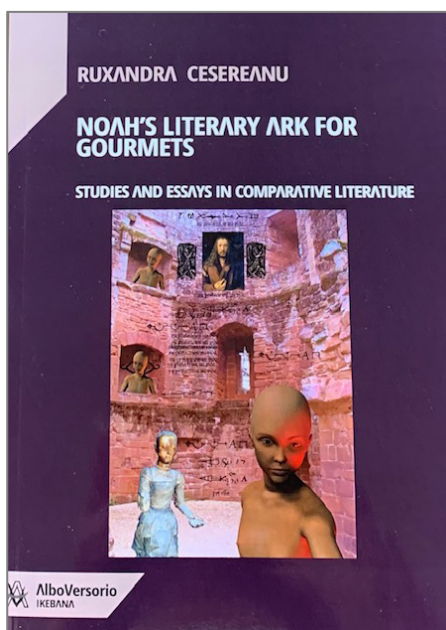


## BOOKS

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**Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Noah's Literary Ark for Gourmets. Studies and Essays in Comparative Literature*, Milano, Edizioni AlboVersorio, 2023, 194 p.**

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The collection of essays by the writer and researcher Ruxandra Cesereanu presents a suite of critical studies in the form of hermeneutic articulations, as reflected in the title of the volume, for an audience nursing thoroughly entrained dialogic polyvalences. The author of these studies aims to launch new critical nuances and brave hypotheses through which to immerse the reader in an exercise of comparative reading. The pillars of strength on which these demonstrations of literary criticism are supported shed light on the theoretical arsenal of the author. The reader goes through this volume witnessing the incubation of a layered hermeneutic where mythocriticism, psychoanalysis, history and ethics meet to delimit themselves in fine nuances or to complement each other.

We must appreciate the dexterity with which Ruxandra Cesereanu precisely masters the tools of comparative reading in the dialogue she initiates, often even in the middle of dissonance, or, at first glance, of non-interstitial registers.

The volume is made up of five sections, each of which revolves around a broader conceptual theme: the imaginary and the symbiosis produced between fictional worlds and their witnesses; the replacement of the center with the periphery alongside the rhizomatic poetics it gives birth to; the posthuman condition and the leaps from utopia to anti-utopia alongside a new habitation of the human psyche; the restorative function of dissident literature and the legitimization of literature as a recapture of history; and last but not least, a cinematic foray into the philosophy of the image bordering on a poetics of nostalgia.

Ruxandra Cesereanu develops a fecundity-sterility dialectic starting from two distinct states of paradise in T. S. Eliot and C. S. Lewis in which the author relies on an ideational glissando on the possibility of salvation. Analyzing on a mythical and symbolic level the



idea of a lost or revitalized paradise (*The Waste Land* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*), the author slices the image of the desolate land on the border between ritual and absurdity, meaning and alienation. The demystification and loss of the sacred dimension of antiquity, the author argues, holds a fundamental key to understanding Eliot's work. Ruxandra Cesereanu, on the one hand, emphasizes the responsibility and intentionality of modern man, and on the other hand, proposes, in the case of Lewis, an alchemical and syncretic reading lens, superimposed on the theological vision, in the form of a "vegetal Christianity". The crucial nuance that the author points out is that literature provokes a spiritual exercise of recalibration of the ethical, moral and spiritual coordinates. Her essay highlights the idea that the search for the fictional paradise is a form of rewriting, problematizing and getting acquainted with it.

The author shows an obvious interest in the "fantasy complex", a concept she treats from the perspective of the reparative effect of compensating for a possible universe that one wants to reach, in the sense of transgressing the unconscious. Ruxandra Cesereanu launches the hypothesis according to which fantasy literature can lead to identity metamorphoses on a teleological level in her analysis of the volumes *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The exercise of imagining a compensatory paradise can be capitalized on after the elimination of some systemic structures, and here lies the stake of defamiliarization that Ruxandra Cesereanu unveils using the concepts of specialized literature. The author creates a mosaic composed of exegetes' definitions, pointing out that the fantasy spectrum incorporates an extension of the human psyche, a favorable context for overcoming negative, traumatic structures. The researcher demonstrates the way in which individual or collective maturation can be achieved through alternative realities. The terminus of the study lies in the argument that solidifies the way Tolkien conveys the solution of salvation through stories, as he problematizes questions of literary theory such as their origins and the resistance to narrative. For the author, the mechanisms of proximity and distance present in Tolkien's work, the reimagining of the relationship between the characters and the self, constitute the essence of the idea of enchantment. In this way, Cesereanu achieves a meta-reflection on the edge of fantasy consciousness.

Another analysis is devoted to the Japanese paradisiacal space in Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book* and how the ecstatic geography experienced by an aestheticizing eye can reframe the being in an ineffable state. The author goes beyond the Aristotelian grid of interpretation of divine contemplation, suggesting the need for sensory knowledge. In other words, the author analyzes the aesthetics of this paradise by turning to the Japanese heritage indicating a synesthetic reading key, which is corporeal up to ecstasy. Sei Shonagon's paradise is one lived and undertaken on a material, but dazzling level. Ruxandra Cesereanu inventories the synesthetic frescoes and the aesthetic principles that emerge from the exercise of looking. The taxonomy of the beautiful evokes and ensures a hierarchy of the imperial institution, focusing on the act of creation. The power and autonomy of desire seem to be synonymous with the art of gardening. At the same time, evil is not the one to blame for the desolation of a garden, but instead the absence of good is the one responsible for it. This connotation given to paradise emphasizes, on the one hand, the primacy of the will, but also submission to hierarchical structures, because beauty is also marked by a gradation of perfection. Ruxandra Cesereanu nuances the obsession for the garden of paradise by recalling the influence of space in man's relationship with the cosmos, drawing important differences in relation to the biblical

paradise. While the Japanese paradise is marked by change and modesty, the biblical paradise is marked by eternity and nudity. The author's critical approach reminds us that we are dealing with an archeology of the ecstatic female gaze in front of purity.

In the essay "The Atlas of Globalizing Fiction", Ruxandra Cesereanu examines the hexagonal structure of the Omani Cloud Atlas. The author offers a spatial track for understanding this fictional universe by developing the concept of identity matrix. The destinies of the characters are codependent on the spatiality that contains them, an opportunity for the author to give Mitchell's spatial techniques a new name. She considers the designation of "poetics of the space" to be more just than "literary mapping". Spatial transgressiveness is the tour de force that Cesereanu sees implemented in *Cloud Atlas*. Moreover, it marks the phenomenon of the globalization of fiction.

The Yerofeyev-Zinoviev-Bolaño triad brings to the fore the condition of marginality as spatiality and as a social body. The triple case study brings up the x-ray of some "space usurpers" alongside the gradations of symbolic deaths they suffer. Peripheries become centers in the case of a simulated inferno of Gogolian expression (Yerofeyev), drunkenness carries attributes of dissent, and justice is equivalent to an infernal court (Zinoviev), as utopia slides into anti-utopia in the underground of the ultimate sense of poetry (Bolaño). Ruxandra Cesereanu envisions the possibility of the existence of a single collective character. Likened to Caliban's sons, Bolaño's characters exist independently of a canon that births them.

Bolaño's postmodern baroque is interpreted as a ballad of misery in the multiple valences of the novel *The Savage Detectives*: hazard, alienation, madness. Another text that proves, in the author's opinion, the ontic turn from the edge to the center is *2666*. The author's remark about overcoming the genre is important. Precisely because of this rhizomatic project, the grotesque is revealed as a noir of plural identity quests.

Franz Werfel is an anchor figure for the Armenian resistance whose literature represents a way of enduring in the face of oppression and genocide. Ruxandra Cesereanu focuses her study on the rediscovery of the Armenian cause, arguing why the resistance on Mount Musa Dagh can be seen as a biblical rewriting of Armenian expression. In addition to the resistance mechanisms identified, the author insists on a syncretic reading, offering a mythical, psychic, and biblical reading model of the Musa Dagh Mountain.

The obsession with memory in the novel *Dora Bruder* by Patrick Modiano questions a poetics of remains and traces, where the shadow aims to reveal identity. Ruxandra Cesereanu focuses in the "Cenotaph and Memory" study on the thaumaturgical process of searching. The author even sees in the plot of the novel a psychopomp gesture to restore the ethical and ontic connection with the truth. Grafting onto already existing criticism, Cesereanu discusses the narrative function of the image. The importance of spectrality is one of capitalizing on gaps and forgetting. The author pleads for a terminological alternative regarding the hybrid genre proposed by Modiano, namely that of "documentary fiction". The gaps become testimonies, and the homage to the specter that has become a woman makes possible the subject's agency over personal history. The post-memoir exposes the great history.

The intergenerational polyphony of Ludmila Uličkaia finds its place in a study applied to two novels: *Imago* and *Iakov's Ladder*. The author's intention is to demonstrate Uličkaia's stylistic and architectural kinship with Solzhenitsyn. The author claims that the fictional approach can lead to the revisiting of history and indicates how Uličkaia investigates the myth of truth as ages repeating themselves in other forms. The Russian

Gulag is multi-faceted, and Cesereanu aims to decipher its variations. The traumatic course from one generation to another is carefully monitored in both works, where the Gulag represents the weight of this legacy.

Posthuman binoculars follow the reality-unreality binomial and the mutations brought about by the violation or manipulation of possibilities. Hybridity is the new eschatological ambition present in *Lanark* and *Unthank* in which the anthropocentric profile is fractured, and bioethics is what needs to be legitimized. The author wonders what type of species is proposed within the vertebrate-liquefied pitch. Cesereanu problematizes a rather a-human equation. The author also studies "the ontological alterity" and "the alterity of the opposite" through a posthuman lens, in the works of Will Self and of Marie Darrieussecq respectively, with metamorphosis as the common denominator. The author notes that a subject reframed towards fragmentation is needed, and this implies a constant revisiting of the imaginary. The question that Cesereanu raises is related to the possibility of overcoming a canonical pattern. How much are we willing to dialogize with a radical otherness? Is communion still possible in the face of differences? The author maps for us a psycho-somatic Eden adapted to the paradise of transsexuality. Ruxandra Cesereanu sees in postmodernity new rites of initiation in conquering decentrality. If *Cock and Bull* present an Adamic couple outside of codependency, where the being is self-sufficient through radically assumed androgyny, *A Novel of Lust and Transformation* speaks of a decay assumed with a self-ironic narrative skepticism. Extreme somatization leads to the exclusive living of the primary needs represented by the non-human. Living fully in otherness, as Ruxandra Cesereanu suggests, involves a revolution of cognitive and ontic schemas. The definitive metamorphosis of the characters could be understood on an epistemic level. It is not the protagonists who have to return to the original state, but the society that has to contain them, alongside itself, in its change.

The pulverized nomadism of Andrei Codrescu is analyzed in the last part of the section. The author analyzes the profile of the anarchetypal poet in the context of the relocation of the spirit of the avant-garde. The crisis of the posthuman subject leads Codrescu to embrace the dispersion of a quantum logic that recomposes from fragments. The exile, the avant-garde, the hipster, the anti-systemic mentor are included in Andrei Codrescu. Ruxandra Cesereanu analyzes a series of essays and novels by the writer in the middle of which anarchy is a primordial condition for liberation from cyberutopia. The author concludes the ludic-anarchic profile by reminding that Codrescu's work militates against dissolving into a simulacrum.

The cinematographic addendum apotheotically concludes the volume of predominantly literary studies, offering an exceptionally cryptic exercise in revisiting the inflections of nostalgia in Andrei Tarkovski (*Nostalgia*) and Lars von Trier (*Melancholia*). The analysis of the films represents a trans- and intermedial study in relation to the history of images and the cultural and philosophical prerogative present in the directorial choices of the two. Ruxandra Cesereanu offers a lucid and multifaceted meditation on the origin of this imaginary of nostalgia in which the history of ideas seems to communicate actively and reactively with the history of art.

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