

Emanuel MODOC, *The International of Peripheries. Avant-Garde Networks of East-Central Europe [Internaționala periferiilor. Rețeaua avangardelor din Europa Centrală și de Est]*, Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2020, ISBN 978-973-167-541-1, 267 p.

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Recent years have seen Romanian criticism undergo a significant paradigmatic permutation, isomorphic, in its methodological *ethos*, to the developments of global literary studies (the emergence of World Literature, the revisiting of sociological approaches and usage of statistical tools, the import of quantitative analysis within the broader digital humanities). The autochthonous field has manifested itself as permeable to what is often deemed ideologically maculate theoretical import. This institutional reluctance is inherently linked to the preponderance of hermeneutic analysis as the main and often exclusive critical tool, and precipitated by the prospect of auto-colonialism, performed through uncritical appropriation. However, the emergence of projects that aim to grant Romanian literature a place within a literary *world system* (such as the ample 2018 *Romanian Literature as World Literature*) or that critically revisit literary phenomena previously discarded as marginal (like translation, in the case of *The Culture of Translation in Romania*) marks a decisive distancing from the previous regime of aesthetic autonomism. It is within this paradigmatic shift that Emanuel Modoc's *The International of Peripheries* [Internaționala periferiilor] establishes itself, both due to its subject matter, the doubly peripheral Eastern and Central European avant-gardes, and its methodological approach, originating in a transnational framework and expanded through a concatenation of sociological theories and critically employed quantitative analysis.

Placed in the direct descendance of *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe. Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, the historiographic project conducted by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, the present volume further probes the relation between space and the configuration of

transnational identity, setting out to (re)read the Eastern and Central European avant-gardes from a transnational perspective and renegotiate their subversive place within the World Literature narrative. Beyond providing a deviceful theoretical panorama of what is otherwise considered an elusive cultural phenomenon, it manages to extricate its peripheral iterations (the Romanian, Hungarian, Czech and Polish historical avant-gardes) from their hindering position as target-cultures in a unilateral transfer of cultural capital. The commendable reconstruction of these ample geocultural spaces outside their national critical fields, but within their national specificity, as exhibited by their inherent trans-frontier hybridity and mobility fundamentally challenges the very manner in which relations between central and peripheral national literatures are presently delineated.

The book is divided in three chapters, enclosed by a rigorous *Introduction* and a conclusive section. The first chapter is essentially theoretical in scope, demarcating the three main concepts against which the ulterior analysis will be carried out: space, community, and network. Consisting of thematically autonomous case studies which ultimately merge into an overview of the intraliterary, therefore intranational, dynamics of the Eastern and Central European avant-gardes, the second section constitutes itself as an empirical endeavour, carrying out eloquent demonstrations of the theoretical propositions previously advanced. The third chapter methodologically performs as an extension of the second, but exceeds the territory of the national into that of the transnational by negotiating the positions of regional avant-gardist productions within the wider interliterary network. Significantly, in its last sub-chapter, quantitative analysis is employed to showcase the network itself, in its geoliterary off-centredness; the operative visualizations constitute the prime demonstration of how functional the (re)conceptualization of the avant-garde as a network can be. The conclusive chapter adopts a metacritical stance, expositive in its depiction of previous critical accounts of the Romanian avant-garde, but firm in its detachment from them and affiliation with a new methodological paradigm.

Proceeding from the assumption that any literary phenomenon of the first half of the twentieth-century is conditioned by “a network of transfer and bilateral transformation that determines its development and particularization in a given literary system” (1), the volume inherently carries a salient dual structure, consistently functioning on both a critical and a metacritical level. As established in the *Introduction*,

it works both to delineate the mechanisms that generate necessarily interliterary networks and to place them in direct comparison with associated historical explanatory models. Therefore, it constantly addresses previous scholarship in an attempt to foreground and destabilize the theoretical clichés with which it operates, and due to which it has, albeit unjustifiably, located certain literary phenomena under the hegemonic centre-periphery binomial.

Given that the historical avant-gardes of Eastern and Central European countries have been subjected to institutionally enforced peripherality, misrepresented strictly as a target-culture metabolization of source-culture concepts, to rethink them from within/as a transnational system is to subversively perform the restoration of their relevance as “the first tentatives of cultural export (in the sense of a trans-frontier accumulation of symbolic capital) coming from the direction of peripheral national literatures” (12) and to highlight their decisive involvement in the process of what has been called, over the past two decades, the *worlding* of literature.

Three essential concepts articulate this endeavour: space, community, and network. The issue of spatiality is probed metaliterarily, through successive deconstructions of various geoliterary demarcations (*Mitteleuropa*, Eastern Europe, “the third Europe”) that recent historiography has issued or instrumentalised when dealing with the region the volume ultimately chooses to identify as “Central and Eastern Europe.” Community is configured as the “hard nucleus of avant-gardist formations” (16); their internal structures, evolutionary systems and dispersion rationales receive a thorough sociological treatment, the theoretical culmination of which is reached through the establishment of the network as a fundamental internal mechanism of the entire socio-cultural assemblage of the peripheral avant-gardes.

Grounded in a spatial, rather than temporal paradigm, the present historiographic venture avoids subordination to a teleological principle, avoiding to “narratively illustrate (often artificial) instances of homogeneity and organicity” (23). In opting for the construction of a transnational history, it allows for a treatment of the cultural and the literary in direct accord with the underlying geopolitical matrix of the region in question, while also maintaining “the primate of regional intersectionality over hegemonic influences” (24). The aimed construction of a horizontal history, devoid of problematically hierarchical, “orientalist” (in E. Said’s connotation of the term) discourse,

leads to the relativization of spatiality and its reconceptualization in terms of the network model, predominantly functional in the case of “transnational approaches which essentially work with discontinuities, politico-cultural landmarks, turning points etc.” (31), as exemplified by the *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*. The critical interrogation of this similarly conducted project reveals how, ultimately, “the geoliterary becomes, instead of another analytic-interpretative or ordering principle (like temporality), just a historically justified pretext” (31) from which transnational theories can commence their exposition of regional phenomena. The principle of historiographical temporality is dismantled in its conventional verticality, but replaced, to a certain extent, by a nuanced understanding of simultaneity as determining a process of co-evolution. Explained under the logic of this biological concept, the local formulations and cultural production of the Eastern and Central European avant-gardes take the shape of a co-evolutive network (comprised of the relations between adaptive and evolutionary mutations). Therefore, any comparative employment of Central and Eastern European national literatures ultimately entails their transnationalization and re-coagulation as an “international of peripheries.”

Therefore, it becomes obvious that the Eastern and Central European avant-gardes are unavoidably destitute of their specificity when placed under the reductive East/West or centre/periphery dichotomies, hence requiring the engagement of transnational analysis. In their case, the employment of such a framework is further deemed necessary by the intrinsic historical and ideological mechanisms that led to the initial formation of these regional avant-gardist networks. Given that they developed shortly after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire and within the “nation building” processes it had set into motion, these peripheral cultural phenomena were actively caught between the institutional imperative to consolidate their national literatures and the disruptive aesthetic *dicta* of their Western counterparts. They emerge from this cultural dissension by selecting or, rather, by forging “a third way’: an identity cosmopolitan in conduct, namely constructive, edifying, affirmative, in *praxis*” (11). Focused on intraliterary dynamics, the second chapter investigates and exemplifies the often paradoxical cultural products that emerge out of this negotiation of the regional through internationalist morphologies (such as the ruralism-infused poetry of programmatically urbanized writers, as in the cases of Vinea and Fundoianu) or, conversely, through local

instantiations and improbable survivals of Western cultural imports (as exemplified by the peculiar case of Romanian surrealism). The predisposition of peripheral spaces to generate and uphold local heterodox forms is subsequently explained in terms of Pascale Casanova's delineation of the two facets of internationalism, as either an ideology of universality, as practiced by source-cultures, or as a "model of transfer of symbolic goods" (126), characteristic of marginal target-cultures, within which it often functions as a "strategy of cultural 'compensation'" (127).

The system of ideological crosscurrents that determined the development of the European avant-gardes as inherently internationalist movements further validates the instrumentalisation of a transnational model. Beyond the conventionally cited significance of the socialist international, the volume emphasizes, both in the *Introduction* and in its second chapter, the critical influence of two other supra-state phenomena (the expansion of imperialist capitalism and the Esperanto movement) in prefiguring the community dynamics and expansion systems of the avant-gardist prerogative, by catalyzing the "genesis of an inter- and transnational consciousness, the articulation of an inter- and transnational behaviour and attitude and the assimilation of internationalist dispersion mechanisms, which led to the formation of the first interliterary global networks" (11).

To further engage with the internal mechanisms of identity formation that operated within the Central and Eastern European avant-gardes, a conceptual binomial is employed; Ben Anderson's "imagined community" and Dionýz Ďurišin's "interliterary community" (centred around geographic proximity, historical affinity and common cultural experiences) enter into dialogue, as they both offer "identity models for the study of the dynamic between multiple literary phenomena that developed not in parallel, but in a distinct relation of co-evolution" (34). Modoc preserves Ďurišin's principles for an interliterary community, but extends his theory beyond its initial national and ethnic configuration, therefore accommodating the supra-individual, non-national unities that form the peripheral European avant-gardist movements.

Yet, the pinpointing of a stable conceptual and aesthetic permutation to which they are all subordinated proves difficult. In being intrinsically connected to the ever effervescent modernism, the avant-garde is often connotated against the national varieties of the latter - in the Romanian context, it is theorised as its most extremist

manifestation, in the Serbian and Polish one, it emerges as an organic development of an elusive, transitory modernism, whereas in Hungarian culture, it was only retrospectively formulated in the 1990s as part of the “aesthetic modernism-avant-garde-late modernism” triad. Given the extent of these regional modulations, the representation of the avant-garde in global critical discourse, particularly when placed within this theoretical dichotomy, is often apparently discrepant, especially after European avant-gardist exports breached the American cultural environment (guaranteeing their historical survival, but renouncing their inceptive purism). Ultimately, the issue of identifying the avant-garde within a literary community is solved by operating with the same binomial, seeing as:

the labor of the consolidation of literary and artistic modernism not only reflects, but also certifies, the presence and, in most cases, the precedence of a very fixed notion of avant-garde, in relation to which modernism identifies itself either as opposition (in Romanian literature), as synthesis (in Polish culture), as transition (in Serbian culture) (...) (46).

However, beyond considering the national instantiations of the concept, a transnational treatment of the Central and Eastern European avant-gardes requires analysis of the specific position they have within the literary polysystem (as theorised by Itamar Even-Zohar). As an intraliterarily marginal cultural product of interliterarily marginal geocultural spaces, they exhibit what Modoc calls a “double peripherality.” Given their constitution in full opposition to the intraliterary system they were marginal in, or entirely outside of, they avoided being hindered by, or generally engaged in, its internal aesthetic conflicts. This facilitated their dissemination in a European circuit in which they were relegated, once again, to a peripheral position:

Although it is tempting to suppose that, given the implicit egalitarian logic of avant-gardist internationalism, a centre-periphery dynamic between western and non-western avant-gardes is at least paradoxical, the power structure becomes as evident as possible when considering that the only way Eastern European avant-gardists (and not only) could accumulate cultural capital was through external validation, certified through expatriations, migrations, or other forms of cultural pilgrimage (53).

For a functional model of the Central and Eastern European avant-gardes and their “interface of transnational negotiation from a (doubly) peripheral position and within a counter-public sphere” (59), Modoc further advances a relational theory of the avant-garde-as-network. Anchored in network theory, specifically Mustafa Emirbayer’s model of a relational sociology based on a trans-actional model, his system calls for viewing the processual dynamics of a literary community (the exchange of theories, information, texts, and manifests) as transactions, with the symbolic value of each member determined by their interaction with fellow members within the transactional context of the community. Restructured this way, the evolution of Central and Eastern European avant-gardes can be deconstructed into its essential units (of interliterary and transactional processes) and understood as their sum.

It is in the third chapter that this methodological shift finds its most complex instantiation - building upon the previous exposition of intraliterary metabolization of transnational concepts (as exemplified by the cases of Romanian or Polish futurism, Hungarian Dadaism or Serbian surrealism), this section of the volume addresses an essential paradox of the internationalist avant-gardes, namely the emergence of exclusively regional, in scope and dispersion, iterations. In generating a panorama of the Central and Eastern European regional “avant-garde isms” (Hungarian activism, Czech poetism, Romanian integralism and Polish formism), the analysis highlights the specific cases in which interliterary relations among the peripheral avant-gardes led to the surmounting of the interferences coming from the central avant-gardes. This phenomenon can be observed in the sheer cultural capital amassed by the Hungarian magazine *Ma*, which functioned as an essential cultural intermediary between the Western and Central-Eastern avant-gardes; Hungarian activism went on to play a decisive role in the general development of constructivism in the region, significantly impacting the Romanian and Czech avant-gardes.

The cultural products of this specific network pertain, through their heterodox nature, to the same negotiation of the intra- and interliterary, displaying, in their similar morphologies, how “local interference modulates the reception and synthesis of Western European elements in the autochthonous variants of these avant-gardes” (190). The “local inventions” analysed (Lajos Kassák’s *picture-poems*, Karel Teige’s *image-poems*, Victor

Brauner and Ilarie Voronca's *pictopoetry* and Mieczyslaw Szczuka's *photomontage*) illustrate, when approached comparatively, a singular underlying concept, disseminated through regional inter-avant-gardist networks and particularised into a form of "alternative transnational cultural production" (200).

It is in the final sub-chapter of the third section that the volume's most obvious innovation resides. Through the engagement of data mining, carried out on a corpus of 17 avant-gardist magazines from Central and Eastern Europe and over eight hundred Romanian periodicals (published between 1919 and 1944), a network abstractization of the discussed geoliterary space is produced. Operative visualizations are critically inserted, offering statistical demonstrations of previously advanced methodology, as in the case of "Futurism in Romanian Journalism. A Case Study of Spatial Dispersion," where the quantitative approach comes to strengthen the argumentation of the precursory sub-chapter, further augmenting the local influence of Western avant-gardists, like Marinetti and Tzara. The chapter's most substantial finding rests, however, on the resonant conclusion that, in the 1920s, the centrality of Paris was questioned within the central and Eastern European space and its publishing community. The way in which, in most cases, its network advantages East-Central publications, like the Hungarian *Ma* or the Romanian *Contimporanul* over Western ones "categorically illustrates the fact that inter-peripheral relations invalidate any presumption of interliterary dependence of the centre-periphery sort" (214).

In its last section, the volume adopts a retrospective view of the previous critical discourse surrounding the Romanian avant-garde, offering accounts of three generationally distinct examples (Ion Pop, Marin Mincu, Paul Cernat). By placing them within Andrei Terian's value axis of reception of literary sub-fields (*natural – artificial – scholarly*) and showing how they destabilize it, forming, instead, an *artificial – scholarly – natural* permutation, the ideational volatility of the phenomenon is noted and the distinct approach of the present volume, emphasized.

Innovative through its theoretical and methodological apparatus, and commendable in its restorative approach, *The International of Peripheries* successfully challenges present assumptions under which contemporary Romanian criticism functions. In turn, it advances its singular stance that "national literary culture is both the sum of its interactions with a source-culture, and the result of intensive negotiation from

within an interliterary community, the formation, structure, and evolution of which are spatially and socio-culturally determined” (229). Therefore, in its assemblage of literary and critical panoramas, it ultimately traces, with rigour and self-awareness, the theoretical coordinates of the paradigmatic shift it is, in itself, an embodiment of.

Reference:

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