

Reading Places: Ioana Em. Petrescu and the Practices of Reading in the 1980s

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*“Is the ‘obvious’ reading,
though, so ‘obvious’ or even
so ‘univocal?’”*
(J. Hillis Miller)

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RHETORICAL QUESTIONS are said to echo, to cite or, maybe, to recite the ‘obvious’/‘univocal’ validity of a former utterance with a slight change of intonation and word order. Asking rhetorical questions is doing readers a favor. As readers, we are often given hints—if texts are not obvious enough—as to the truth value of an assertion, “insights” into those “blind” spots that we could either clarify by ourselves or ask for help. Whether help comes from the inside (text) or the outside (critics) is a different story, indeed—but this story accounts for the many ways in which we can deal with solutions. The above-quoted question is intended as a response to the position Wayne C. Booth and M. H. Abrams assume when discussing deconstructionist reading, which they denounce as “plainly and simply parasitical” on the “obvious or univocal reading.”¹ Its rhetorical feature not only displays an allegorical demonstration of deconstructive forces at work in the text, but also pinpoints the very politics of deconstruction: the interroga-

tion of textual explicitness/obviousness/univocality with a mind to reveal its implicit, unapparent, ambiguous flipside.

It is no wonder, therefore, that deconstructive analysis caught the critical eye of theorists and critics in search of alternatives to the politically or ideologically canonized discourse. Romanian intellectuals were no exceptions in this case, which is why the present article is a case-study on practices of reading deconstruction off the geographic and ideological limits configured/traced by the Western school of criticism. Ioana Em. Petrescu's interest in deconstruction early in the 80s (even before the actual contact with Anglo-American literary theory between 1981 and 1983) comes as a confirmation of the dynamics involved in the (un)official exchange and circulation of ideas, despite troubled histories or limitations of various kinds. What we are seeking here is to recapture and, thus, revitalize silent (close) readings performed by the Romanian theorist in question, as they are recorded or written on the margins of printed material, on title pages, in reference notebooks and reading cards (observations, exclamations, conclusions, notes, summaries, comments etc.). The immediate (because unaestheticised, abridged) response of Ioana Em. Petrescu's reading to critical and philosophical texts—which she managed to explore between 1981 and 1983 or shortly before and afterwards—betrays essential aspects of cultural acquisition: adequacy and moderation.

Her declared interest in American criticism, deconstruction and contextualism is registered in the letter of application for an extension of the Fulbright grant (July–August 1983) motivated by the need:

1. To improve and enlarge my knowledge of some fundamental trends in recent American literary criticism. My investigation is supposed to develop and to advance in three directions:

1.1. I would like to complete the study of “deconstructive” criticism (Derrida, Paul de Man, H. Bloom etc.);

1.2. I need to increase my knowledge of “Reader response” criticism (running through some recent publications, such as W. Iser's or S. Suleiman's);

1.3. I got deeply involved in studying the “school of criticism” from U.C. at Irvine and I am interested in going further, because I think that Prof. Murray Krieger should be considered one of the most outstanding literary critics of our time.²

The “completion” of her study on deconstruction betrays the already familiar practices of reading, prior even to her American experience as a visiting lecturer at UCLA and as a reader of “recent” literary theory. In fact, readings on deconstruction represent a career threshold for the Romanian theorist and critic who

searched for a different critical discourse while anticipating the necessity to further explore those “recent” concerns within the reader-response critical frame and within a postmodern poetics. Ioana Em. Petrescu’s reading notebooks therefore reveal a series of preoccupations with up-to-date theoretical writing; itself a deconstructive practice, the act of reading becomes—in her case—an opportunity for writing back, for answering critical challenges and for clarifying philosophical, literary or linguistic matters that were part of the current debates. Her “response” to texts is recorded in the form of quotations, usually doubled by comments (the left page is generally the space for such observations) in Romanian—the familiar language of comprehension and commentary—or merely underlined and accompanied by exclamation marks. The selection of quotations retains what is essential to Ioana Em. Petrescu’s understanding of deconstruction: its philosophical dimension, its linguistic relevance, its rhetoric, but also its connection to other systems of thought and different schools. At times, these fragments are further articulated by rather subjective considerations which betray certain preferences (J. Hillis Miller is one such example, or the many notebooks allotted to readings of Derrida) or recurrent preoccupations with related topics.

Out of a total number of 54 notebooks, the most relevant for deconstruction are the ones immediately following readings of philosophy (Plato, Sartre, Nietzsche, Heidegger), namely Notebook 28 (Derrida’s *De la grammatologie* and *Otobiografies*), Notebook 34 (Derrida’s *Speech and Phenomena*, *Writing and Difference*, *Positions*, *Le facteur de la Vérité* and *Margins of Philosophy*), Notebook 35 on deconstruction and general criticism (Frank Lentricchia’s *After the New Criticism* or the essential 1979 *Deconstruction and Criticism*), Notebook 36 (on de Man’s *Blindness and Insight* and *Allegories of Reading*, but also Colin Campbell’s *The Tyranny of the Yale Critics*), Notebook 53 (again Derrida’s *La Dissémination* and *Shibboleth*). The notebooks are in themselves networks sending the reader to similar bibliography; Campbell’s book is a good introduction to *Rhetoric and Form: Deconstruction at Yale University*, Oklahoma Press, 1985, just like notebook 46 contains a separate bibliographic note on postmodernism alone.

Ioana Em. Petrescu’s apprehension of deconstruction does not limit itself to gradual readings or bibliographic discoveries, though; the theorist goes beyond the safety zone into critical inquiry which, at times, questions the very ground against which deconstruction seems to stand. One of her constant concerns is that of the *subject* and its position inside the philosophical context of the new paradigm—a problem which reacts against the nature of the humanist discourse Ioana Em. Petrescu was so fond of, to say the least. Derrida’s skepticism as to the existence of a “private language” and a “private mental life” is a matter of unrest for Ioana Em. Petrescu, who—while reading Derrida’s *Speech and Phenomena*—worriedly posts Romanian comments such as: “would this involve the subject?”³³ The debate around the weakening of the subject’s position will later on be

brought to light by two more readings, such as Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism* (notebook 35) and Murray Krieger's discussion of the "absence-presence" status of a poem in *Theory of Criticism—A Tradition and Its System*. The first rereads Derrida's defense in *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*⁴ as a denial of ontology in general, doubly supported by Derrida's "Il n'y a pas d'hors texte": "Il n'y a pas d'hors texte' must not be read as positing an ontological 'nothing' outside the text . . . Derrida is no ontologist of le néant because he is no ontologist."⁵ Ioana Em. Petrescu's vision, on the other hand, in turn challenges this proposition by further rhetoricising in Romanian: "The question still remains whether this is possible." Moreover, she gives Derrida's words a different turn and a different interpretation: situating the subject instead of entirely erasing it reminds Ioana Em. Petrescu of the recent debate in contemporary physics which rethinks the whole theories and issues of centrality: "As a matter of fact, the problem resumes discussions in contemporary physics: the opposition between the materialist perspective, which seeks for the ultimate elementary particles (quarks) and the perspective of the relation as sole reality of the existing world. We still don't know if this crisis refers to the concept of the existing or just to that of matter (which I optimistically hope it does)."⁶

Although she separates herself from Lentricchia's understanding of deconstruction through predominantly sociological lenses, Ioana Em. Petrescu seems to agree with his observation that "My point is that Derrideans and their antagonists are flipsides of the same coin"⁷—an affirmation which will be completed (in the same sentence and in Romanian) by her reasoning that: "since the denial of the subject ends with the act of reading, whose free play betrays a solipsistic layer." Such informal dialogue-like sequences of quotation-commentary would often come up as the main strategy of text interpretation; the shift from English to Romanian and backwards is more than an act of intercultural exchange or translation. It is probably the best illustration of an immersion into the new system of critical thought and of its appropriation. Ioana Em. Petrescu would time and again underline, emphasize or speculate those critical instances of soft-core deconstruction that she would retain as deconstruction "from within," when predicated by Derrida in his interview with Julia Kristeva (*Semiotics and Grammatology*). Beyond the hard rhetoric of displacement, transformation and turning against traditional concepts, Derrida also mentions that "I do not believe in decisive rupture, in an unequivocal 'epistemological break."⁸ It is this register that Ioana Em. Petrescu favors over radicalisms that are meant to disrupt or disentangle; at this point, her analogy with contemporary physics is welcome mainly for the discussion of entities in *relation*, and not in the isolation as consequence of decisive ruptures. "Doubtless it is more necessary (...) little by little to modify the terrain of our work and thereby produce new configurations."⁹

From within this new vision of semiology according to which *la signature invente le signataire*, the sign is endowed with a different function: it does not *express* the truth, it *constitutes* it. By consequence, signs will no longer express, they will no longer consider referentiality, but *create* it—hence, Ioana Em. Petrescu’s observation (as a side mark to *Deconstruction and Criticism*) that deconstruction is the “new name,” the new perspective (against logocentrism):¹⁰ reconstruction/re-creation in the name of deconstruction. The play with and on the power of naming is best rendered in Derrida’s *Otobiographies*, in the superimposition of creation and God, since *Dieu est le nom propre le meilleur*.¹¹

Starting from the premise that the deconstruction of the sign is, actually, the deconstruction of metaphysics, Ioana Em. Petrescu would often reread and rethink the relationship between deconstruction and metaphysics in various ways. In the Saussurian dichotomy signifier-signified, Ioana Em. Petrescu identifies the medieval translation into the intelligible-sensible, which sends at a rather theological opening towards the equivalence of the intelligible with the divine *logos*.¹² Hence, her rhetorical: “Could the archtrace actually be the print of the Being, prior to the existent?”¹³

She would go even further in skeptically reverting Derrida’s insistence that difference is older than Being itself, without its “ineffable” implications, without its God-like features. Ioana Em. Petrescu strongly reacts against Derrida’s overt avoidance of any theological propositions and comments on reading Derrida’s *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*: “And yet, the result still remains that his difference strikingly resembles God, a God that is involved and consumed inside and within his own creation.”¹⁴

The same applies to her reading of the *trace*. Despite Derrida’s careful positioning of the trace outside any contextual reference to Being (“the trace is neither a ground, nor a foundation, nor an origin,”¹⁵ Ioana Em. Petrescu seizes the opportunity to state the divergence of her vision on deconstruction and its accepted perspective, which is of an ontological rather than philosophical nature (also explicitly rendered in her conference article entitled “Derrida’s Poststructuralist Philosophy and the Solutions of Contemporary Criticism”). What Derrida claims as a theological impossibility (in no case can it [the trace] provide for a manifest or disguised onto-theology¹⁶), the Romanian theorist converts into discursive erasure and, thus, subjectively undermines Derrida’s position by openly declaring her alleged censorship of Derrida’s text: “This is exactly what I would at least partially leave out from Derrida.”¹⁷

In this game of grammatological cleansing that is part of a general deconstructive practice, the theorist once again foresees a metaphysical problem. When Derrida asserts the necessity of introducing a new language via a new type of conceptualization (“Certainly a new conceptualization is to be produced,

but it must take into account the fact that conceptualization itself, and by itself alone, can reintroduce what one wants to ‘criticize’¹⁸), her counter-reaction interrogates the mere status of the concept itself: “How? Actually, the concept alone should be abolished. How else could one avoid the metaphysics of the presence?”¹⁹

In this, she comes close to Murray Krieger’s position, who—in his *Theory of Criticism*—starts to defend “the illusionary presence of the poem” and concludes almost metaphysically: “so in presence there is absence” . . . “so in absence there is presence.”²⁰

A discussion around the metaphysical interpretation of the linguistic arbitrariness of sign appears in Frank Lentricchia’s *After the New Criticism*, in the chapter allotted to Paul de Man, whose theory concerning the symbol and the allegory is resumed by Ioana Em. Petrescu (following Lentricchia’s own line of reading) as an existentialist interpretation of arbitrariness because “tragically separating the human from the natural being, as an absence of God . . . and as the temporal dimension of discourse.”²¹ This in turn leads Lentricchia to the conclusion that de Man’s critical system is metaphysically existentialist in essence, since “literature, in his understanding, names the void, the *néant*.”²² This recurrent turn and return towards the metaphysical implications of deconstructive analysis oscillates between discussing it as the metaphysics of nihilism or as the relationship with a more religious form of perceiving it, with its theological echoes. Colin Campbell records J. Hillis Miller’s treatment of de Man’s religious dimension as a denial of the nihilist nature of deconstruction (as it comes down from Nietzsche and Derrida alike): “‘I remember de Man looking me in the eye,’ Miller recalls ‘and saying: For me, the most important questions are religious questions.’ ‘So much for nihilism.’”²³

In fact, Miller’s vision of deconstruction comes against the Derridean position and strongly argues against it by overcoming the negotiation of discursive forces of both metaphysics and nihilism, in that he understands deconstruction to go beyond these into the more generous frame of interpretation: “‘Deconstruction’ is neither nihilism nor metaphysics but simply interpretation as such, the untangling of the inherence of metaphysics in nihilism and of nihilism in metaphysics by way of the close reading of texts.”²⁴

Ioana Em. Petrescu looks at these issues with a keen eye on the religious inertia of critical discourse and reaches the conclusion that biographical relevance is imported in the sphere of criticism, as well, since: “J. H. M. seems obsessed with the (religious) seriousness of deconstructionists. He is the son of a Baptist preacher man; Bloom, Hartman and Derrida are Jews ‘who have found medieval Midrash (rabbinical explanations of the Scriptures that sometimes roam far from apparent meanings) and Cabbala (a body of occult Jewish doctrines) more or less compelling models of interpretation.’”²⁵

CONSIDERING THE political and historical context we are referring to when revisiting Ioana Em. Petrescu's readings of deconstruction, it becomes clear that these side marks on books, side comments and observations remained inside the covers of workshop materials; an alternative to the proclaimed nihilistic metaphysics inherent in the deconstructive practice—which echoes in religious, theological overtones—could neither be publicly shared nor occasionally printed, unless a different name was at hand. One possible solution was the already cited Murray Krieger's clinging on the "presence of the poem," on the *aesthetic* experience, which, in Ioana Em. Petrescu's view, replaces the *religious* experience.²⁶ Another solution reshuffles Miller's position (though never intended as solution proper) with respect to the status of the critic-parasite inside and outside the organic structure of a text, above and beyond the conflictive territories of metaphysics and nihilism. "Deconstruction does not provide an escape from nihilism, nor from metaphysics, nor from their uncanny inherence in one another. There is no escape. It makes the inherence oscillate in such a way that one enters a strange borderland, a frontier region which seems to give the widest glimpse into the other land . . . It is as if the 'prisonhouse of language' were like that universe finite but unbounded which some modern cosmologies posit. . . . The place we inhabit, wherever we are, is always this in-between zone, place of host and parasite, neither inside nor outside."²⁷

Insofar as the question of modern cosmologies is concerned, Ioana Em. Petrescu openly acknowledges her adherence to this new critical perspective, which is both an alternative and a safe strategy of interpretation that could very well compete with the philosophical perspective; Ioana Em. Petrescu declaratively prefers the ontological and scientific implications of deconstruction—a stance that she assumes in her conference paper on "Derrida's poststructuralist philosophy and the solutions of contemporary criticism." Her interest in Miller's "The Critic as Host" emerges not only from the value of his critical discourse in general, but also from his analogy with the modern cosmologies—a point of interaction between the American and the Romanian theorist, a cultural "border-zone" that unifies both positions. Her reaction to Miller's description of the "prisonhouse of language" is relevant for her later readings and research on Eminescu's poetry. Her left-page commentary on the above-mentioned fragment from "The Critic as Host" is an enthusiastic reaction, similar to a scientific discovery that is meant to clarify a series of ambiguities: "Very important! Cosmological model! If I manage to deconstruct its comparative terms, we get the structure (the structure of contemporary thought)!"²⁸

Ioana Em. Petrescu manages to read between the lines and pinpoint the nature of critical discourse whenever it should something else is at stake; her reading of Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism* is carefully accompanied by her

own hesitation as to his sociological interpretation of deconstruction, which—from Ioana Em. Petrescu's point of view—is due to be explained and understood primarily in a philosophical key, and secondly as a parallel “to the new model of the universe as advanced by science.”²⁹ It is no wonder, then, that her notebooks list a generous range of bibliographic sources that were meant to bring about a change in the critical apparatus at hand at the time and to enrich perspectives by enlarging the literary sphere and correlating it to the configuration of the world in its contemporary profile (notebook 47 registers five titles dealing with different cosmological models, such as Hawking's, Witten's, Fredkin's; notebook 43 is a partial reading on Einstein; notebook 38 is an investigation of Heisenberg's theory—to name but a few). It is, if not just a solution for philological unrest, then at least a reasonably acceptable strategy of being up-to-date, being a contemporary of Western thought and sharing some of the recent concerns with the presentness of research. She would often dissociate between these two realities or between reality and fiction, in an attempt at situating literature at the border-zone of interpretation, neither inside/outside reality nor inside/outside fiction. That would explain her commentary on Derrida's *un texte se trouve dans l'autre* as insistence on the reterritorialization of both literature and fiction: “Then how these two differ? What makes science different from fiction?”³⁰

Again, rhetorically, the Romanian theorist foresees the necessity of opening up to a more inclusive interpretation or, rather, to a more democratic understanding of the new relationship between subject-text; is it from this point of departure that Ioana Em. Petrescu would reconsider criticism, thus engaging in the study of “recent theories” involved in either the exploration of the subject-reader (reader-response criticism) or the new paradigm: postmodernism. Notebook 42 is a good source of information in this respect, because it includes Ioana Em. Petrescu's encounter with the recent Jane Tompkins' 1981 *Reader-Response Criticism*—which is the first title on a longer list on reception theory and not only: Walker Gibson, Gerald J. Prince, Michael Riffaterre, Georges Poulet, Wolfgang Iser, Stanely Fish, Jonathan Culler, Norman Holland, David Bleich, Walter Michaels—names which she would separately write down as guidelines for further research projects.

These projects also include the debates around postmodernism, as recorded in notebook 46 (J. F. Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, I. Hassan's *Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective* and *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, R. Schusterman's *Postmodernism and the Aesthetic Turn* and, obviously, the Romanian review of theory and criticism *Caiete critice*—with an issue dedicated to postmodernism and its prodigal names). Notebook 46 is a key point of academic interest, since it also includes a separate sheet of titles that might have been at least partially

read during and especially after the Fulbright stay. The page features Matei Călinescu—*Five Faces of Modernity*, Linda Hutcheon—“Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism,” in *Textual Practice*, Andreas Huyssen—*After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Fredric Jameson—*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* or *Regarding Postmodernism: A Conversation with Fredric Jameson*, Brian McHale—*Postmodernist Fiction*, Richard Rorty—*The Linguistic Turn*, Richard Schusterman—*Convention, Saving Art from Aestheticism, Postmodern Aestheticism* and *T. S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism*.

The selection of titles is not arbitrarily chosen and neither is the development of research “projects,” including postmodernism, which, in Hassan’s words, is introduced by an ironic reading eye that helps us “move from the deconstructive to the coexisting reconstructive tendency of postmodernism.”³¹ Whether a sequel to deconstruction or a mere echoing of its close scrutinies, postmodernism seems to raise a rhetorically *what next?* in the notebooks of the Romanian scholar so consciously engaged in the active participation in contemporary debates.³² Most projects are ambitious anticipations of what is *next* and evaluations of what was *before*; whether openly declared as such, Ioana Em. Petrescu’s projects represent a coherent history of reading(s) that managed to challenge the incoherent history of reading spaces.

□

Notes

1. J. Hillis Miller, “The Critic as Host,” in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, eds. Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey H. Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 218.
2. The document is entitled “Application for a grant extension” and it is part of a series of other documents dealing with Ioana Em. Petrescu’s academic activity, subseries “Received/Sent Correspondence,” paper case 4, folder 8.
3. Ioana Em. Petrescu’s notebook no. 34, p. 3.
4. “First of all I didn’t say there was no center, that we could get along without the center. I believe that the center is a function, not a being—a reality, but a function. . . . I don’t destroy the subject, I situate it.” Footnote in M. Krieger, *Theory of Criticism*, (Baltimore–London: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1981), 230–1.
5. Ioana Em. Petrescu’s notebook no. 35, p. 4.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
8. Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
9. *Ibid.*
10. These comments are side marks on the volume *Deconstruction and Criticism*, p. 229 and start from Derrida’s assertion that “deconstruction” is “one current name for this reversal.”

11. J. Derrida, *Otobiographies* (Paris: Galilée, 1984), 77.
12. See Ioana Em. Petrescu's Romanian comments on Derrida's *De la grammatologie*, notebook 28, p. 5.
13. Comments on *De la grammatologie*, notebook 28, p. 24.
14. Comments on *Speech and Phenomena*, notebook 34, p. 57.
15. Derrida, *Positions*, notebook 34.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Krieger, 230.
21. Comments in Romanian on Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism*, notebook 35, p. 16.
22. Ibid., 17.
23. Colin Campbell, "The Tyranny of the Yale Critics," *New York Times*, no. 48, 9 Feb. 1986, notebook 36, p. 35.
24. Miller, 230.
25. Ioana Em. Petrescu's Romanian comments on Miller's "The Critic as Host," notebook 36, p. 35.
26. Comments on Krieger, 210.
27. Miller, 231.
28. Comments on Miller's "The Critic as Host," notebook 35, p. 72.
29. Comments on Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism*, notebook 35, p. 10.
30. Comments on Derrida's "Le facteur de la vérité," *Poétique: Revue de théorie et d'analyses littéraires* 21 (1975), notebook 34.
31. Ihab Hassan, "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective," *Critical Inquiry* 12, 3 (Spring 1986), notebook 46, p. 32.
32. In this, Ioana Em. Petrescu could be chosen as an exception in the line of Romanian critics and theorists who practised a "selective" reading of Anglo-American literary theory. For more details on Romanians' interest in structuralism in the 1980s, see Mihaela Ursa, "On Distance: Romanians in the 'Republic of Letters,'" *Transylvanian Review* 15, 4 (Winter 2006): 116–124.

Abstract

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The study presents the development of the deconstructionist reading cultivated by Romanian theorist Ioana Em. Petrescu during the early 1980s. The identification of the precise bibliographical sources and of the theorist's academic concerns is based on the analysis of the entries made in her reading notebooks after the consultation of various essential deconstructionist texts, during her Fulbright fellowship at UCLA, between 1981 and 1983.

Keywords

literary criticism, deconstruction, postmodern poetics