Lucia OPREANU

TIME'S FOOLS: TEMPORAL JOURNEYS AND PERCEPTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVES

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Lucia Opreanu's *Time's Fools: Temporal Journeys and Perceptions in Contemporary Narratives* is a complex textual and cultural exploration of time, in its fluid and multidimensional aspects. Viewed as a relative and fragmentary construction, subjectively and paradoxically experienced, in infinite supply yet mysteriously running out, time is the common denominator of this riveting analysis of postmodern texts. Bringing together English, American and Canadian writers, Lucia Opreanu approaches the construct of time viewed as history/ value/ story/ memory/ personal experience, so as to create an inspired analysis of time travelers trapped in dystopian spaces, of life events which defy temporal causality and of time- keeping devices that tantalizingly fail to keep track of time.

Lucia Opreanu offers a highly original investigation of recent novels, less scrutinized by prior critical voices and unveils how Homeric myths are distilled in protean postmodern narratives, by weaving themes and symbols which narcissistically and intertextually mirror each other. The space-time chronotope is investigated in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*, Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships*, Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife*, Matt Haig's *How to Stop Time* and *The Midnight Library*, and in the movie *About Time* by Richard Curtis. The postmodern texts are systematically and creatively pursued to decipher the myriad connections among them and the way in which a text stems from others, or a discourse spills into another, in a circular and contiguous intertextuality. As such, a text is almost obsessively

pursued as written or cinematic discourse, or as novel turned into television series (*Handmaid's Tale* by M. Atwood), on its own and by comparison, in a rigorous yet highly inspiring investigation which considers mythologizing interpretations, feminist readings and New Historicist approaches.

The nine chapters, organized as intensive close reading sessions, investigate the deceptive linearity of time and space and engage critically the subgenres, motifs and narrative devices which configure the magic, fantasy and technology of time travel.

The first chapter comes in the form of a compelling discussion of time through theories of quantum physics and psychology, anthropology, philosophy and literary history. From its very first pages, the book promises to turn the difficult and at times frustrating reading of the postmodern discourse into a fascinating experience, by delivering a remarkably insightful analysis of multi-level stories, with multiple narrators trapped in temporal folds, who swing back and forth in time or migrate in intertextual spaces. As the critical voice moves gracefully between dystopian and science fiction constructions of time, the past is reconfigured as a cluster of stories and events worth remembering while the future is imagined as a nebulous amalgamation of objects-symbols.

The chapter "A brief history of views on time" traces the morphing system of ideas that consolidate visions and approaches of time. This part is an extensive description of the narrative experiments which simultaneously construct and deconstruct time: time shifts, temporal disruptions, rewinding and fast-forwarding techniques, time loops, all combining to create variegated constructions, in which time seems to dilate and contract at the same time. The critic's original voice is heard at its best in the refined analysis of different temporal constructions, which take readers through a vast array of critical sources, from Marcel Proust to Foucault and from Umberto Eco to Fredric Jameson.

The chapter "Time odysseys: an interlude about textual migration and immortality" describes time lived not as duration, but as an interval comprising heroic acts and worthy exploits. As Opreanu deconstructs the story in a text-intensive analytical investigation, she unveils the mechanism by means of which stories are reshaped and reconfigured by permuting elements of old stories and myths (as in Wolfgang Peterson's *Troy*). Whether she discusses the text as disjointed narrative or cinematic discourse, Opreanu's writing style is hypnotic, mesmerizing, with words skillfully blended to create an almost incantatory experience.

In the chapter "From time to time: Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Emily Wilson's *The Odyssey*", Lucia Opreanu connects the motivation behind writing with the creator's almost narcissistic, irrepressible wish to last in time, to survive the inexorable passing of time, to be remembered. Her insightful

analysis of M. Atwood's *The Penelopiad* recontextualizes Ulysses' wife while humanizing her, turning Penelope from a myth into a full-fledged woman, vulnerable yet strong, faithful yet strategically deceptive, motivated by grand reasons or petty ones. The silenced female voices of the Odyssey weave in M. Atwood's *Penelopiad* a different fabric, which draws its energy from the Homeric epic while simultaneously dismissing it.

In the chapter "Twenty Years of Solitude", Lucia Opreanu focuses on mythical elements dissimulated in details of the present time and on real-life facts reconstructed in mythical times. In Natalie Heynes's *A Thousand Ships*, she examines narrative strategies by means of which the "official" myth is challenged, canonical interpretations are revisited and prejudiced cultural (mis)representations of women are denounced. Hidden in plain sight or painfully emerging out of broken artefacts or fragments of long-lost texts, Homer's silenced female protagonists undertake an exceptional journey, in which classical literature becomes meaningful to contemporary readers, who are also given a unique insight into the circular nature of time.

In the chapter "World enough and time: Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife*", Lucia Opreanu reflects on the subtle and overt implications of time disruption and place dislocation and elaborates on impossible or out-of-sync romances, marital frustrations and domestic havoc. Henry's existence defies the coherent chronotropic frame of the adventure novel, as he jumps back and forth in time, suspended between sites of remembering and forgetting. The character is followed across a large spectrum of postmodern texts (Henry as Homeric male character who is, in turn, a wanderer, a king, a beggar, a father, a son, a leader and a thief). Out of the many relationships that Henry desperately hopes to have, the one with different versions of himself is the most meaningful.

In "The final lesson: Richard Curtis's *About Time*", Opreanu's pursuit of cultural symbols across multiple texts and media correlates with her painstaking propensity to follow the subtext, the seemingly insignificant, the apparently inconspicuous detail, yet solely able to offer insightful revelations.

The chapter dedicated to Margaret Atwood's novels (*The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*) focuses on characters who weave themselves in the interstices of different cultural sources. Opreanu unveils Atwood's satire of patriarchal ideology and religious extremism of the Reagan era, which takes place in Gillead, a dystopian space created by time reversal experiments and ruled by a theocratic fundamentalist. Pursuing the intersection of the aesthetic and the political, the book analyzes the underlying interplay of power and victimhood, of oppression and resistance within a totalitarian regime and patriarchal society. Opreanu's painstaking investigation of postmodernist narrative strategies and feminist imagery is doubled by her interest in exploring

particular details, which lend themselves to significance and semantic connections, while at the same time conveying the inexpressible or the elusive.

The last two chapters are dedicated to Matt Haig's novels, *How to Stop Time* and *The Midnight Library*. The characters move across historical paradigms as they seek knowledge, love or themselves, by doing impressive somersaults in time, from the Paleolithic to the Holocaust, from the French Revolution to the Hippie decade. Chasing their alter-egos over space and time, they are thrust into unfamiliar chronotopes and in the process, they evaluate and re-evaluate the elusive nature of virtues, principles and values as inscribed in personal and collective histories. The lesson to be learnt is rather grim: even if one's life span were indefinitely prolonged, man would eventually run out of the cognitive and emotional resources in the act of living. Mental exhaustion makes eternity both untenable and unsustainable. Yet, there is hope, as throughout one's existence, man acquires not only the ability to reflect on grand historical and political events, on fate and mankind, but also enough wisdom to realize that it is the small gestures that make life worth living. Readers also learn, as Nora Seed does in Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library*, the novel chosen by Lucia Opreanu to end her book, that death is not the end of time. There are many, numberless possibilities of writing us into immortality or of inscribing ourselves into existence via texts.

A refined voice of breadth and vision, with proven skills in describing ideas and strategies of the postmodern discourse, Lucia Opreanu is a critic of unmatched critical finesse, who alternates and combines masterful control of critical strategy with her own playful style to make sense of textual quirks and quips. Wit and academic rigour combine to create a profound and intriguing book, an indispensable resource for scholars of postmodern literature and book lovers alike.

Works Cited

Opreanu, Lucia. *Time's Fools: Temporal Journeys and Perceptions in Contemporary Narratives*. Constanta: Ovidius University Press, 2021.

BIONOTE

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