

BOOKS

Laura Pavel, *Personaje ale teoriei, ființe ale ficțiunii*, Iași, Institutul European, 2021, 338 p.

Laura Pavel's *Characters of Theory, Beings of Fiction* is a feat of post-critical thought, single-handedly setting the stage for the advent of "post-theory" in Romanian cultural studies through the development of notions whose life can be extended well outside the realm of the country's academic output. Innovative concepts and perspectives emerge as Pavel convincingly localizes the tenets of post-theory within the scope of Romanian literature, while also occasionally stepping into international waters, as in an essay on the works of Klaus Obermaier. As imaginative and honest as it is subtle and precise, *Characters of Theory, Beings of Fiction* works through the political realities underpinning the creation of art in order to shed light on its ontological singularity. Though this undertaking might sound familiar in the wake of the many "turns" in Contemporary cultural studies, Pavel's lines of inquiry bear strikingly surprising and vital results.



To start with, in "Latour Enters the Stage", the author announces that her investigation into the "beings of fiction" (Bruno Latour) aims to "reveal the interpretative potential and the ekphrasis (the potential for a dialogue between artistic, literary, plastic, as well as anthropologic modes of discourse) which this notion contains" (30). To broaden and expand upon the frameworks set forth by "characters" of post-theory such as

Latour, Martha Nussbaum and Rita Felski, she develops the concept of "figurability" as a "term for the reversibility between the created figures, on the one hand, and the creators (designers) or just their interpreters and audience" (40). As Pavel suggests that this process results in "figures of graphicity", "figures of montage" and "figures of performativity" (35), the language assumed within such inquiries would need to have the "fluctuations, the pulsating [sense]" of what Latour has called an "infra-language" (40), "harbouring the

flickering vibration of an infra-being, rather than the affirmation of a full, unqualified ontological condition" (42). Though part of a later chapter, "Cultural Turns. The Dynamic of Interpretative Narratives" is another essay which encapsulates the overarching impetus at work in Pavel's book. Drawing upon the work of thinkers such as Stanley Fish, Nicolas Bourriaud, Mieke Bal, and many others, she synthesizes the theoretical narratives which have engendered "the cultivation of some hermeneutical illusions", suggesting that "the illusion might have to do with the excessive faith in their multiple functionality and semantic scope" (172). However, she subsequently argues that "a paradoxical extension of the meanings of performativity also allows for the association of this dynamic and anamorphic concept with visual creation" (177). As an answer to these tumultuous developments in the realm of theory, Pavel hints at the hermeneutical possibilities contained by Bourriaud's notion of "relational aesthetics", which could offer new insights into "the ekphrastic, interartistic dialogues, but most of all ... those daily meetings within a communal space, which can take the shape of a performance with artistic or identitarian-political stakes" (178). This approach carries over to "The Literary Turn: Arguments and Micro-analyses", which builds towards the possibility to "look at literature as if through a telescope turned to the anthropomorphic figure dwelling in the depths of the text, in the 'intrinsic' being of the literary", leading to what the author sees as "simultaneously an infracritical and a postcritical perspective" (188). With "Radical Interpretation in the Work of Donald Davidson", the author goes on to

investigate and widen the scope of Davidson's idea of "charity" by relating it to Emmanuel Levinas's "ethic of alterity", but also to Agamben's "theory of the 'device'" (221).

With these theoretical scaffoldings at work, the book offers a fascinating take on the symbiotic relation between the "beings" lurking within works of fiction and the "characters" through which our theoretical perspectives are filtered. Issues of reversibility and inter-reflexivity spring up throughout "Biographical Fiction and Living in Style", where Pavel develops a post-critical reading of two texts by author Ion Iovan: *Mateiu Caragiale* and *The Last Notes of Mateiu Caragiale Accompanied by an Unpublished Epistolary Novel, as Well as by an Index of Beings, Things and Events in the Presentation of Ion Iovan*. Pavel draws notions from the realm of theatre studies in order to illustrate the texts' concern with "the opening of the authorial self towards the fictional mask, towards its future character (from a future event of writing which evokes a past of literary history)" (67). In this reading, the idea of "theatricality" reveals its "flexibility", its "[functionality] as an instrument of interpretation" (69), which can shed a vital light on the "relation between the subjectivity of the author-actor, that of its fictional creature and that of the emancipated, theatricalized author, the 'spectator'" (75). This willingness to skirt borders between theoretical fields is echoed in "The Psychobody. Defictionalization and Self-Exposure", where Pavel traces the patterns whereby actors and authors alike are "defictionalized", as "the politics of the self can itself recalibrate aesthetic and anthropological understandings of the liminality of the artistic condition" (127).

Throughout the essay “The Literary Bohemia of the 1960’s-1970’s: Manners of Being between the Autobiographical and the Fictional”, Pavel develops the notion of “co-fictioning”, a phenomenon whereby authors “transfer to each other their modes of belonging together, their modes of existence, to one another” (77), as observed in the “private life of fiction, or self-fictionalization” that lays exposed in the historical records and literary works left behind by the 1960s Romanian literary *bohemia* (specifically, texts by Nicolae Breban, Nichita Stănescu, Nina Cassian). Pavel claims that this dynamic was propounded by an interdependence between the “irresponsibilization of the self” and an “ethos of survival through adaptation” (77). In interpreting Ion Mureșan’s “effigy-poem” *Alcohol* (2010), she also demonstrates how a certain “lens-character” can “[guide] us through the process certain manners being belonging to the writer”, as well as to the “reader”, “if the latter is willing to be contaminated by the beings of fiction” (78). Essentially, the “co-fictioning” practiced by the 1960s Romanian literary bohemians reveals “a way of documenting and exposing this life as a readymade – an artistic and existential practice” (81).

Pavel expands this inquiry into Romanian “beings of fiction” with the essay “The Total Novelist of the 1960’s-70’s. Expanding the Realm of Fiction”, as she shows how a drive for fictionalization is also harboured by the Romanian “total” novels, penned by “star-authors” of the era, such as Marin Preda, Constantin Ţoiu, George Bălăiță, and Nicolae Breban. Here, a “bovarism of compensation” leads the “total novelist” to “rival, knowingly or unknowingly, the posture of the political de-

cider of the time and their ideological fiction” (108), part and parcel of a literary genre she terms “socialist fictionalism” (111). Pavel goes on to convincingly argue that these “total novels” are marked by “a certain amount of subversiveness, but also [by] a paradoxical agreement with the centralizing, totalizing will of the political” (111). Such a complicity is augmented by the *total* authors’ “temptation to exert their symbolic authority beyond the borders of their own texts” (123) and by their manner of living, which sometimes mimics that of their characters, the novelists thus “offering themselves as characters” (122). This deep internalization, or subconscious engagement with the political discourse put forward by the Communist regime, is reflected in the actual stylistic texture and structure of the texts, as “the narrative situations, the conflicts, the epic nodes and rhetorical formulas parodically deconstruct and then symptomatically reconstruct the discursive mechanisms of the ideological power” (123). Shifting the focus upon the rethinking of “ekphrasis”, the essay “Beyond the Artistic Aura – Visual and Aesthetic Ideology” shows how Victor Man’s artworks, labelled with titles which allude to literary works, can be interpreted through the lens of a “pictorial-literary relation”, revealing “a privileged inter-artistic dialogue” (231). This approach aims to demonstrate that the “old notion of ekphrasis deserves to be re-evaluated in its interpretative, but also argumentative, rhetorical, dimension” (232). Pavel claims that, once we adopt “a critical infra-gaze, through which one can plunge into the interstices of artistic practice” (255), “the work gains the position of subject, with which one can enter a her-

meneutical dialogue" (256), as its interpretation would either "give voice (*ekphrazein*) to the state of creative latency, the 'potentiality' (Agamben) of non-being, of repressing expressivity for a while, by transferring it from an artistic practice into the discursive, argumentative realm", or "would only accompany and describe, as an accomplice, a certain irreducible enigma... which exists in an artistic creation" (256). In the same essay, the author goes on to offer an incisive new perspective upon Adrian Ghenie's and Marius Bercea's oeuvre. For Pavel, their artworks create a "pictorial-auratic effect, in spite of their deconstructive parody" (270), which is sustained by "an oscillation and a complementary dynamic between aestheticized politics and politicized aesthetics" (284). Pavel thus suggests possible interpretative narratives which would uncover "the irreversible (and somehow unpredictable, thus performative) relation between the work of art, which achieves the position of a subject, and the context of its apparition and reception" (283). For example, the

"ekphrastic irony" (267) that the author observes in Ghenie's *Pie Fight* installation is related to "Emmanuel Levinas's theory of ethics", such that the works can often "be 'read' as visual metonymies of an ethical drama", harbouring the status of a subject which elicits our responsibility. Likewise, with "Gaps in Fiction: Aesthetic and (Bio)-Technological borders", Pavel dives into Klaus Obermaier's "hybrid creations" (such as *Apparition* and *Le Sacre du Printemps*), which "contain a story about the matrix belonging to a creativity of the ekphrastic, intermedial kind" (293).

Ultimately, Laura Pavel's *Characters of Theory, Beings of Fiction* is an invaluable work for researchers interested in the future of post-theory, Romanian literary history, as well as Theatre and Art studies. Chances are that the avenues Pavel opens up between each of these fields of study, as well as between theory and art itself, will make for a more thoughtful, ethical understanding of artistic singularity in a contemporary context which increasingly calls for moral urgency.

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