

THE JOURNEY IN POSTMODERN NARRATIVE WORLDS

summary

The doctoral thesis *The journey in postmodern narrative worlds* aims from the very title to set its research area, the investigation of the *topos of journey* in the context of Romanian postmodern prose. The need to investigate the cultural behaviour of *homo viator* is derived from an intrinsic need to discover the purpose of existence in its consubstantial dynamicity.

The innovative character of the thesis resides in the approach of postmodern prose from the thematic perspective of the esthetical category represented by the journey, in association with the study of alterity, identity and fragmentariness as a mode of being.

Structured on six chapters: I. The postmodernism, II. The Symbology of the road, III. Travellers and journeys from tradition to postmodernism, IV. The journeys of Romanian writers, V. Reading perspectives, VI. The fragmentariness as a mode of being in postmodernism, the present study contains ideas, analyses and interpretations in a cultural dialogue moderated by the voice of an introspective reader, who is aware of his/her privileged status and, at the same time, conscious about the postmodernist aesthetic, which moves the accent from *intentio auctoris* to *intentio lectoris* (in the words of Umberto Eco).

This research is constructed by means of a methodological stratification, imposed by the hybrid substance of the literary movement, which extends its area towards related domains; by using the cultural study in the hermeneutic tradition and the thematic analysis, by accessing the psychoanalytical and sociological critique, we will attempt to draw up the reference points of the journey-related imagery as it results in the works selected based on a subjective criterion.

Our endeavour is especially focused on mapping the theoretical reference points incorporated in postmodernism, on the constitution of the latter as a variable phenomenon, impossible to be defined by employing the previous esthetical paradigms. The heated conflict between foreign and Romanian theoreticians on this subject demonstrates the chameleonic nucleus of postmodern prose, which cannot be limited to the rigidity of such restraining formulas because the postmodern texts are living, neotenous organisms which, as Dali's painting, "The Persistence of Memory", defy the moral perceptions of reality, retracing from within specific aesthetic coordinates. Thus, the sense of the hermeneutic process is reversed, so the postmodern text can be investigated by going from the interior towards the exterior,

from the tesseract world towards the real world, towards the critical orientation, for which the interpretation directions are tolerated only for orientation purposes.

Chapter II, The symbology of the road, divided into four subchapters, captures the symbolic hypostases (terrestrial and aquatic), covered by the road motif, as well as the types of roads with specific significations, as they have been inventoried in the specialised literature.

The following chapter, chapter III, *Travellers and journeys from tradition to postmodernism*, is dedicated to a portrait-like investigation of the travellers and of the specificity of the journeys undertaken by them, as it reflects in the Romanian works of 19th century. The postmodernism reuses most types of travellers and journeys, but in a reinterpreted form; they maintain a few features, but they also acquire new attributes or even new types appear: *the wanderer* from the works of Daniel Vighi, *the nihilist* of Mircea Cărtărescu, the traveller between two worlds/the undecided/the rootless from *Cinci nori colorați pe cerul de răsărit* (*Five coloured clouds on the oriental sky*). The *alienated* from Mircea Nedelciu's short prose, the *unsuccessful traveller* (the uninitiated who sets off on a journey that ends up in failure) from Cărtărescu's *Levantul* (*The Levant*), *the inner traveller* from the novel *Exuvii* (*Exuviae*), the *exiled/self-exiled* from Herta Müller's prose represent the new portraits of travellers encountered in the texts analysed in this thesis.

Chapter IV, *The journeys of Romanian writers*, highlights the indissoluble relationship between the vocational writer and the art of travel; for the writer, the voyage becomes a creation laboratory, a fruitful source that constitutes the sprouting nucleus of the stylistic specificity of each author.

If the first four chapters contextualise the postmodernism and analyses comparatively the motifs related to the topos of the journey, chapter V represents the nucleus of our research, revealing the original character of the thesis through interpretive readings applied on several writers (Alexandru Vlad, Mircea Cărtărescu, Mircea Nedelciu, Simona Popescu, Doina Ruști, Florina Ilis, Herta Müller, Daniel Vighi) considered to be representative for providing an overview on the metamorphoses of the journey topos, emerged after the reconstruction and redefinition phenomenon triggered by postmodernism. These *potential, disloyal readings*, oriented towards the journey imagery are supported by the consulted critique studies, in a permanent dialogue.

The first subchapter focuses on the prose writer Alexandru Vlad. The absence of roads becomes a constant element for the materialisation of the journey theme in the novel *Ploile amare* (*Sour rains*), the characters' labyrinthine wanderings in the isolated topos that becomes

the village surrounded by waters are *pseudo-journeys* in the dark universe of the *haunting decade*, the deterioration of the foundation of a traditional world erected on deep roots is gradually followed, the deceitful mud that remains in the underground, replacing forever the once solid ground.

Subchapter 5.1.2., *The road to the South Pole of short prose*, captures another postmodern journey hypostasis, *the journey as a temptation of limits*. The story *Drumul spre Polul Sud* (*The road to the South Pole*), artistically deals with the purposeless journey, a journey that knocks at the gates of Thanatos. The journey theme is overlapped in the text with the theme of the creative act, the existence of the author's alter-ego character is governed in most of the texts by the principle of discovering an authentic mode of expression. *The self-exile seduction*, illustrated in the short prose *Teofil*, concocts from the conversation of the two artists a new journey type, *the journey as a flight from artistic failure*. The briefly analysed travel journal, *Atena*, *Atena* (1994), describes the coordinates of a "refuge-journey" from the period of a closed-border Romania.

Another prose writer that we considered representative for illustrating a *postmodern homo viator* is Mircea Cărtărescu, who becomes the main subject of the subchapter II. *The oneiric-fantastic journeys on the streets of reality specific to Cărtărescu* reveal the author's personal method of approaching the journey-related imagery.

The novel *Orbitor* (*Blinding*) becomes the space for carrying out atypical journeys, the glide from one type of journey to another is part of the narrator's discursive strategy; all these postmodern journey facets highlight the paradigm alterations of the journey imagery. Hence, the textual weaving reveals: *fascinating journeys through the fluid of memory, oneiric journeys, journeys in reverse, wanderings and roamings, journeys towards nothing, esoteric roads, journeys within one's own corporality*. *The motif of wandering, of maternal uterus and of viscera* are reused redundantly in the prose weaving in order to configure the image of a layered labyrinth, composed of fractures of reality and dreams, but also of personal corporality. In Mircea Cărtărescu's novel, the journey becomes a *meaningless path* of some spaces without clear outlines, stereotypical peregrinations in a quasi-real - quasi-virtual polymorphous universe, enclosed in personal angst and futility.

The motif of Russian dolls, of concentric waves, of the tesseract discussed by the exegetes become the new postmodern, multidimensional geography, opposed to the linearity and two-dimensionality of the preceding literature. The secured spaces of the interwar period will be replaced, as Irina Petraș notes in the paper *Oglinda și drumul* (*The mirror and the*

road). *Contemporary writers*, with atypical, unsafe spaces (streets, factories, sites). These spatial and temporal ruptures often lead the postmodern character to an autistic behaviour.

Another appreciated text of the author, *Levantul (The Levant)* brings forth a *journey towards a false initiation*, a text thoroughly imbued with parody. The road appears in *The Levant*, in a contorted way, no longer *the great road* of becoming, of discovering the fate and fulfilling it, but a series of inferior road fragments: narrow streets, tight alleys, hollows, canals. The image of this inferior, fragmented, labyrinth made of canals, alleys, hollows, cellars, caverns, descending stairs is the reflection of the characters' obsessions and disorientation that populate this world that lacks meaning and perspective.

The journey to worlds and into worlds has, for this author with a vivid and proteic language, a multiple signification, it is first a reflection of a degraded image of the every-day life that swarms on inferior roads, just as the human being drags its own ancestral consciousness, and on the other hand, it repositions the narrative occurrences in the complex universe of the interpretive process, therefore the initiation is possible only at meta-textual level.

The third prominent name from our list of exegetic readings is Mircea Nedelciu, subchapter 5.3. *Hypostases of traversing.in Mircea Nedelciu's short prose* follows the spatial dimensions of the topos of journey.

The author's short prose includes a variety of journey and traveller hypostases in the mundane everyday life, thus demonstrating Nedelciu's tendency to capture the human becoming in the context of the fulminating transformations of the present. The subchapter analyses, from the journey perspective, 12 short proses, which we considered to be the most evocative in this sense. This way, *free journeys, denial journeys, tourist visits, crossing and disconnecting from the native space, and exiles* become the travel options that constitute the Nedelcian imagery.

The traveller from the industrial and standardised world of the communist regime can no longer obtain the initiation by following the chosen path, this way s/he becomes only a passenger who runs chaotically on pre-set routes in the always failed attempt of self-discovery or of finding the meaning of existence.

An innovative female prose writer occupies the central place in the subchapter 5.4. Doina Ruști complements the pessimist postmodern prose landscape (category that also includes the other prose writers we approached in this research) by imposing a more optimistic side of postmodernism. The escape into historiographical metafiction allows the author to play with the conventions of the universe built in such a way to evade the influence

of the fragmentation of absolute values. Thus, the journeys she proposes in the two texts that we submitted to critical reading, *Zogru* and *Manuscrisul fanariot* (*The Phanariot Manuscript*), are *journeys in the search of eros* and of fulfilment through love.

Zogru must be read as an initiation novel, through the Eros - Thanatos - journey triad. *Manuscrisul fanariot*, the second text of the female prose writer Doina Ruști describes a journey as a flight towards redeeming/losing the freedom.

Florina Ilis becomes the pretext of the hermeneutic dialogue from the fifth subchapter, investigating hypostases of certain contemporary travellers in multiple dimensions of existence.

Cruciada copiilor (*Children's crusade*) exploits the journey theme by means of the pluri-perspective postmodern discourse, featuring various interpretation angles that this topos, the all-time favourite of prose writers, can develop. The relaxation journey from the beginning of the novel will assume several roles along the text, according to the willingness of the travellers to understand the crusade phenomenon, for some of them, it remains at the initial level of perception, for others, the ones who can perceive the unseen face of the world, it becomes a journey of initiation in the sacredness universe and in the enigmas of the spirit. We believe that the object of this novel is this very liberty of personal choice in the face of everyday encounters and events.

The re-reading of the novel from the journey topos point of view reveals several types of multidimensional journeys according to the comprehension and initiation level of each traveller from the vacation train: *the journey as an opportunity to change the perception over reality, the ancestral journey, the journey in the recesses of guilt, the journey as an erotic initiation, pilgrimage for fulfilling a sacred vision, the escape from the concrete reality into the virtual universe, the mission type journey, the journey through drugs, the journey toward the children's world, a journey for redeeming the power, the road to spiritual ascension, fictional roads.*

Our research continues with a subchapter that weaves a thematic parallelism between the aforementioned female prose writer and Herta Müller. Both of them, in their novels: *Cinci nori colorați pe cerul de răsărit* (*Five coloured clouds on the oriental sky*) and *Călătorie într-un picior* (*Journey on one leg*) bring into focus protagonists in the role of *travellers between two worlds*.

In the following subchapter of our thesis, Simona Popescu writes her own *trips inside the flesh* (Gh. Crăciun), in the pages of the novel *Exuvii* (*Exuviae*). The journey topos is contoured in this *matrioshka-novel*, in what concerns both the identity and the emotional and

textual levels, the protagonist reaches the end of the initiation journey following a concentric inner path. She becomes her own guide and mentor, pursuing successively the *exuvial* transformations on different ages of transition. The relation with the alterity is minimal, the models chased in childhood are replaced in the teenage period with the retreat to the caverns of books and spirit.

A short exegetic analysis of the poem *Efeb cu cypridium* (*Ephebos with cypridium*), realised by Ion Pop seems to catch the essence of the novel *Exuvii*: „rafinată odă închinată unei făpturi androgine, răătăcite frumos în lumea prozaică și brutală” (*refined ode dedicated to an androgynous being, beautifully lost in the prosaic and brutal world*)¹.

The last subchapter of the fifth chapter reveals the incarnation of the journey in the grey mundane universe of the prose writer, Daniel Vighi. From the short prose volume, *Povestiri cu Strada Depozitului* (*Tales of the Warehouse Street*), to the novel *Istoria din cutia de pantofi* (*The history from the shoesbox*), an insipid urban space, lacking any sort of sentimental emanation is depicted. The journeys from the urban grey area take several forms: *journeys in dreams as a form of escaping from the mundane, walks between two shifts, going out to the cinema or cafeteria, excursions without spiritual satisfaction*.

The main street appears frequently in stories, together with *concrete fences, iron gates, black fences*, empty streets or, on the contrary, overpopulated streets, delineating a *fractured universe*, portioned into sectors and departments, where every individual has his work tasks assigned, which s/he executes with resignation, without a trace of revolt. The characters' life seems willingly suspended, limited to mechanical gestures that imitate the robotic movements of the social machinery. *The characters' commute* becomes a metaphor for monotonous, repetitive life, the workers (spiritually mutilated executors) being nothing more than batch production of the great social machine.

Istoria din cutia de pantofi, signed by Daniel Vighi, highlights the *eternal wanderer, lost in paper worlds*. The centre of the work becomes the *wandering journey* of Ahasverus, who became a bookish character, the embodiment of the writer in search of personal revelations.

The last chapter of our research has a suggestive title: *VI. Fragmentariness as a way of being in postmodernism*. The postmodernists' journeys can no longer delve into those *terrae incognitae* that the great explorers like Columbus used to discover, today's unknown can be found only in the inner caverns, for those who have the courage to venture in their

¹ Ion Pop, *art. cit.*, p. 6.

exploration. The postmodern traveller is an inner Don Quixote of his time, who fights his own chimeras.

Homo contemporaneus, assaulted by the civilisation of image and loud music, feels the *historical exhaustion* that Spengler talked about and takes refuge in the *weak thinking* predicted by Vattimo, drifting away from the absolute truths; everything is an opinion, the postmodern era becomes the era of post-truth, of post-humanism. All this process, excruciating for superior consciences, gives birth to a society under destruction, in continuous deconstruction, whose faithful mirror is the postmodern fragmented text. This *dripping of shadows* (Ion Pop) no longer allows the access to truth, except for short moments of revelation for those exceptional, introspective travellers, who are chosen people and can regain and understand these knowledge residues.

By investigating the way in which this theme, fundamental for the preceding literary tradition, relates to the new paradigms, we notice the loss of the main functionality of the journey as an effective passing through narrative worlds with the purpose of initiating the hero in the mysteries of knowledge and life, in the favour of some *fragmented micro-journeys*, most often interior or situated in a different temporal dimension.

The great myth of the journey died in its basic form; in postmodernism, it was segmented as the giant Imyr from the Nordic mythology, and from the shattered fragments of his body, customised, degraded and parodied forms were constituted; walks, crossings, aimless journeys, labyrinthine journeys, sequential, retrospective journeys, wanderings, roamings, inner journeys (on the vertical axis), oneiric journeys, failed initiation journeys, temporal journeys. The pulverisation of the discourse, of the multiform universe and of human's self-image leads to the fragmentation of the great paradigms, *the postmodern wears the mask of a failed traveller, under which the searches of an introspect are simmering.*