

BOOKS

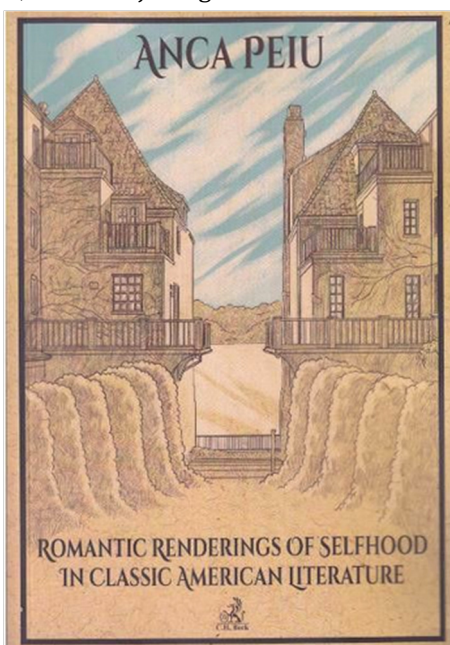
Anca Peiu, *Romantic Renderings of Selfhood in Classic American Literature*. București: C.H. Beck, 2017, 380 p.

Anca Peiu connects eleven essential American writers under the central theme of self and its expressions, seen as rejecting the anxiety of influence and constructing profoundly original, characteristic modes of expression. Peiu focuses on the theme of selfhood "in/or poetry" for five of the trademark figures and "in/or story-telling for other six in an attempt to investigate the thematic as well as the foundational pillar of the American literature. Aware of her markedly ex-centric, East European position, the author decides to reiterate her standing as an advantage which offers her the opportunity to read and interpret these canonical, widely discussed and analyzed figures from a novel point of view. Peiu insists on the highly selective and subjective nature of the process, the final products serving as a guide for both students and American literature novices eager to expand their vision of the world literature and its continuum which spans continents and centuries.

Poe is the first name to be analysed. He traces his complex works, rang-

ing from subtle horror to the beginnings of ratiocination, both of them revelations of the clockwork mechanisms which (dis)organise human minds and our intellects. Poe is considered as novelist, short stories creator and, most importantly, as poet, a position he identified with throughout his entire career. His works are seen through their connecting lines of debt to writers contemporary with us - such as Ishiguro and the intricate issue of identity for human clones - or contemporary with him. Both Poe's William Wilson and Melville's Ishmael are in a shared quest for the "immeasurable imaginary inner life".

Self-reliance as "the rule of survival" is the perception adopted for the investigation of Ralph Waldo Emerson who is seen as a living contradiction between his marked spiritual generosity and his insistent need of individualism. The textual analysis is meant to reconcile the apparent dissonance. The next in line is Thoreau, Emerson's disciple eager to continue developing his master's ideas in a call to "civil disobedience". This essay



which displays its author's pledge for the necessity of self-assertion is fluidly continued in *Walden*, which could be regarded as a true *ars poetica*, with Peiu exposing his final quest for truth as "the ultimate value of human existence". Walt Whitman has a similar standing point. His famed *Song of Myself* shows the strands of collaboration and recognition existant between these figures reunited under similar preoccupations and interest. Whitman's masterpiece is essential to the definition of the American self, both individual and collective, as "the best gifted, the most talented and endowed poetically".

Emily Dickinson, this formerly forgotten figure, contemporary to Whitman, thematically connected to his works yet seen fundamentally distinct is another subject worthy of analysis. Only fully acknowledged by the middle of the twentieth century, Emily was minorised during her life in part due to her unique conception of poetry, aesthetics, and the self. Connected to the metaphysical and romantic tradition, she is similarly keen on dispensing with the tradition and adopting a new mode of artistry. In a significant *post scriptum* Peiu presents Dickinson in her kinship with our local Ana Blandiana, whose leaf of grass gracefully unites the temporal gap across the two sides of the Atlantic.

In turn, Peiu considers Irving to be indebted to the Old World fairy tale tradition, adjusted to the requirements of current American history and considered in its already marked individuality and distinction. Careful importance is given to his attempt at introducing what will later be considered the "typically American storytelling vein". Another forger of paths, James Fenimore Cooper,

is recognized as the founding father of "the American Western myth, reiterating and developing the idea of the split nature of the American selftorn between its continental past and a future which should be negotiated with the already established native populations. The struggle is acknowledged and described in Peiu's analysis of "The Last of the Mohicans". The novel was well received by Cooper's immediate successors and gracefully passes the test of time, remaining a piece of resistance in the contemporary reading list

The problematic of the American double self is further tackled by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Anca Peiu investigates the intertextual links in the story of Hester Prynne, a moral tale which unveils the human hypocrisy disguised in the form of puritan ideals. To counteract such an attitude, Hawthorne argues in favour of a code of conduct which encourages the empowerment of the personal ego.

Herman Melville becomes associated with Dickinson, both as reclusive rebels whose vision of the autobiographical self is incorporated within an original form of creation. His aesthetics were seen as unsuitable for the period, which led to his downfall. Nevertheless, Peiu acknowledges that this singular vision offered him immortality on the literary scene. Through her textual study, the reader gains awareness of the image of potential optimism which pervade both *Moby Dick* and *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, this precursor of the "American tales of the absurd". For this purpose, she focuses on the profound metafictional quality of his prose in order to exhibit the image of the man in his continuous pursuit of "the ungraspable phantom of life".

In the same vein Peiu analyses Twain, this self-acclaimed realist writer whose insistent rejection of tradition only betrays a hidden romantic strain. Peiu proves that Twain's inaugurates a narrative creation meant to challenge his readership to take part in the literary game by forsaking the pursuit of any moral, motive or "true plot".

Finally, Kate Chopin, is regarded as a veritable precursor to the long strand of

High Modernist American authors, her pioneering is essential in the history of American literature.

Peiu provides a refreshing analysis of eleven fundamental writers and their pervasive influence. These writers' definitions of the self remain topical and allow connections with Romanian literary evolutions.

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