Literary Geography/Topo-Analysis/Psychogeography and the Art of Wandering
A Case Study: Camil Petrescu's Fiction[1]

ȘTEFAN FIRICĂ

Abstract: *The interest in the relationship between (urban) space and (states of) mind has been increasing constantly, especially with the development of globalized metropolitan areas around the world. With more or less ineffable tools, in all seriousness or with a tinge of postmodern playfulness, in the footsteps of the Surrealist or Situationist movements, cultural criticism took to exploring the emotional side of the cityscape, be it factual or fictional, past or present. Recent researches have attempted to trace the connection between literary texts and socio-psychological spaces within or beyond. This paper offers a re-reading of some well-known fragments from Camil Petrescu's novels* Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război [The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War] *and* Patul lui Procust [The Bed of Procrustes]*, from the perspective of "urban studies" (using the terminology and tools of literary geography/topo-analysis/psychogeography).*

Keywords: *identity, urban studies, literary geography, topo-analysis, psycho-geography*

Résumé : *L'intérêt de la relation entre l'espace (urbain) et (les états de) la pensée a grandi constamment, surtout avec le développement des zones métropolitaines globalisées du monde entier. Avec des outils plus ou moins ineffables, très sérieusement ou avec une touche de gaieté postmoderne, dans les pas des mouvements Surréaliste ou Situationniste, le criticisme culturel s'est mis à explorer le côté émotionnel du paysage urbain, soit-il factuel ou fictif, passée ou présent. Des recherches récentes ont essayé de repérer la connexion entre les textes littéraires et les espaces socio-psychologiques, à l'intérieur ou au-delà. Cet article propose une relecture des fragments les plus connus des romans de Camil Petrescu,* Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război [La dernière nuit d'amour, la première nuit de guerre] *et* Patul lui Procust [Le lit de Procuste]*, du point de vue des «études urbaines» (en utilisant la terminologie et les outils de la géographie littéraire/topo-analyse/psycho-géographie).*

Mots-clés : *identité, études urbaines, géographie littéraire, topo-analyse, psycho-géographie*

With the novels he published in the early '30s—*Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război* [*The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War*] (1930) and *Patul lui Procust* [*The Bed of Procrustes*] (1933)—, Camil Petrescu is among the most prominent writers to confirm one of the core tenets of Eugen Lovinescu's critical system, i.e. the "evolution" of modern fiction from the rural to the urban space (Lovinescu, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1900-1937* [*The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1900-1937*] 185), in line with the new developments of public life. Bucharest, the capital of a state whose territory and population roughly doubled with "the Great Union" of 1918, displaying a complex, multi-layered social and ethnic structure, is indeed the environment where Camil Petrescu's heroes live most of their lives. Camil Petrescu's interest in the representation of the capital was quite common in his time. In the 1920s-1940s, many other writers depicted Bucharest as well, either as a backdrop for their novels, or as a superindividual character: Cezar Petrescu (*Calea Victoriei*, 1929, or *Carlton*, 1942), Octav Dessila (*București, orașul prăbușirilor* [*Bucharest, the City of Collapse*], 1931), G.M. Zamfirescu (*Maidanul cu dragoste* [*The Barrens of Love*], 1933), I. Peltz (*Calea Văcărești*, 1933, or *Foc în Hanul cu tei* [*Fire in The Linden Tree Inn*], 1934), G. Călinescu (*Cartea nunții* [*The Book of Marriage*], 1933, or *Enigma Otiliei* [*Otilia's Enigma*], 1938), Mircea Damian (*București* [*Bucharest*], 1935), Grigore Băjenaru (*Cișmigiu et comp.* [*Cișmigiu & co.*], 1942), Ion Marin Sadoveanu (*Sfârșit de veac în București* [*Bucharest at the Turn of the Century*], 1944), to name but a few. One of the cultural journalists who attempted to draw a more comprehensive list of the writers who contributed to the "literary monograph" of interwar Bucharest is Mihail Sebastian, in an article published in 1940:

> It would be a picturesque exercise to try to draw a map of Bucharest, as mirrored in our fiction. [...] The "team" would be incomplete without Sadoveanu (*Oameni din lună* [People from the Moon]), Rebreanu or Arghezi; or without Ardeleanu, Octav Dessila and G.M. Vlădescu. There is almost no contemporary novelist, from the older or the younger generations, who hasn't included, in his or her work, elements from this map of Bucharest: V. Demetrius, Corneliu Moldovanu, Dem. Theodorescu, N. Davidescu, Cezar Petrescu, Ionel Teodoreanu, N.D. Cocea, Gib. Mihăescu, Eftimiu, Lovinescu, Camil Petrescu, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Mircea Eliade, Peltz, G.M. Zamfirescu. (Sebastian 754)[2]

One of the aspects Sebastian highlights (himself one of the "painters" of the capital, in his novel *Accidentul* [*The Accident*], 1940) is the fast reconstruction of the city, which divides its life into an "old" and a "new" era. From the literary point of view, however, it is significant that there are also an "old" and a "new" style of representing the capital. The "old" image inherits a set of post-romantic and post-naturalist stereotypes, which result in the kitsch-like idealization of its landmarks (such as Cișmigiu garden and other central landmarks of "the Little Paris"), or in the widespread *cliché* of the Moloch metropolis (drawing on the naïve antithesis between the "quiet" countryside and the "evil" city). In this respect, Cezar Petrescu's novel *Calea Victoriei*, which traces the destiny of a

respectable family coming from the provinces and relocating in Bucharest, with their inability to save themselves from perdition, is exemplary: the father becomes a corruptible state attorney, thrust forward by his wife's ambitions of social achievement; the son enters a terrorist political conspiracy; the daughter loses her virginity and, eventually, her life; the idealist poet loses his ideal after making a compromise in order to survive. *Calea Victoriei* is just one among many other works that are fully indebted to the ideologies of *sămănătorism* and *poporanism* (local post-romantic movements glorifying rural values and demonizing modernization, sometimes equating it with social injustice).

However, at the same time, there is an opposite manner of (re-)writing the city, spread among the avant-garde artists, which leaves behind the nostalgia for the past and enthuses over the recent industrial, architectural, and cultural advances of urban areas. Some of the most celebrated novels belonging to French surrealism, such as *Le paysan de Paris* [*The Paris Peasant*] (1926) by Louis Aragon or *Nadja* (1928) by André Breton, render the restless, richly textured, mysterious, Parisian cityscape. The latter is conceived as a "report" of the real, aimless walks taken by the author together with Léona Delcourt, alias Nadja, the woman he had met by chance, on October 4th 1926, at the corner of Rue Lafayette.

Camil Petrescu's approach stands halfway between the radically innovative project of the surrealist autobiography and the commonplaces of 19th-century realism, his 1930 and 1933 novels blending urban tropes from both poetics. A difference between realism and Petrescu's "authenticist" outlook is that, while the former draws on mimetic codes, the latter makes extensive use of referential codes. Thus, on the streets of *Patul lui Procust*, one can spot real buildings alongside fictional ones (Colonel Visante's house[3] being not far from Fred's newly bought studio), historical and fictional characters interacting closely (Nae Gheorghidiu shaking hands with prime minister Ionel Brătianu, Emilia Răchitaru exasperating Ion Valjan, the director of the National Theater, with her poor acting, or Mrs. T. being offered the lead role in Camil Petrescu's 1919 play *Act venetian* [*Venetian Act*]). What is more, Mrs. T.'s confession was first published in Camil Petrescu's magazine, *Cetatea literară*, in 1926, as a letter from a mysterious, but still real, young authoress, which made the critic E. Lovinescu give her a more than warm and courtly welcome to the world of Romanian letters:

> My dear lady—for I can't believe this is a substitution, although your keen spirit of observation and accurate notation recommend you as a man—, I take the liberty to welcome you, at the dawn of your literary activity. (Lovinescu 1)

Therefore, more than mixing fact and fiction, Camil Petrescu's approach consists in treating fact as fiction and fiction as fact, in intermingling the factual and the fictional codes, so as to obtain a *trompe l'œil* effect, a strategy meant to neutralize the traditional frames of reference and engage a special type of reading.[4] This overlapping of fact and fiction, identified right from the onset, in the very first reviews of the novel, as a procedure of "authenticating" the text (Constantinescu 7), is in stark contrast with the earlier poetics of realism, as it is based on sampling, rather than duplicating, life experience.

On the other hand, what characterizes the surrealist modality, and can be partially found in some of Camil Petrescu's pages, is the interweaving of the experience of wandering with the experience of writing: the art of loafing and the art of digressing are of the same sort. Drifting aimlessly, changing direction at any street corner, on the one hand, and sliding involuntarily on the corridors of memory, pushed downward by the whims of free association, on the other: two means of exploring the external/internal space at ease. Urban architecture is so loaded with psychic symbolism that the city map turns into "psychogeography." The concept was put forward by the Lettrist movement and the Situationist International of Guy Debord in the '50s, but its history goes back to Poe, Baudelaire, Fournel, or De Quincey's miniatures of modern city life, passes through surrealist literature and reaches Walter Benjamin's magnum opus *Arcades Project*, an enigmatic insight into the changing atmosphere of Paris before and after Baron Haussmann's radical renovation in the mid-19th century, as seen through the eyes of the *flâneur* (Coverley 63-65). With its avant-garde pedigree, the concept of "psychogeography" attaches, beyond all seriousness, a playful side to the notion of (self-)exploration.

Camil Petrescu's *Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război* (1930) follows the hero-narrator's tribulations during his marriage with Ela, a beautiful woman who was his colleague in college. Thinking he has been cheated, a jealous Ștefan opts for separation, but painfully cherishes any new encounter with his wife, at the theater, at the races, or on the streets. The first-person narrative renders a chance meeting of the two at a news stand on Bulevardul Independenței, near the riverbank of the Dâmbovița. Ștefan gallantly offers to escort Ela to her aunt's house, where she now lives, on Strada Olari. The long walk in two, on the main east-west arterial road, sets off a comedy of hidden emotions, both husband and wife feigning indifference while still being in love, pretending to be in a hurry while indefinitely putting off the time to say goodbye, and finding childish excuses to continue strolling side by side, while the empty taxi carriages flow past one after another. Having left behind the Ministry of Agriculture and Domains and Piața Rosetti, finally having reached their destination, they go on pacing around up and down the side streets, one hour more. Petrescu's amorous walk is far shorter than Breton's in *Nadja* (it is only a couple of pages long), but it still aims to convey the vivid sensation of time dilation, that the narrator, having remained alone, suddenly becomes aware of with exhilaration and a touch of light sadness. The oxymoronic fusion of emotions, so Proustian in its substance, is suggested through visual and thermal images of the neighborhood, as Ștefan is coming back "in the dry, scorching afternoon," "sinking deep in the melting asphalt, as if in rubber, looking at the tired carriage horses, at the blinds lowered over almost all the windows, for the siesta" (Petrescu, *Ultima noapte de dragoste* 112). The blinds allude to the sheltered intimacy that the hero aspires to, while the torrid weather hints at his gradual descent into the deeper and hotter strata of consciousness—the crude emotions of love being depicted as "a joy which illuminated me on the inside like a sun" (Petrescu, *Ultima noapte de dragoste* 110). The well-contained, cool facade has thawed, giving way to his throbbing heart, and now the narrator is able

to scrutinize from close range the "fractions of impression" making up his love (155), that now he realizes is the hurting center of his existence.

The city tropes are more visible in Camil Petrescu's second novel, *Patul lui Procust* (1933), where they tend to shadow and substitute the language of introspection. This stylistic shift suggests the repositioning of the author in the literary system, in spite of the fact that he has long been considered one of the emblematic representatives of the "fiction of psychological analysis" (Lovinescu, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane* 301). However, his affiliation to Marcel Proust's narrative formula is overstated, whereas his connection to the urban literature, with its double, realist and surrealist, lineage, has been rarely discussed. Edgar Papu is the first critic to notice that the "a-stylistic" capital of interwar Romania, with a texture that blends together streets and buildings from various epochs without the coherence of a planning strategy, is mirrored in the "a-stylistic" composition of the novel, characterized by the lack of a unifying superstructure. Thus, the voices proliferate freely (Fred Vasilescu, Mrs. T., George Demetru Ladima, and the Author take turns at telling the story), completing or contradicting one another, being no more than parts of a mottled mosaic:

> The novel doesn't have a plan or a map; instead, it gives the impression it was built arbitrarily, much like the old properties in Bucharest, apparently disseminated at random, according to the whims of the owners, and observing no city planning geometry. Digressions devour the text everywhere, following the subjective caprices of the author, undisputed owner of his field of divagation, with no respect to the objective requirements of fiction as an organized structure. Camil Petrescu's poetics marks a decided stand against talent, style, grammar, in the same manner as the taste of Bucharest dwellers rejected a real urban "phrasing" of their city in favor of an anarchical composition, like *The Bed of Procrustes*, made up of several pieces, incompatible to one another. (Papu 190)

The parallel between the "phrasing" of the city and the "phrasing" of the novel may be illustrated through the excerpt rendering Fred Vasilescu's walk, before he decides to go to Emilia Răchitaru's place, on a hot August afternoon of the year 1928 (one may notice, again, how the weather code is associated with the deep intrusion into the character's mind). Having taken a disappointing lunch with a bunch of acquaintances in a garden restaurant on Strada Regală, the hero is heading to the right end of the street, where a couple of old boyar houses are being torn down, for the widening of Brătianu boulevard. This is part of the great North-South axis, whose major renovation started around 1900 and was finalized only when the systematization masterplan was fully applied. For now, Fred witnesses the demolition of the expropriated buildings from the ultra-central segment, near I.C. Brătianu's statue. The moment is perceived as a turning point in the urban development of Bucharest: the old town is perishing, with its patriarchal mansions and quiet gardens, while the geometric lines of the modern capital, with high towers and busy traffic, are beginning to take shape.

The city planners do not hesitate to compare their efforts to those of the prefect Haussmann (in terms of budget and architectural audacity) and, implicitly, to liken the Romanian King Carol II to the French Emperor Napoleon III (*Planul director de sistematizare a municipiului București* [*Masterplan for the Systematization of the Municipality of Bucharest*] 41). There is an unmistakable political side to the phenomenon, which was largely commented in the media, for instance by one of the leading architects of the time, G.M. Cantacuzino, who saluted the metamorphosis of Bucharest from "a town where there were more trees than dwellers, more church steeples than poplars and reddish rooftops scattered in the green gardens" into "the metropolis of a great state" (Cantacuzino 35). In his turn, Sebastian remarks the substantial urban transformation of 1930-40, and talks about a "double picture," comprising the debris of the old buildings and the iron-concrete of the new ones (Sebastian 752). Here is another testimonial of these spectacular changes, in the memoirs of another witness to the process:

> The most extended transformation affected the axes of the boulevards parallel to Calea Victoriei, which connect Piața Universității and Piața Romană. I mean the boulevards then called Brătianu and Take Ionescu (now called N. Bălcescu and Magheru), which replaced the old Colței street and its extension created at the beginning of the 20th century. In my childhood, this axis was one of the most important residential arterial roads. It had a patriarchal feel to it and it was full of trees, planted on the sidewalks and in the courtyards. All of a sudden, after a genuine revolution in urban planning, it turned into an arterial road with high, modern, mostly commercial buildings. (Bălăceanu Stolnici 212)

In 1939, a foreign visitor could still perceive a stylistic discrepancy between the northbound and the southbound segments of the arterial axis, as seen from the vantage point of Brătianu's statue: the former has an American atmosphere, given by the long range of hotels, theaters, gas stations, and car dealers, while the latter becomes more and more Balkan, with its street merchants, within tens of meters of each other (Willy Pragher, qtd. in Pârvulescu 114). Camil Petrescu's hero is keen on Western technological and cultural modernism, and it is telling that he never crosses Piața Brătianu into the "Oriental" realm where, for instance, Mateiu Caragiale's protagonists from *Craii de Curtea Veche* [*The Old Court Libertines*] (1929) hang around for nights on end. Camil Petrescu associates his character with the regular venues of the elite of the 1920s—the Military Circle, the National Theater, the Élysée restaurant, the Romanian Passageway—and follows him driving North, to the elegant Filipescu park, to spy on Mrs. T.'s home. Unlike Fred, Ladima wanders mostly through the city slums (Petrescu, *Patul lui Procust* 127), starting with the attic in which he lives (on Calea Rahovei, in the Southern half of the city). As a journalist, he advocates in favor of moving the capital from Bucharest to a city in Transylvania that would be built from scratch, in order to ensure a brand new future, uprooted from the past of filth and corruption (Petrescu, *Patul lui Procust* 96). His arguments (unfriendly climate, heavy traffic, poor sewing system, broken sidewalks,

lack of green spaces, shortage of drinking water, and, above all, the Balkan heritage) echo the debates which inflamed the Romanian media in the 1920s.

Fred seems fonder of Bucharest, and especially of the rich central and Northern zones, where he spends most of his time. On one sultry afternoon, he takes a walk in the narrow area limited by Brătianu, Strada Regală, Batişte and Enei, approximately on the same patch where the landmarks of the 1930s are about to be built: the multistory Sun London, Creditul Minier and Carlton blocks. Fred watches the demolition of an old house situated at the crossroads, with its roof already dismantled, so that an onlooker standing on the first floor of Colonel Visante's house could see its rooms across the street (the boulevard had not been widened yet), "as if inside a human body, lying open on the operating table" (Petrescu, *Patul lui Procust* 48). The human-architectural homology is straightforward: once devoid of its soul, this carcass-house becomes a morbid sight. The sensation of intrusion is also rendered through a reference to voyeurism: "It is like an act of violation. No one should be allowed to see a house whose rooftop is being lifted, the same way as a woman in love does not let the servants do the bed of her embraces, but arranges it herself, before leaving" (Petrescu, *Patul lui Procust* 31).

When "alive," a house is both body and spirit, i.e., intimacy. This metaphor, quite common in 20th-century psychological fiction, is obviously indebted to Freud's representation: "The only typical, that is, regular representation of the human person as a whole is in the form of a house" (Freud 125). Bachelard takes this psychoanalytical reading of the house even further by sketching a symbolic interpretation of the multi-leveled structure of the "oneirically complete" house (25), whose "verticality" is ensured by the polarity between "the rationality of the roof" and "the irrationality of the cellar" (18). In the terminology of Bachelard's topo-analysis, the dismantling of the roof stands for the suspension of conscious censorship, which anticipates the hero's *dérive* on the streets of Bucharest and, at the same time, on the lanes of his memory. At this point in the narrative, Fred Vasilescu's confession gathers an unprecedented density, giving almost simultaneous access to several levels of his consciousness (Petrescu, *Patul lui Procust* 48-51).

Like a genuine *flâneur*, the hero likes to explore any arterial road under construction, regretting that he cannot see the old and the new street simultaneously: when the latter is being built, the former is going under. A momentary association pushes him into a musical digression on an episode from his early childhood (his mother reading the score and transforming it into a piano song, to his surprise). In the meantime, he passes by a construction site and by a gas station full of rusty old cars, follows the whimsical trajectory of a sheet of paper floating in the wind, walks on Batişte street (where he spontaneously decides to pay a visit to some friends; it turns out they are not at home), comes back on Brătianu boulevard, passes by a hotel notorious for its sexual promiscuity (probably Britannia Hotel), stops in front of a bookshop window, where his attention is caught by a series of political cartoons, postcards of classical musicians (Chopin, Schumann, Bizet, Wagner), and racy pictures of women (one of whom might be "the queen of cancan", Louise Weber, nicknamed La Goulue). This is one of the rare fragments where Camil Petrescu's narrative goes off the beaten track of psychological realism to draw on more experimental techniques, not far from the surrealist collage. Towards the

end of the excerpt, it becomes more and more obvious that the all-encompassing theme is (pan-)sexuality. By now, the hero's mind is set, and his decision to spend the rest of the afternoon with semi-prostitute Emilia Răchitaru is made. Fred Vasilescu's walk through central Bucharest brings him on her doorstep, in luscious anticipation. To sum up, his ten or twenty-minute stroll may be read in a "psychogeographical" key due to the co-presence of several techniques: transgressing the frontier between fact and fiction, mixing the psychological and the geographical realms, following a trajectory governed by chance and dictated by desire (to paraphrase Coverley 75), fluctuating between past and present while experiencing the rhythmic alternation of old and new elements in the urban texture.

The author's interest in interior design is consistent throughout the novel and welcomes an interpretation in the key of Bachelard's topo-analysis. His long depictions of house decorations and furniture are more than manifestations of snobbery: they are corridors into his characters' minds. Fred Vasilescu's new studio, decorated by Mrs. T., the interior designer he falls in love with, displays modern geometrical lines of a minimalist elegance (Petrescu, *Patul lui Procust* 270). By way of contrast, Mrs. T.'s own home in Filipescu park brings together old-fashioned post-romantic and post-impressionist pieces, in contrast with her reputation among her clients as one of the most radical promoters of cubism in Bucharest. There is a stylistic gap between what she designs and what she lives in (in terms of new vs. old style), which may be tackled from the perspective of the house-mind homology discussed earlier.

In his representation of the human mind, Camil Petrescu is influenced by both Henri Bergson's philosophy and Marcel Proust's fiction: the soul is the continuous flow of inner states, a multifold entity in motion. As Beckett suggested in a 1931 essay on *In Search of Lost Time*, the individual contains a multitude of selves following one another in time, each with a "birth" and a "death" of his own (Beckett 8). Therefore, the transition from the old to the new home, like the transition from the old to the new self— "For a new soul, we need a new home," says Ladima (Petrescu, *Patul lui Procust* 99) —, represents the ambiguous moment of an identity crisis. Beckett showed how Proust looked into Marcel's dramatic transitions between his consecutive selves, scrutinizing with great refinement the infinitesimal changes of his consciousness. Although a declared supporter of Proust's narrative technique, Camil Petrescu does not master the same ability to delve into his heroes' minds by using the tools of modern psychological analysis. Instead, in order to infiltrate into the intimacy of his characters, he relies on urban/architectural tropes. The houses and the streets symbolize the mind: the disappearance of the old boulevard and the making of a new one, the demolition of an old building and the construction of a new one function as metaphors of an identity crisis. Fred Vasilescu's moving to the studio renovated by Mrs. T. represents his transition to a new self, dominated by his love for her, while Mrs. T.'s reluctance to change the decoration style of her own home stands for her reluctance to change at all. Both heroes are faced with severe identity crises, which result in Fred Vasilescu's unexplainable behavior (running away from Mrs. T., with whom he is, nevertheless, hopelessly in love), or in Mrs. T.'s more or less severe depression (Petrescu, *Patul lui Procust* 189-190).

As compared to the complex literary devices borne out of the turn-of-the-century developments in psychology and psycho-analysis (interior monologue, stream of consciousness, dream diary, automatic writing, dictation of thought, and so on), Camil Petrescu's tools may seem out of pace, still reminiscing of sentimentalism, with its melodramatic tricks, or of realism, with its similitude between character and physical space. However, his endeavor is actually typical of high modernism: he builds a complex structure by interweaving a narrative about urban planning and interior design with another one about self-analysis and identity trauma, and amplifies the reader's response by deliberately swapping the factual and fictional codes. As a mental ambient, the "authenticist" city represented in *Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război* and in *Patul lui Procust* reminds one of the psychogeography explored by the author's contemporaries, as it stands halfway between the conscious and the unconscious, between the realist and the surrealist poetics.

NOTES

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[2] My translation. All subsequent translations are mine.

[3] For the history of the real building, see Hagi-Mosco (155).

[4] For more theory on the matter, see Golomb (9-20) and Schmitt (46-72).

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University of Bucharest