of Pamuk and Cărtărescu. *Surrealism as World Literature* in itself is no study of direct influences, but a review of the specific ways in which the movement is reborn in particular geopolitical conditions. Cărtărescu and Pamuk, for instance, recognise the impact of pre-surrealist literature (Hoffmann, Novalis and Nerval) and that of post-surrealist writers who never actually belonged to the current (Borges, Nabokov). Delia Ungureanu compares the duo with that formed by Dalí and Breton. Because while she does mention their common surrealist manifestations (creating a mythology of one's home city, engaging in oneiric prose), she chooses to focus on their diverging self-promoting strategies on the world market. The comparison is fitting, especially as the two writers both come from peripheral cultures. In order to offer a clear, nuanced account, the author also sets apart the political and social contexts that Pamuk and Cărtărescu grew up in: while the former was the citizen of a then-liberal Turkey and was given an international education, the latter was the son of middle-class workers in a communist country. This is how Ungureanu explains Cărtărescu's disengagement from politics as a political stance per se. She builds this last part of the book on the close-reading of surrealist elements in Pamuk's *Black Book* (a mystery, noir novel inspired by Aragon's prose project) and in his *Museum of Innocence* (an affirmation of useless emotional objects, as opposed to economically relevant capitalist goods). While the novel proves that the very literary formula that Breton had banned ended up preserving the surrealist legacy and taking it forward in the work of postmodernist writers, Pamuk's memento of heartbreak after the loss of love is oriented to the past, but, instead of simply reviving memory, aims at re-captivating and re-engaging the lost souls by means of their old possessions. Cărtărescu provides a chance to make remarks on the most interesting case of *postmodernism without postmodernity*, as his oneiric prose, for instance, is born simultaneously with the darkest decade of Romanian communism. It would be trivial to simply state that there is a surrealist nucleus in Cărtărescu's writing, since a collection of stories like *Nostalgia* builds on communicating dreams, teenagers exchanging bodies through lovemaking or prophecies in order to form an oneiric Bucharest. Therefore, Delia Ungureanu goes a

step forward and comments on Cărtărescu's position in the international network. Although apolitical and opting for imagination and dreams rather than historical reality, Cărtărescu manages to weave poetry into prose, exploiting one of surrealism's greatest achievements – the blurred lines between genres, consumed by the power of chance and mystery; thus, his project of renouncing strict Eastern categorizations in favour of an open Europe where artists are connected through affinity, not nationality is nothing but a continuation of the surrealist legacy and, more importantly, of his own symbolic universe.

The surrealists' solution to modernity and its anxieties was probably one of the most pertinent, as it looked past matter – but also past truth and dogma – into a field of potentiality. Breton's *convulsive beauty* was not only the apparent distance between repose and movement (always imbalanced), but also the notion of the chance encounter which leads to a found object and to the revelation of what it could signify. Discussing the amalgam of factors that surrounded surrealism – from the political spectres of imperialism, socialism or democracy to the increasingly mobile communication channels between cultures – *Surrealism as World Literature* shows how a theoretically marginal movement actually incorporates the tensions and micro-revolutions of today's world literature.