

BOOKS

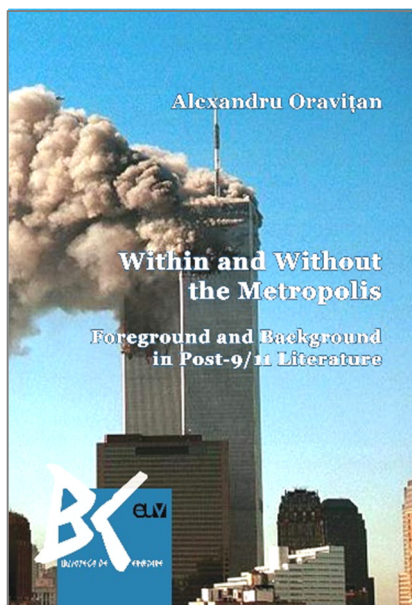
Alexandru Oravițan, *Within and Without the Metropolis – Foreground and Background in Post-9/11 Literature*, Timișoara, Editura Universității de Vest, 2019, 394 p.

Alexandru Oravițan's book, *Within and Without the Metropolis – Foreground and Background in Post-9/11 Literature*, discusses a topic about which both academics and the layman know plenty: the 9/11 terror attacks are often considered to be a changing point in American history, a paradigm shift in American art and culture, and an event which shaped not just the American, but the global views about international politics, cultural differences, the ideals of nationalism and more. 9/11 is no easy task to discuss: there are many incredibly delicate details to consider, from the purely emotional to the exceedingly complicated socio-political arguments. Such a visual tragedy, with scenes that could easily appear in an action flick, is bound to be recognized, discussed, and analyzed by everyone who has seen the images and video footage of the Twin Towers' collapse.

Oravițan does not intend to focus on too many political aspects of the tragedy, even though this cannot be completely omitted; the events of September 11, 2001

are inherently political. However, the author is interested in the many ways literature has been able to “deal with” such a complex and profound subject. In the first chapter, Oravițan introduces the notions of foreground and background, tools which help one identify context and central elements when interpreting a work of art or literature. These devices are often used to frame narratives with different perspectives by bringing to the forefront some aspects of it and hiding others in the back. However, as Oravițan explains, the background “is a deeply unstable element, in constant change with regard to the manner in which it is received. Moreover, it is a shaky groundwork from which the foreground will ultimately rise” (23).

In the literature discussing 9/11, Oravițan identifies the foreground as the Western self in most cases, while the background is defined as Other, but he stresses the fact that these two opposing sides are not clearly defined. By implementing a third space between foreground and background,



the author points out that there is no clear boundary between them: what we call the Western metropolis is not homogenous; it is not contained in a bubble, as it interacts with and engulfs a great many cultures. Thus, the so-called background shifts to the center, creating hybridity – which is prevalent and identifiable in post-9/11 literature. Oraviṭan’s book carefully leads the reader through the theoretical framework he uses to determine and analyze this hybridity, a notion from post-colonial studies, whose tools Oraviṭan uses to discuss what he calls the dual trauma: the loss of First Worldism and displaced Otherness (cf. 380).

One of the book’s key points is that post-9/11 literature cannot be viewed only in the literary context. Oraviṭan explains the necessity of observing extra-literary implications and trends which cannot be overlooked when reading the fiction about the terror attack. The American “Center” and the “Other” societies is examined in the second chapter, where the author also discusses the reasons why the Twin Towers were such a symbolic landmark of the Western world. Their existence and demise are viewed as both the shrines of the United States and the trauma of the Others, who resort to terrorism in order to gain a pseudo-advantage over the oppressive Center. Oraviṭan explains that due to everchanging aspects of the foreground and background, critical theory must accept “new” cultural notions such as hybridity.

Oraviṭan applies the cultural notion of the hybrid to literature: he discusses the vast and dynamic works of literature in this light, with expressed attention to intertextual and even extra-literary elements in many cases. His methodology includes tools such as close reading, deconstruction, and the post-colonial critical approach,

which serves to contextualize the cultural landscape which surrounds the literary works.

Based on carefully contemplated criteria, Oraviṭan chose to analyze seven novels (which include bestsellers such as *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer and *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo), by American authors or by authors outside of the country (e.g. the United Kingdom, France). He concludes that the trauma that followed 9/11 is not restricted to the American citizens, it affected the First World as a whole. Still, many of the European novels dealing with 9/11 are classified as failures “as they are incapable of conveying or verbalizing the exact nature of the trauma surrounding the fall of the Twin Towers” (89). One could argue that part of this critique comes from the ever-present American exceptionalism, which has become more palpable after the 9/11 attacks. Oraviṭan argues that this shared trauma is a result of the Americanization through globalization. Due to the crumbling borders in the online space, this discourse is becoming more and more interconnected; thus, the distribution of this trauma and its analysis is increasingly shared.

The final chapter shifts focus to the “Other,” to writers such as Dan Stanca and Mohsin Hamid, who redefine 9/11 as a global event with voices all over the world reflecting on it. While most works of fiction that come from the Center (be it the United States or the First World) tend to identify the perpetrator-victim binominal, novels such as Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* point out that this overly complicated issue cannot be compressed into such simple archetypes.

Oraviṭan establishes a robust and well-researched theoretical framework which helps the reader contextualize the

novels with the tools of background, foreground, and the newly introduced notion of the hybrid. However, for the most part, Oravițan seems to steer clear of political discussion and focuses on the cultural outputs of this tragedy. I find this to be the soundest solution for the sake of a scientific discourse. Nonetheless, his political bias is noticeable due to the post-colonial critical approach, which was mentioned as a drawback by Mircea Mihăieș in the Foreword. In my view, Oravițan avoided the pitfalls of the political fanatic and treated the subject of post-9/11 literature with a very specific field of study in mind: his book gives insight into the many ways authors tried to work with such a world-shattering event that from the very

first days has been calling into question the survival of arts and literature in the United States. As Richard Gray explained, “nothing to say became a refrain” for a while after the terror attack. The term “post-9/11 literature” became widespread quickly, even though this “genre” has been contested and questioned many times. Oravițan succeeds in explaining why this is not only a viable but a dynamic and impactful part of both American and global literature. The author proves his points with well-researched and detailed analyses of novels picked from both the “Center” and the “Other.”

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