

SOME THEORETICAL SHORTCOMINGS IN MIHAI IOVĂNEL'S *HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN LITERATURE:* *1990-2020*

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ABSTRACT. *Some Theoretical Shortcomings in Mihai Iovănel's History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990-2020.* This paper is an analysis of some of the concepts (*posthuman, capitalist realism, transnational*) used in Mihai Iovănel's *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990-2020*, pointing out the way in which the author borrows some terms from current global debates and uses them as labels, without their theoretical backgrounds and foundation. This echoes another misunderstanding in Romanian literary studies, that of the term *postmodernism*, which is, Clinci argues, another example of self-colonization.

Keywords: *postmodernism, posthumanism, self-colonization, Romanian literature, capitalist realism*

REZUMAT. *Câteva probleme teoretice în Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990-2020 a lui Mihai Iovănel.* Acest text este o analiză a câtorva concepte (*postuman, realism capitalist, transnațional*) utilizate în *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990-2020* a lui Mihai Iovănel, care arată cum autorul împrumută unii termeni din dezbaterile globale actuale și le folosește

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drept etichete, fără baza sau fundalul lor teoretic. Acest lucru reia o altă problemă a studiilor literare românești, cea a termenului de *postmodernism*, ca un alt exemplu de autocolonizare.

Cuvinte-cheie: *postmodernism, postumanism, auto-colonizare, literatură română, realism capitalist*

As expected, Mihai Iovănel's *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990-2020* [Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990-2020] has received mixed reviews since its publication in early 2021. The less progressive critics, who published their reviews in *Observator cultural*, no. 1067, mostly argued against Iovănel's method of supposedly doing away with the Kantian principle of the *autotelic work of art* (or *aesthetic autonomy*) in favor of a more contextual approach, which the author dubs, to the shock and awe of many a conservative, as "post-Marxist" (Iovănel 13). The more progressive critics, who published their reviews in, among other places, *Revista Transilvania*, no. 7-8/2021, praised the book mostly for the fact that, due to its being sociologically informed, it reads like a historical narrative, like a story, and not strictly like a *literary history* in the traditional fashion of Romanian criticism, which establishes hierarchies and judges works from the all-seeing position of authority of the critic as a demigod of literature. In a sense, this is the context of Iovănel's contextual approach. Published during a silently blooming culture war between the venerable tradition of judging works based on the critic's *taste* and some newer ways of thinking, reading, and generally dealing with literature, the *History* managed to reinforce and uncover, in more ways than one, probably the most ignored process in Romanian culture: self-colonization.

Mircea Cărtărescu's *Romanian Postmodernism* [Postmodernismul românesc], first published in 1999, partially tells both the global and the local story of a concept and the debates that were sparked during the 1980s and 1990s by the introduction of this new label: *postmodernism*. Funnily enough, the local debate on postmodernism took place at a time when Romania was a modernized, industrial, authoritarian state, and when the literary field was largely controlled by the Party bureaucracy. Thus, the material conditions and the theories presented by Cărtărescu in the first part of his study could not be easily transposed into Romanian culture. Nonetheless, one may argue that Romanian literary studies embraced the label, but not the concept. In the absence of a *postmodern culture* and exhibiting a certain misunderstanding of the historical Avant-garde and its criticism of bourgeois culture (Cărtărescu 2010, 162), in the absence of a neoliberal capitalist condition, critics such as

Mircea Martin expressed some concern over the use of the label, mentioning a “postmodernism without postmodernity.”² On the other hand, the general view was that postmodernism was an “evolution,” a mark of renewal, progress, and value (Iovănel 2021, 154), an idea supported, in a somewhat ironic turn, by the currently conservative critics. The question, if I am allowed to still call it that, of *Romanian postmodernism* remains: why did the local literary critics and academics embrace this label, in spite of all the contradictions? There are, of course, many ways to navigate around this issue, and Iovănel tries to make sense of it, even mentioning self-colonization in a paragraph where he fails to recognize its meaning and where he ends up referring to it as “a reactionary concept.”³

Alexander Kiossev came up with the concept of “self-colonization” as a means to explain the weird cultural status of “peripheral” or “lateral” areas in relation to the modern colonial European centers (Kiossev 1995). The colonial relation of power is relatively straightforward: European powers invaded, for instance, the Americas not only through hard, military might, but also through soft tactics, among which the most important was the spread of Christianity. This allowed for a certain resentment to develop within the indigenous populations who saw the colonists as invaders. Similarly, the Europeans doubted at times whether the indigenous peoples could pass as legally *human*, given that they did not seem to comply with the norms and rules of Western civilization (Anievas and Nişancioğlu 2015, 124-125). However, Bulgaria, Romania etc. remained at the periphery of *the West* and outside the colonial power dynamics. The nation-building processes of the nineteenth century in Eastern Europe were, as Kiossev argues, an example of self-colonization, that is, the import of methods and strategies like institutions, concepts, values, stories, and myths. At the same time, these young nations coming out of the nineteenth century also embraced their own inferiority in relation to European states (Kiossev 1998), willingly accepting their authority. One important fact that Kiossev discusses is legitimacy—“the recognition-granting gaze”—which can only be awarded from the European centers of (cultural) power. As modernity, humanism, capitalism, and *the West* were all created within the colonial relationship, the self-colonizing peoples were simply ignored; they ended up being neither exotic enough to be interesting for the West, nor quite as Western as the real thing (Todorova 2009, 13). Thus, self-colonization may explain the discourse and the promise of modernization and Europeanization that still wins elections in this part of the world, as well as the central tension in Iovănel’s *History*. Rightfully denouncing that old form of self-colonization, which is nationalism with all its current

² “postmodernism fără postmodernitate” (Cărtărescu 2010, 167; Iovănel 2021, 155).

³ “conceptul este de fapt reacţionar (Iovănel 2021, 162).

conservative ideological appendages, Iovănel employs a new form of self-colonization, taking labels from some of the current debates within the Western Left without subjecting them to critical examination and without really managing to use them as concepts. Like his so-called postmodernist predecessors, he seems to consider that words like *posthumanism*, *capitalist realism*, and *transnational* have some sort of value to them as signs of progress but fails to build a necessary bridge between their meanings and the way he uses them in his *History*.

“Posthuman Dispersion”

In Chapter 16 of the *History*, Iovănel analyzes what he calls the “Posthuman Dispersion.” The reader is left completely in the dark as to what this dispersion might be, for the author does not take the time to explain what he means by “posthuman.” I can only infer that it has something to do with a “poetic wave” which has its own “tropes” and “stylemes,”⁴ these being somehow linked to technology, the human-as-machine, the internet, popular music, and science fiction writing and cinema. For instance, Iovănel describes the “posthuman poet” as a “hipster,” an urban bourgeois youngster, “natively integrated within digital culture,” who nevertheless “ecologically explores and integrates various predigital cultural layers.”⁵

Defining “posthumanism” and “the posthuman” is no easy endeavor, especially since there are a number of approaches that converge only partially and since not all the theorists associated with these concepts actually agree with them wholeheartedly. Posthumanism begins from multiple points, but one thing is clear: post-human-ism is a critique of Western human exceptionalism as invented during colonial modernity. We must also remember that “the posthuman” stems from Donna J. Haraway’s “cyborg” figure, a feminist-socialist and materialist (and, if I may, also postmodern) “ironic myth,” that is, it stems from a critique of classical liberal humanism (Haraway 2016, 5). Unfortunately, Haraway’s use of the term “cyborg” created a dangerous misunderstanding between (critical) posthumanism and transhumanism, which is simply yet another iteration of that modern myth turned neoliberal capitalist that technology will indeed save the world and the human using high-end prosthetics. More recently, connections between posthumanism (not transhumanism) and literature have been drawn with mixed results. On the one hand, there are approaches that

⁴ “valul postuman pare să-și fi atins faza finală a expansiunii. Stilemele poeziei postumane” (Iovănel 2021, 638).

⁵ “poetul postuman poate fi reprezentat prin figura hipsterului – individ integrat nativ în cultura digital, care însă explorează și integrează ecologic diverse straturi culturale predigitale” (Iovănel 2021, 618).

believe that “posthumanism,” as a rejection of human exceptionalism, is a trans-historical category; in other words, that humanism contains posthumanism in itself and can be identified even in medieval literature (Steel 2017, 3). On the other hand, more respectful and coherent approaches understand that “posthuman(ist) literature” is a dubious theoretical issue, acknowledging that “posthuman literature might thus be a contradiction in terms” (Herbrechter 2017, 65). Herbrechter ends his study reminding the readers that the project of posthumanism – that of both criticizing the humanist tradition and bringing forth an understanding that “we,” the “story-telling animal,” were never alone – cannot be brushed aside since it is far from over (66). In the *Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman* (Clarke and Rossini eds. 2017), from which the above examples have been extracted, one may also find examples of literary themes pertaining to posthumanism, such as bodies, objects, technologies, and so on, all of which have a definite political underpinning.

Iovănel's chapter about “posthuman” poetry has, on the other hand, no political stake. Even though the book promised (or threatened) to be “post-Marxist,” one will find the same old reading impressions and aesthetic judgment of a traditional critic. Why Iovănel decided to label some poets “posthumanists” remains a mystery if we only refer to the book. However, in keeping with the self-colonization process, it is obvious that Iovănel seems compelled to introduce the “posthuman” into his *History* as a means to gain some legitimacy or theoretical leverage by using a currently popular term, even if he hijacks all its deeper meanings, the debates it sparked (and still does), and its political foundations.

“Capitalist Realism”

Chapter 12 of the *History* deals with a number of fiction books from the 2000s and 2010s under the heading “Capitalist Realism.” It too is an example of hijacking a political concept and turning it into a mere aesthetic label, while relegating the name of Mark Fisher to a brief footnote. Obviously, Iovănel is trying to mirror the Soviet tradition of Socialist Realism in post-Communist, capitalist times through pretentious wordplay (Iovănel 2021, 408). Mark Fisher's “capitalist realism” was defined as “the widespread sense that [...] it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher 2009, 2). For Fisher, the power of capitalist realism, this feeling that there is no alternative, comes from the fact that capitalism somehow manages to integrate all previous history and all its opposites in the system of commodification. Practices, ideologies, concepts, Che Guevara, anything with a subversive potential, all are transformed into “merely aesthetic objects” (4) circulating within the vast networks of the capitalist market. Drawing from Marx, Debord, Deleuze

and Guattari, etc., Fisher seems to equate capitalist realism with a postmodernism haunted by an immobilizing lack of creativity (7), best highlighted by the case of Cobain and his band, Nirvana, where “even success meant failure” (9), even a protest against MTV would be televised and get high audience ratings on MTV. Capitalist realism is not merely the proverbial rat race, but the ideology which says that the rat race is the only possible reality.

In their “Introduction” to *Reading Capitalist Realism*, the editors (Alison Shonkwiler and Lee Claire La Berge) try to give Fisher’s capitalist realism a literary twist by turning it into a critical “mode” of showing capitalist commodification at work (Shonkwiler and La Berge 2014, 15). However, their proposal of a realism from within the boundaries of capitalism has nothing to do with the novels listed by Iovănel in the chapter on “Capitalist Realism,” nor with his discourse, which fails to be critical and remains simply descriptive.

“Transnational canon”

The first paragraph from Chapter 20, “Towards a Transnational Canon,” develops what I have previously referred to as the central tension of the entire book, that is, the Europeanization and modernization of Romanian literature seen as value in itself, and implicitly opposed to a form of nationalism that says, on the one hand, that only local expressions are to be of interest for literary critics and, on the other hand, that Romanian literature loses its complexity in translation. Strictly speaking, the conundrum of Romanian culture in post-Socialism can be summed up in these two alternatives: the new self-colonization, that of a modernizing Euro-centric capitalism, or the old one, nationalist, patriarchal, Orthodox Christian, even rural. Both have their inherent issues. The first suffers from the absence of that “recognition-granting gaze” identified by Kiossev, exemplified in Iovănel’s book by Cărtărescu’s case (Iovănel 2021, 667), and, generally speaking, by a very particular relationship of power with (Western) Europe. The second is rendered almost superfluous by the Romanian exodus from the villages directly to richer European countries in search of jobs, mostly as cheap unskilled labor. In this chapter, Iovănel seems preoccupied with the way in which Romanian writers could gain some recognition in the West, proposing two possibilities: translation and implantation (Iovănel 2021, 668-675). However, he also seems reluctant to acknowledge that the question of recognition is part of the self-colonizing dynamics, using the phrase “integration of Romanian literature in the global market.”⁶ As the following paragraphs prove, “global market” does not really mean *global*, but *Western*,

⁶ “integrare a literaturii române pe piața globală” (Iovănel 2021, 668).

and the best (and dare I say, the only relevant) example is Cărtărescu, given under the “translation” tactic. The other tactic of gaining recognition from power, “implantation,” suggests that Romanian writers may “infiltrate a central culture [...] subtly modifying its parameters.”⁷ The only example given here is Andrei Codrescu. However, in spite of all these seemingly hopeful proposals, Iovănel lucidly understands the fact that the integration of Romanian literature in a “transnational canon” is very unlikely (679).

Thus, it is clear that Iovănel renounces his initial claim of “post-Marxism” throughout the book. This is most visible in the final section of the *History*, where he employs “transnational specificity” as a very elitist concept strictly centered around literature, devoid of the social and material conditions that make it possible. A transnational perspective, as Paul Jay says, means emphasizing “mobility, migration, travel, and exchange” (Jay 2021, 10), an encounter of cultures that end up “cross-pollinating.” It is a descriptive tool (Jay 2021, 21), one that would fit a leftist analysis if that were the case. Iovănel uses it, on the other hand, with a normative flavor, as if Romanian literature *should* become part of a transnational perspective (but will probably not), a fact echoed by the relatively resigned tone of the *History*'s final paragraph. This is symptomatic both for Iovănel's position and for Romanian culture, in general. While a number of researchers have analyzed the fact that concepts such as *transnational literature/canonization* and *world literature* still maintain and propagate that venerable colonial Eurocentrism (Apter 2013; Thomsen 2008), Iovănel reproduces Lovinescu's “synchronism” and its inherent self-colonizing tone.

Finally, I would like to note that I do not use the term *self-colonization* with a moral undertone. Self-colonization is a historical process of nation-building in “lateral” or “peripheral” European spaces and thus a concept that puts into perspective a kind of power play that is outside the traditional colonial framework. In other words, self-colonization is not good or bad, it is the way Romanian culture and the Romanian nation have been constructed since the nineteenth century. Iovănel's *History*, however, could have avoided falling into this trap by engaging into a critical discussion on the terms, concepts, and labels that he uses, and by analyzing them from a leftist perspective. It is beyond doubt that this *History* is an important achievement within the field of Romanian literary studies and a welcomed shift in perspective. But it is also true that it sacrifices theoretical coherence in favor of rhetorical devices meant to give it a “synchronized” sheen. If it manages to spark some serious conceptual and theoretical debates around the terms it uses, then it will have been a breakthrough.

⁷ “infiltrarea unei culturi centrale dinspre o cultură periferică într-un mod care modifică subtil parametrii primeia” (Iovănel 2021, 675).

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