



Anca PEIU

SOPHISTICATED LADIES IN LIFE AND LITERATURE: SELECTIVE PORTRAITS

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In her latest book, Anca Peiu, Associate Professor of American and English Literature of the 19th and 20th centuries at the University of Bucharest, outlines the (literary) portraits of some of the most appreciated female personalities of the *fin de siècle*, as well as contemporary Anglo-American literature and culture, offering a bird's eye view of her *sophisticated*(ly chosen) *ladies*, whilst equally dedicating minute attention to each of their distinctive stylistic repertoires. Her collection, *Sophisticated Ladies in Life and Literature: Selective Portraits* (2022), consists of 21 short, yet concentrated essays, which, although previously published, had been revised and adapted, in order to place greater emphasis on the women evoked, be they writers, poets, scholars, translators, visual artists, anthropologists, socialites, or even a blend of those at once. Through her carefully-chosen vocabulary and direct(ive) *feminine irony*, Peiu proves to be a distinguished lady scholar herself, which is, above all, reflected through the keen thematic fidelity of her work.

The common denominator between these *portraits* is, in Peiu's own words, "the best meaning of *feminism*," understood as "above all, respectable *hard work* and *genuine talent* for a particular domain of activity, in which someone specialises after numerous years of devoted endeavour." (X) Attributes such as

hard-working and *genuinely talented* are defining when it comes to Peiu's distinctly picked Anglophone feminine personalities, amongst whom I shall mention several writers (Anne Brontë, Virginia Woolf, Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton, Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald, Alice Munro, Angela Carter, and Yaa Gyasi), scholars (Katherine Verdery, Mihaela Mudure, and Amelia Precup), and film directors/actors (Luiza Pârvu, and Olimpia Melinte, respectively). The recognition received by these women is a result of consistent *professionalism* and prowess in their work/study field, thus reinforcing their feminine, as well as feminist iconicity.

Anca Peiu does not come forth as a feminist; however, it is important to acknowledge the type of feminism she alludes to throughout her volume, so as to gain valuable insight into her analysis. Provided her firm assertions, according to which these (literary) women's professional accomplishments weigh more than "just some (would-be) ideological small-talk" (X), on a par with a set of (inter)personal and artistic *feminine* values that set them apart from their male counterparts, Peiu purposely departs from the *superficial* value of "noisy feminist activism" (177), in pursuit of advocating for a diligent, merit-based, yet self-contained feminism, reminiscent of, but not limited to, (neo)liberal values – a kind of *post-feminism*, so to speak.

Considering the interplay between 'feminine' and 'feminist,' one must acknowledge the melange of subtlety and nuance Anca Peiu balances so wittily. Her collection of essays, much like her clued-in title, constitutes a polyphony – both in a Bakhtinian and in a literal sense – in and of itself, whose prevailing statement is feminine self-expression. In the case of Peiu's literary analyses, the author's study of narrative devices centres around the aesthetic value of these protagonists' discourse, to which the ideological value comes in second. Thus, verisimilitude is much more palatable in Anne Brontë's realistic novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), than in her older sister's *Jane Eyre* (1847), for example, owing to her dual narrative, which consequently achieves Anne's heartfelt purpose of serving justice to her female characters, and, by extension, to women released from abusive relationships. Another outstanding novel in which narrative devices allow for a rather relatable, empathetic reception of the central character's struggles is Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). The "tension" linking the fleeting stamp of time and the (often) confusing stamp of memory is heightened by the complementary use of analepsis and prolepsis (55). The result

is a space that is “neither memory, nor dream, yet something *in-between*” (66), levelled through the stream-of-consciousness technique by the spontaneous interplay linking Clarissa’s melancholy and self-irony, when it comes to answering the dilemmas of “this thing ... called life” (Woolf 185, quoted by Peiu, 56).

At the other end of her analytical spectrum, Peiu acquaints us with deliberately unreliable narrators, as carefully observed in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Alasdair Gray’s *Poor Things* (1993). Following her “*professional doubter*” (216) instinct, and relying on Linda Hutcheon’s theoretical insights into narcissistic fiction, the author considers applying *unmasking* as a narrative strategy, with a view to answering Carter’s impenetrable question (suggested through Fevvers’ catchphrase) “Is she fact or is she fiction?” (Carter 3, quoted by Peiu, 213), whose ambiguity is left unaddressed even by God(win) himself: “But you need not believe this if it disturbs you.” (Gray 41-42, quoted by Peiu, 219)

Anca Peiu’s predilection for narrative complexity (as reflected in either fiction, non-fiction, or visual arts) is equally supported by a thoughtfully-carried analysis of female (character) tropes. Therefore, the reader encounters multiple instances of womanhood, such as: the (a)typical Victorian woman (Anne Brontë in opposition with her sisters), the English socialite unfazed by her mortality (Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway), the American post-ironic flapper queen (Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald), the “failed [grand]mother” (Eudora Welty’s [grand]mother figure ‘Phoenix’ Jackson, Wharton’s Mrs Hopewell, as well as Chatty Lovell, Munro’s Juliet) and the “disastrous daughter” (147) (O’Connor’s Joy/Hulga, Munroe’s Corrie, as well as Penelope), ladies as strangers (Chopin’s Edna and Wharton’s Ellen, Gyasi’s Esi), the *madwoman* (Gilman’s anonymous protagonist, or Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald), the unladylike (Southern) belle (Scarlett O’Hara), the mock-heroic performer (Angela Carter’s Fevvers, juxtaposed by Alasdair Gray’s Bella Baxter), etc. All these (literary) women are brought together by their collective experiences of discrimination, social withdrawal, *horror*, (*hurt*) *hubris* and *humility*, sublimated into literary and cultural artifacts (131). Subsequently, they come to embody the anti-heroine attribute, in their (extra)diegetic attempts at challenging *what-the-people-say*-isms, obedience, and confinement. Nevertheless, the aforementioned *challenge* posed by these anti-heroines would not have been

possible, had it not been for the use of proper literary instruments, amongst which irony, bitter humour, and self-reflexivity prevail.

The previously-referenced instruments are twice as relevant when discussing translation. According to Peiu, inasmuch as language opens the door to alternative understandings of topics conventionally deemed taboo, it can also estrange people from reaching a common ground. An example of the latter is the author's close-to-home commentary on Katherine Verdery's *My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File* (2018), a socio-anthropologic analysis of mass surveillance in Communist Romania, filtered through an Orwellian lens, for comparative purposes. Verdery's personal account of being a young scholar whose object of research becomes an act of surveillance itself (37) strikes us as purely ironic at first. However, her alienation, heightened by visible linguistic differences, a diffuse sense of the self, a paralysing anxiety of not getting infected with the *securist*¹ virus, respectively, constituted the daily horrific uneasiness of millions of Romanians under the iron fist of Ceaușescu's dictatorial regime. Yet, Katherine Verdery's experience is, undoubtedly, empowering, given her self-composure and -determination to conclude her research, despite the constant, overbearing monitoring of Romanian citizens by the secret services, as well as her evident homesickness.

To conclude on a pensive note, the restorative power of translation as an incentive in the direction of piquing the (Romanian) readers' curiosity towards "a sense of timing" (25) and "belonging" (27), is also achieved when two works such as Rodica Marian's *Poems/Poeme* (2021) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) respectively, are placed in the hands of Mihaela Mudure and Amelia Precup. When discussing Mudure's translation of Rodica Marian's poems, Anca Peiu suggests the negotiation of a self-referential poetic language that defies "conventional linguistic frontiers." (24) Rodica Marian and Mihaela Mudure's *Poems* propose an exercise in "solitary selfhood" (25), a state of being experienced mainly (although not exclusively) by polyglots and globetrotters alike. Much as Peiu implies, relying on Ralph Waldo Emerson, there is no escape from one's sadness, wherever they go, and neither can one escape their mother tongue/land (28-29), for their roots, irrespective of how widely spread, will

¹ *Securist*, from *Securitate* (i. e. The Romanian Security Service), refers to (a member of) the secret police organisation of the Socialist Republic of Romania.

forever be reminiscent of one's home. The fact that Rodica Marian, "a poet of the mind" (25), to use Anca Peiu's words, is made accessible to an English-speaking public, courtesy of Mihaela Mudure, a scholar so anchored in thought and reality, allows for an up close and personal translating experience, which reinforces the confessional distinctiveness of Marian's poetry.

In the same vein, Amelia Precup and Mihaela Mudure are worthy of praise when it comes to popularising Charlotte Perkins Gilman's persona and literary work to a 21st century Romanian audience, still so painfully afflicted by outdated political views and prejudiced attitudes, not too far from "their old 19th century aggressiveness" (107), sensibly articulated by Peiu herself. Due to its terminological fidelity, Precup and Mudure's translation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman² does not wander from the aesthetic value of the writer and the original text, which, to Peiu's mind, makes it such a quintessential feminist read. Besides irony and self-reflexivity, the chroma of the infamous wallpaper receives great attention. Gilman's sickly yellow (wallpaper) conceals the collective trauma of female (literary) confinement, which, if repressed enough – either by 'unsympathetic' husbands or biased male physicians – forces the female protagonist into 'neurotic behaviour.' As noted by Peiu, the allegory of the wallpaper beyond which an anguished woman incessantly tries to figure a way out does not constitute a mere stylistic technique to outline a female protagonist's state of distress; much rather, it is a clear indicator of women writers' ceaseless efforts to practice their writerly craft, in spite of the psychiatric discourse of the time dictating strongly against it. Anca Peiu concludes that Amelia Precup and Mihaela Mudure's translation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, as well as the metatext they offer, facilitate a compelling insight into the American feminine/feminist writing for the critically-trained Romanian reader.

The *open-ended* finale of Anca Peiu's *Sophisticated Ladies*, as proclaimed by the author herself, exhibits possible portraits of women writers to be included in a potentially revised edition of her book. In addition to her exceptionally-crafted representation of femininity in *Life and Literature*, the author's equitable self-evaluation and constant encouragement towards her readers to think critically, as well as profoundly, are to be appreciated, and, subsequently, absorbed, in an optimistic attempt to extend the critical reception of these (and many other)

² Both CPG herself and her work.

feminine personalities further. This conclusive remark is what unquestionably offers Anca Peiu herself the definite title of *sophisticated lady*. After all, she possesses the necessary toolkit of *feminine* stylistic devices imperative for delivering *her* (in the collective³ sense of the term) message towards a public of analytical, professional readers.

Works Cited

- Carter, Angela. *Nights at the Circus*. Picador, 1985.
Gray, Alasdair. *Poor Things*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 1992.
Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway*. Penguin Books, 1996.

³ Her, referring both to Anca Peiu and the collective female writing experience.