

Habilitation Thesis

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**Transdisciplinary Approaches to Literature and
Reading:
Modernist, Postmodernist, Postcolonial and
Transcultural Literature; from Reading Scrolls to E-
Reading and Bibliotherapy**

IAȘI

2020

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Summary

One finds exhilarating joy in revisiting one's own past. Nothing indeed prevents the academic past from being less colourful and invigorating than the other forms of one's own history. I am now embarking on this journey along its never forgotten paths, putting all its pieces together, and giving the whole what Mircea Eliade called in *Ordeal by Labyrinth* an "orientatio":

As a rule, one lives one's life in fragments. One day, in Chicago, passing by the Oriental Institute, I felt the continuity of this stretch of time which begins with my adolescence and continues with India, London, and all the rest. It is an encouraging experience: you feel you haven't wasted your time. Everything connects - even the intervals I had deemed immaterial, like, for instance, my military duty, which I'd forgotten; everything connects, and all of a sudden we realize we've been led by some purpose – an *orientatio*. (158)¹

This habilitation thesis, which is a revisitation governed by a sense of *orientatio*, maps out my main areas of research in the last twenty years or so.

By way of introduction I look at the relation between literary creation and its criticism and theory, starting from the premise that literature resists its own reflection in the mirror of theory. This has always been my concern, triggered by an awareness of two main aspects. As a reader, literature is for me emotional in the first place, and therefore it stirs emotional responses to start with. This is why I readily embraced Harold Bloom's approach in his book *How to Read and Why* when he says that his protagonist in the story of reading is the "solitary" reader because "the way we read now, when we are alone with ourselves, retains considerable continuity with the past, however it is performed in the academies" (21). Of course, this is an urgent and rather tough reminder of my everyday professional reality: much as I have a passion for reading for pleasure, I teach literature on what my field claims to be scientific bases, I use certain methods and I assess the students' interpretive performances. In other words, my superposed self reads

¹ My translation

in a context that institutionalizes literature, while at the same time literature is for me, as I know it is for most writers and readers, a space of freedom from many points of view.

Therefore, the question: does literature resist theory and institutionalization? To probe into this hypothesis I reference David Lodge's models of the relation between creation and criticism (*Consciousness and the Novel*), discussing them in conjunction with Paul de Man's approach to the same issue ("The Resistance to Theory"). I let the argument follow its own course of pros and cons, engaging the views of a series of other writers, who also reflected on their art of poetry or fiction. While showing that there are literary ages when literature was written independently of its criticism, which in fact was very little recorded in a written form until the Renaissance, I also contend that literary criticism and theory can play and have indeed played an important cultural role, and especially in the last decades they have become, as Lodge argues, "a kind of" or even "a part of" creative writing (*Consciousness and the Novel* 93). Paul de Man's view is that in fact it is not so much that literature *per se* resists theory as the fact that theory undermines itself. To complicate this issue, I draw on de Man's and Terry Eagleton's approaches to literariness (*Literary Theory*), a concept developed by the Russian formalists in their grappling with the slippery fish which is literature.

The second part of the introduction surveys the evolution of literature from myths and archetypes in relation to storytelling and reading. Drawing on Alberto Manguel's approach to reading as an essential human enterprise in his book *The History of Reading*, I discuss reading as a function almost as necessary as breathing. The first aspect of its fundamental role is its cathartic effect, which is an anticipation of a new field I am planning to research and practise, i. e. bibliotherapy. I argue that "catharsis" is relief and purification, and in performing this function, literature is not only therapeutic, i.e. a therapy of the soul, but also uplifting, which makes it an art. Taken to the extreme, the experience of reading literature is somatic, and Emily Dickinson's often quoted account of the devastatingly intense experience of reading poetry epitomizes it. This brings me to what Harold Bloom called in *How to Read and Why* "the aesthetics of pleasure" (22-23). I argue that Harold Bloom and Edward Hirsh, who describes the cathartic effects of reading poetry in *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*, meet on the grounds of this aesthetics. I conclude this second part of the introduction with a discussion of Bertrand Westphal's "literaturization" of the reality we perceive in *Geocriticism. Real and Fictional Spaces*, correlated with Martin Puchner's enthralling idea in his book *The Written World* that we inhabit a "writtern world" in the sense that our reality is shaped by the books we read. Likewise, writers write the books for which their culture creates a context.

In Part I revisit my PhD research on E. M. Forster's fiction, literary theory and criticism, whose outcome was a PhD thesis defended in September 2000 at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași. My perspective now is a vantage point which does not rehearse my ideas almost twenty years ago but rather reinterprets those ideas, which are now more nuanced after repeated reflection and a lot more readings.

Part II looks into my research of aesthetic modernism, drawing on Charles Baudelaire's definition of "modernity" in *The Painter of Modern Life*. Then it probes into modernism's connections with postmodernism, which is coincident and in its turn connected with postcolonialism and transculturalism. I argue that modernism was a radical break with a line of tradition, which makes it look cataclysmic. This hurricane of change shook the plinth of the old model and made room for an essentially iconoclastic thinking in all the spheres. The sciences and the arts followed suit. The sciences started to discard Newton's model of a homogeneous, positivist, orderly and well-balanced universe, and discovered the discontinuous, unpredictable and heterogeneous model of quantum mechanics, replicated by new finds in psychology and psychiatry. The arts, in their turn, found their underpinning aesthetics in a shift of focus from a view of the world governed by Newton's model to one based on the process of perception rather than the thing perceived. This new model was subjective and protean, or, in Baudelaire's terms, "ephemeral," "fugitive," "contingent" (*The Painter of Modern Life* 13), and therefore unstable, spatially and temporally non-linear and fragmented. Focusing on the aesthetic modernism with roots in the aesthetics of impressionism and developed by Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Joseph Conrad and Henry James, I argue that Virginia Woolf's and James Joyce's stream of consciousness novels, D. H. Lawrence's novels of sensibility and Aldous Huxley's musicalized fiction were achievements of experiment. My survey of aesthetic modernism ends with a few notes on Baudelaire's *flâneur*,² an emblematic figure of modernism, who remakes the city in his own imagination.

My account of postmodernism in Part II largely draws on my approach to postmodernism's ambiguous relation to modernism and to some of its major aspects illustrated with texts written by hyphenated, multicultural or border-culture writers in my book *PoMo Mosaics* prefaced by Professor Thomas B. Byers. I contend that postmodernism "harks back to that wing of modern thought, Nietzsche in particular, that emphasizes the deep chaos of modern

² See Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*. Phaidon Press. 1964, and Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.

life and its intractability before rational thought” (*PoMo Mosaics* 25). However, I also look at postmodernism as a reaction to a particular formula of modernism known as high modernism. As Harvey shows, postmodernism embraces the features of modernity that formed one “half of art” in Baudelaire’s terms (*The Painter of Modern Life* 13), without transcending them in a desire for synthesis, as the modernists Forster, Woolf, Joyce, and Huxley did. In Harvey’s account, postmodernism “swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is” (*The Condition of Postmodernity* 44). I end the survey of postmodernism, which references Professor Byers’s own reflections on my reflections in the preface to my book, with reminiscing afterthoughts and a coda, where I discuss the dialogue in which I engaged the text of the *Mosaics* with a series of pictures, most of which taken during my six week stay in Louisville in 2001.

Part III is a synthesis of my postdoctoral research carried out between 2010 and 2013. There I tackle Salman Rushdie’s writing in terms of Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity (*Liquid Modernity*), and I argue that what Rushdie did was to give postmodernism a twist through postcolonial satire, conceiving characters which are, like himself, “translated men,” (*Imaginary Homelands* 17) who inhabit a space of cultural and linguistic translation between East and West.

Part IV looks into Rushdie’s condition, like all the British Indian writers’ for that matter, of having “been borne across the world,” and by that “liminality” (in Bhaba’s terms)³ being and writing across spaces (East and West) as “translated men” (*Imaginary Homelands* 17). I argue that this condition is both cultural and linguistic, and it may be considered an epitome of our “global soul.”⁴ During my three month postdoctoral research at the Centre of Inter-American Studies of Karl Franzens University of Graz (March-May 2012) I wrote a series of studies in which I put Rushdie in crossing contexts, highlighting the many facets of his postmodernist, postcolonial, transcultural writing. A collection of those studies came out in book form under the title *Rushdie’s Cross-Pollinations* published by Junimea Press in 2013.

Part V is preceded by an Intermezzo, an analysis of Rushdie’s American novel *Fury* set in New York, a city which, like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, is redolent of an atmosphere of glamour and decadence, a *Zeitgeist* which seems to have visited the Big Apple

³ See *The Location of Culture*. Routledge. 1994.

⁴ The syntagm was inspired by a novel by Pico Iyer: *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home*, Vintage, 2001.

in the Roaring Twenties, and then some eighty years later, in the year 2000, when Rushdie wrote his *Fury*. This is an approach to New York as a "New Rome," i. e. a place of opulence and waste as viewed by two writers, the American F. Scott Fitzgerald and the migrant Salman Rushdie. The New York of the Jazz Age in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* informed Rushdie's New York of the late 20th century in *Fury*. Both writers wished to capture a waning glamour of the city and its Babylonian archetypal image of the decadent city of all times. The intermezzo is a corridor joining the parts.

The intermezzo which connects parts IV and V of this thesis follows a turn my research took in 2014 from modernism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, transculturalism, with a focus on the city as a setting for their new polymorphic cultures and aesthetics, to reading, and especially digital reading, and the space it creates. This new interest, occasioned by my participation in the COST Action IS1404 E-READ: Evolution of Reading in the Age of Digitisation between 2014 and 2018, put the whole of my research into a new perspective. Indeed, it added horizon not in the sense of limit but as another, much broader, intersection of all the layers I had explored before. Working for four years with specialists in reading, computational linguistics, neuro humanities, etc., I delved into the complexity of reading as an age-old cultural activity and into the challenges offered by the new reading devices and technologies.

Part V is a survey of reading from scrolls to reading on screens, which is a return to scrolling. Drawing on Martin Puchner's idea in *The Written World* that the noosphere we inhabit has been created and shaped in time and across continents by stories, first oral and then written, I argue that reading is a fundamental activity which defines the human species. Reading, in its close connection with writing, is a major aspect of our cultural DNA, and humanity would not be what we know it to be today without it. In the study "On Emerson's Dream of Eating the World" (2018) I used Ralph Waldo Emerson's metaphor of eating the world,⁵ which has taken the shape of an apple in a dream, to suggest that we actually inhabit a literaturized world or even universe. For hundreds of years, until very recently, that world has been and it continues to be written on paper. Does reading on screens alter our haptic

⁵ I found an account of this dream in Edward Hirsch's book *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*. Harcourt. 1999. The only source of the quote is an indication of the author's name (Ralph Waldo Emerson). The quote is used as the books' prefatory motto, with no page number: "I dreamed that I floated at will in the great Ether, and I saw this world floating also not far off, but diminished to the size of an apple. Then an angel took it in his hand and brought it to me and said, 'This must thou eat.' And I ate the world." My colleague Radu Andriescu and I translated this book, which was published by Alexandru Ioan Cuza University Press in 2015.

engagement with the texts we are used to reading on paper? Are we losing the pleasure of reading books through all our senses (touch, smell, even taste), replacing it with reading for information? Are we losing our sense of direction we are accustomed to when we hold a book in our hands, making it do with the loss for the sake of the e-reader's convenient portability? These are some questions I have been raising in the study "Reading in the Digital Age" (2016), a sequel to "On Books and Reading" (2015). "Reading Books Differently" (2018), another study in this series, based on a talk Professor Dan Cristea and I gave at a COST Action conference in Vilnius in 2017, reiterates the idea that we step into the picture books have already created for us, and it describes an application we are planning to develop in the near future. The roots of this application are in the "Mapping Books" project,⁶ which pushes the interactivity with the book content well beyond the usual hypertext links: a mapped book can contextualise instantaneous positions of the user while reading, as well as her/his personality and cultural preferences, which sounds like a reasonable compensation for all the possible downsides of digital reading.

Parts VI and VII outline the evolution and plans of my future career development in the light of the research I carried out, looking at the compelling activity of reading, and more recently e-reading. Part VII projects the development of an app for reading books differently, i. e. in this case connecting travelling with reading.

Part VIII is a terrain that remains to be explored, a field called bibliotherapy, which cuts across philology and psychology. Having set my goal on doing research on reading, and on looking into the possibilities offered by interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, the idea that reading is therapeutic presented itself to me in the form of a lecture given by Professor Philip Davis at the Vilnius conference. Professor Davis is the director of CRILS (the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society), which does "research into the effects on the human psyche of both shared group reading and the private solitary reading of serious literature."⁷ This is an axis of research I am planning to pursue in the future, ideally in collaboration with psychologists. Bibliotherapy is an overarching field that opens the academia out into a larger world, i.e. the whole of society, which would hugely benefit from this kind of academic research.

⁶ The MappingBooks project was financed by the grant PN-II-PT-PCCA-2013-4-1878 Partnership PCCA 2013.

⁷ See <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/humanities-social-sciences-health-medicine-technology/reading-literature-and-society/>

My academic engagement with the fields mentioned above has been organic, starting with a focus on modernism, triggered by my PhD research of E. M. Forster's contribution to its innovative aesthetics. The book *Impressionistic Modes and Metaphoric Structures in E. M. Forster's Fiction and Criticism*, based on my PhD thesis, was published by Junimea Press in 2001. E. M. Forster revealed himself to me as an ambivalent writer steeped in his Victorian heritage, a line of continuity which places him in a tradition to be traced back in Charlotte Brontë's and Thomas Hardy's realism, and also in Joseph Conrad, a forerunner of impressionistic modernism, which was to develop and grow into the experimental novels of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, Forster's contemporaries. While opening me to this rich and dynamic literary landscape, Forster's career as a novelist and theorist of the novel suggested an important aspect, which is actually the highlight of my research: the challenging ways in which the impressionistic modes and metaphoric structures of the early 20th century British writer's *oeuvre* interlock to form an archway of possibilities for the development of mid and late 20th century aesthetics of fiction.

This extremely significant find gave me the go-ahead to further explore the extent and the depth of the early 20th century approaches to the condition of the modern individual as a split identity, and the new aesthetics of British modernism promoted by the Bloomsbury Group. Convinced that the academic's duty is also to share ideas with a larger public, I published a few of my studies in *Cronica*. I looked into Forster's project of putting the "fragments" of a broken world together in "E. M. Forster and the Anxiety of 'Living in Fragments'" (February 1999). In "Bloomsbury – The Metaphor of Autumn and Millennium in London" (November 1999) I recorded my impressions of a visit to the Tate Galleries, where I was fortunate to linger along a temporary exhibition of Bloomsbury art (4 November 1999 – 30 January 2000), while actually writing my thesis on Forster and Bloomsbury as a grantee carrying out a six month research at Birkbeck College, University of London, under the supervision of Professor Peter Mudford. I pursued my interest in modernism both in my teaching and in my research, with a series of talks I gave at conferences, later published in volumes of proceedings: in 2003 I looked into the opposite pair of "Antagonism and Oneness in D. H. Lawrence's Fiction" (based on a talk I gave in 2001).

As a Fulbright American Studies Institute Fellow (June 22 – August 3, 2001) in Louisville, Kentucky, I discovered an interest in American postmodernism, a cultural and aesthetic paradigm which I connected with British modernism. The result of this was what I call a Trans-Atlantic international modernism, followed by a postmodernism whose epicenter

was the United States of America. In the wake of this extremely challenging experience in which I interacted with 16 other colleagues from all the continents, I wrote a book prefaced by Professor Thomas B. Byers, our mentor and guide through the mosaicked spaces of postmodernism, whom I met 18 years later in Salamanca, Spain, at a Conference. *PoMo Mosaics. Pomo City and PoMo Identities at the Crossroads*, published by Demiurg Press in 2004, is a study of the ins and outs of the troubling relationship between modernism and postmodernism, the most recurrent postmodern themes and techniques of writing, from pastiche to panopticon, from conspiracy to cyberpunk, magic realism and multiculturalism, from schizophrenia to the sublime.

In his Preface to the book, Professor Byers contends: “This is kinetic criticism, written by an intellect that is, in every sense, up to speed” (*PoMo Mosaics* 12). Inspired by the spirit of internationalism and speed with which postmodernism travels, I also wrote and published a series of articles in *Timpul* in 2002. “From Metropolis to Cyberspace” is the first article in which I clearly outlined a new approach to the city as a postmodern site of cyberculture. In a talk I gave at the Partium Christian University of Oradea, published in the volume of proceedings in 2011, I synthesized perceptions and theories of spatiality and zoning in the contemporary world, drawing on Michel Foucault’s heterotopia (“Of Other Spaces”), Brian McHale’s concept of zone (*Constructing Postmodernism*) and Marie Louise Pratt’s concept of contact-zone (*Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*), while the postcolonial theory of Edward Said (*Orientalism*), and especially Homi Bhaba’s concept of “liminality” (*The Location of Culture*) completed the picture of the contemporary perception of space as composite and indistinct, all merging into Jean Baudrillard’s “hyperreality.” “Hyperreality – An Illusion of Postmodernity?” published in *Timpul* looks into Jean Baudrillard’s concept of “hyperreality” (“Simulacra and Simulation”), a key aspect of the postmodern condition, which renders physical reality redundant, replacing it with a world of copies without origin, a map without a territory of palpable existence, whose pixel peeped digital fabrications have become the world we consume and inhabit today.

Along with the articles in *Timpul*, I gave talks on topics related to postmodernism, and its intersections with feminism and postcolonialism at the conferences organized by our English Department. “Angela Carter’s Mirror in the Reader’s Flesh,” published in the conference proceedings volume in 2000, is a feminist reading of “Flesh in the Mirror,” one of Angela Carter’s short stories in *Fireworks. Nine Profane Pieces*. Intrigued by what I discovered in postmodern feminism, I extended my research to probe into postcolonial feminism with the

study “Creole Identities in Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*,” published in *Annales Universitas Apulensis* in 2003. “The PoMo Sublime in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*,” another talk that developed into a study published in the 2005 volume of proceedings, tackles the postmodern sublime in DeLillo’s 1984 novel.

Between 2010 and 2013 I was a social and political sciences postdoctoral grantee, doing a project on Salman Rushdie’s career as a writer whose work has always been irradiated with history and politics in a manner which illustrates the butterfly effect in chaos theory. Born in Bombay, then British India, into a Kashmiri Muslim family of moderate faith, Rushdie, educated both in India and in England, typifies “the forging of a British Indian identity” through the English language, which “must, in spite of everything, be embraced” (*Imaginary Homelands* 17).

Between 2014 and 2018 I participated in the COST project E-READ, which focused my interest upon the age-old activity of reading and more recently e-reading, with all the challenges of the transfer that needs to be done from paper to screen. This focus on reading showed me the way to another field that I am keen on exploring in the future, which is bibliotherapy.

It is in the logic of any paper, and this makes no exception, to draw a conclusion. The conclusion to this thesis sums up my research activity so far and outlines its future development in more firm touches, while also giving a brief presentation of my concrete editorial activity and project participation. The last section is, of course, a list of the works cited and referenced.

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