

BOOKS

Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Lumi de ficțiune, lumi de realitate*, București: Editura Tracus Arte, 2022, 354 p.

What do the relation between C. S. Lewis and T. S. Eliot, the horrifying serial murders described in Roberto Bolaño's *2666* and Ion D. Sîrbu's dystopic novel have to do with each other? Apparently, nothing, yet Ruxandra Cesereanu's latest work, entitled *Fictional Worlds, Real Worlds* and published in 2022, brings them together in a meaningful and thought-provoking manner.

A collection of fourteen of the author's previously published studies, now revised and augmented, the volume centers around the idea of fictional and real worlds. The gravitational force holding these seemingly disparate elements together is a primordial human fascination with story-telling, and a passionate desire to look into the depths of art in order to see the world reflected through it. This inquisitive glance approaches its object through the perspective of comparative



world literature, unearthing sometimes surprising but well-founded associations, while examining and speaking to acute contemporary problems. As already suggested by the title, the fourteen chapters are divided into two parts along the opposition between fiction and reality. However, as the author indicates in the foreword, they in fact represent three categories: works dominated by fiction and imagination (C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien,

Marie Darrieusecq, Will Self, Leonid Dimov, Mircea Cărtărescu) or by an interest in reality and descriptive realism (Sei Shonagon, Franz Werfel, Ion D. Sîrbu, Patrick Modiano, Herta Müller, Elfriede Jelinek, Lyudmila Ulitskaya), while the rest are located in transition, in between the two opposites (T. S. Eliot, Antonio Lobo Antunes, Roberto Bolaño and Andrei Codrescu).

Nonetheless, wherever the objects of the present studies might be found on



the imaginary spectrum ranging from fiction to reality, they never fail to show and contend with something of the inherently (non)human in us.

The first part of the book, dedicated to fictional worlds, opens with two chapters on pioneering works of fantasy literature by fellow scholars and friends, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien respectively. Yet, instead of approaching *The Chronicles of Narnia* in a more-or-less conventional manner, Ruxandra Cesereanu offers a reading of the series, especially of the first volume *The Magician's Nephew*, through the curious mirror of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. She presents the two works as dialectical opposites, the former being permeated by a hope of regeneration and fertility, a *vegetal Christianity* as coined herself, while the latter is dominated by the sterility of hopelessness and the demystification of Antiquity. This sterility and desolation of the real-world experience could be the reason behind the rise of a so-called *fantasy complex*, discussed in relation with J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* in the second chapter. This concept is developed by the writer herself from the original Jungian idea, arguing for a positive interpretation of its effect, since for the majority of readers fantasy literature proved to be "therapeutic, healing and constructive" (p. 41).

Moving away from the reinvigorating force of fantasy literature, we turn back to the desolation once again in the third chapter, resounding from António Lobo Antunes' powerful *fado* over the political history of his native country. Ruxandra Cesereanu identifies the writer's obsession with decomposition and corpses as a literary diagnosis of Portugal and through the dissection of six of his novels arrives at the characteristic

elements (be they thematic or stylistic) of the ex-psychiatrist's fiction. The following chapter, focusing on Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, allows no respite from cruel or gruesome sights. While the first part of the chapter is dedicated to the way Bolaño reconfigures what belongs to the center of the periphery in literature, everything that is or seems unimportant or secondary becoming essential and primordial (p. 98), the second is dedicated to the minute analysis of the topic of femicide in the light of several historical events, theories and ideologies of the last century.

The fourth chapter of the volume brings together the theories of Jean-Jacques Wunenburger and Tzvetan Todorov in order to talk about alterity and metamorphosis in the books *Cock and Bull* by British novelist Will Self and *Pig Story* (or *Truismes* in the original language) by French writer Marie Darrieussecq. Both novels deal with fantastical sexual transformations, which the author of the present volume brings in context with Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* in an enlightening manner.

The last three chapters of the first part all bring Romanian authors into the spotlight: Leonid Dimov, Mircea Cărtărescu and Andrei Codrescu. In the first of these, Ruxandra Cesereanu gives a concise and well-documented overview of Leonid Dimov's oeuvre and its reception, emphasizing not only his poetical creation, but comparing his practice with his oneirist theory.

Moreover, starting from Corin Braga's classification of Dimov's poems as "neogothic tales" (p. 160), she explores this aspect of Dimov's work through the analysis of numerous poems. The following chapter is devoted to Mircea Cărtărescu's trilogy *Blinding* and his standalone novel *Solenoid*, the interpretation of his writings being aided by concepts Cărtărescu himself has used

to describe his novels or his ideas of creation during the *Phantasma* debates in 2006.

Therefore, geometrical and structural concepts such as the matryoshka doll, the spiral, fractals, mandalas, holons and holarchies (as defined by Arthur Koestler) abound, the most prominent of these metaphors being none other than the cranial map, which seems to permeate and create everything. The closing chapter of this sequence focuses on Andrei Codrescu, a multifaceted Romanian-born writer living in America. To be more specific, the emphasis falls on his essayistic works, which clearly reflect Codrescu's fascination with Dadaism and its influence on his thinking. Throughout her analysis, Ruxandra Cesereanu holds him up as an example of the *anarchetypal* author, a concept which has been theorized by Corin Braga.

An eleventh-century Japanese author and court lady, Sei Shonagon opens the second part of the volume, *Real Worlds*, though *The Pillow Book* written by her represents a space which strikes the modern-day reader rather as heavenly than real. This aestheticizing lens converting the Japanese imperial court into paradise is the subject of study in this chapter, as Ruxandra Cesereanu examines in detail what exactly is considered beautiful and worthy to be admired by the Japanese court lady. Yet the chapter ends on a tragical note, recording the destruction of the Edenic garden. The following chapter builds on biblical allusions as well, centering around Franz Werfel's novel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, which chronicles the Armenian genocide of 1915. Ruxandra Cesereanu explores the relation to and parallels between the fate of the Armenian and of the Jewish people, while investigating the problem of individual and collective identity, and its ethical and historical significance in Werfel's novel.

The following two chapters also commemorate traumatic periods in the lives of other nations, though in a very different style and genre. Ion D. Sîrbu's novel *Goodbye, Europe!*, discussed in the first of them, paints a dark and painful picture of the communist regime in Romania. The author of the present volume, based on the classification outlined by Corin Braga, identifies this novel as a Balkan dystopia where the repressive power is structured similarly to a Turkish sultanate. She also offers a thought-provoking comparative reading of Sîrbu's novel and Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* in relation to the problem of justice. The following chapter approaches the cruelty of repressive totalitarian systems from a different angle, delving into the question whether literature can or cannot restore lost lives and identities, erecting a tombstone, a memorial made out of words for those who fell victim to them. Patrick Modiano's acclaimed novel *Dora Bruder* and three of Herta Müller's works, *The Appointment*, *The Land of the Green Plums* and *The King Bows and Kills* respectively, serve as the basis of this inquiry.

The penultimate chapter tackles Austrian Nobel-prize winner Elfriede Jelinek's controversial novel, *The Piano Teacher*, analyzing from a socio-sexual and psychological viewpoint the sadomasochist relational triangle constituted by the main character, her controlling mother and her male student. As a result, the sickness and degeneration of humanity is uncovered, which proves to be beyond the saving power of music (p. 334).

Last but not least, the final chapter of the volume is dedicated to the novels *Imago* and *Yakov's Ladder* by Russian author Lyudmila Ulitskaya, both preoccupied by generational tales in the context of the last century. Ruxandra Cesereanu sees

Ulitskaya as an heir of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in consequence of her specific talents as writer, a comparison the author supports through the commentary of the aforementioned novels.

Overall, the volume *Fictional Worlds, Real Worlds* gives ample proof not only of its author's scholarly expertise, but also of her skill as a writer. Ruxandra Cesereanu manages to sublimate the essence of her extensive research and her own contemplations in an accessible style, operating with a well-defined and clearly expressed conceptual toolkit. Her studies enter into

dialogue with both Romanian and international criticism, all the while not abandoning aspirations to didacticism and informativeness, mainly manifest in the ample footnotes throughout the book. Be it a veteran scholar or a novice in the study of comparative literature, this volume can offer new questions to ponder to any reader.

Borbála SZÁSZ

*MA Student, Faculty of Letters
Babeş-Bolyai University
Cluj-Napoca, Romania
Email: szaszborbala@yahoo.com*