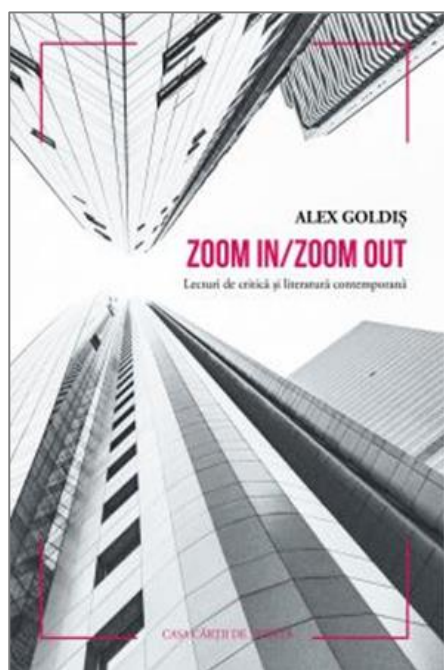


BOOKS

Alex Goldiș, *ZOOM IN/ ZOOM OUT*, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2023, 369p.



Alex Goldiș's 2023 book, *ZOOM IN/ ZOOM OUT: Lecturi de critică și literatură contemporană* (*Readings of contemporary criticism and literature*), is a comprehensive and enduring exploration of some of the most influential texts regarding literature and criticism that marked the Romanian literary scene. The book has a tripartite structure, the first part dedicated to Romanian literary fiction and the others to Romanian criticism and international theory respectively. To be more specific, the book represents a collection of reviews and chronicles that span over more than a decade of academic writing. Consequently, the volume is not meant to portray a Romanian canon or a recent literary history, but a more nomadic network of the dynamics concerning contemporary literature and criticism.

The first section, dedicated to literary fiction, represents the most extensive fraction of the book. Gathering up thirty-three chapters, this section delves into a diverse exploration of poetry, prose and memoirs. The reviews are arranged chronologically, the very first one dating from 2007 – dedicated to Petru Cimpoeșu – and the last one is from the previous year, 2023 – dedicated to Sașa Zare. As the author notes in the opening argument that links the corpus of the volume with its title, the main idea governing these chronicles was to offer a close analysis of the authors which form this section – hence, a *zooming in* – while also offering, when possible, a more distanced and panoramic view over the main dynamics regarding the state of literature in the first part of twenty-first century Romania – hence, a *zooming out* motion. The chapters do not connect in any form, perhaps only theoretically



and methodologically, for they stand alone as reviews and detailed analyses of a wide range of literary volumes.

I shall point out only a part of these chapters, arguing the fascinating ability of Alex Goldiș to move from one text to another, maintaining the same energy and professionalism throughout the years. In his articles, the reader will notice three main focal points that the author uses: analysis of a certain volume, positioning the respective text in the larger area of the writer's previous works and, finally, placing the author in the much broader context of Romanian literature in general. For example, we can take a look at Goldiș's review over Radu Vancu's volume of poetry: *Sebastian în vis (Sebastian in a dream)*. Goldiș starts from drawing the larger picture of the young generation of poets that have come to grow up and to adapt their new poetic language. Pointing out the transition to the novel of some representatives (Marin Mălaicu-Hondrari, Dan Coman or Stoian G. Bogdan), Goldiș succeeds to highlight Vancu's relevance in the Romanian poetic field.

Even more, the author does not hesitate to include in this volume some reviews dedicated to debuts that marked the last twenty years. The chapters about Andrei Dósa, Medeea Iancu, Ștefan Baghiu, val chimic, Bogdan Lipcanu and Sașa Zare are relevant for the reader in order to understand their impact at that time and to highlight the changes that took place through their literary texts. Consequently, these reviews stand as proof of Goldiș's ambition to create a space of dialogue between literature and criticism, while also supporting the new generations of writers.

At the same time, it is highly relevant to enunciate that the author does not hesitate to write about older generations. He analyses the works of Gabriela Adameșteanu, Angela Marinescu, Dora Pavel, the memoirs of Mircea Cărtărescu, Adrian Marino, Alexandru Mușina, Paul Cornea and Ion Ianoși and the dialogue between Gabriel Liiceanu and Mircea Ivănescu. The author maintains a keen eye while regarding their works, remembering that the old generations are not necessarily *a priori* golden and perfect generations, but also noticing their relevance in the evolution of literary history.

From this point, a reader can already notice the diversity of texts that Goldiș chooses to integrate in his volume. Travelling from poetry to prose, the author includes memoirs, autobiographies, dialogues, childhood fiction (Răzvan Rădulescu) and anthologies: one coordinated by Marius Chivu, dedicated to short-fiction of the 2000s and the other, coordinated by Alina Purcaru, called *Povești cu scriitoare și copii (Stories with female writers and children)* dedicated to short-fiction that focuses on the mother-child relationship.

When considering the unity of these reviews, as I pointed out before, it's quite difficult to follow a main theoretical narrative that the author adopts. The texts seem to be linked only by a rather abstract part of zooming out, through which the reader is allowed to match different dots from different chronicles in order to create his or her own history of Romanian contemporary literature.

However, the chapters concerning poetry tend to emphasize some common features of the contemporary dynamics. If we take a look, for example, at the review dedicated to Andrei Dósa or the one dedicated to Ștefan Baghiu, we will notice that the author exposes the mundane character of the Romanian lyricism. The poets of the 2000s seem to refuse to include *high motifs* in their poetry and instead choose to talk about colloquial subjects.

Regarding prose fiction, Goldiș calls attention to the main themes that travel in the contemporary literary circuit. He highlights through a review dedicated to Petru Cimpoeșu that there are two main vectors that guide Romanian literature: one with an autofictional tendency and one with a higher level of fantasizing, with a larger ambition to be imaginative and inventive.

Closer to our times, the chapters dedicated to Dan Lungu with his novel, *Pâlpâiri* (*Flickers*, 2018) or to Bogdan Coșa with *Cât de aproape sunt ploile reci* (*How close are the cold rains*, 2020) are meant to expose the instrumentalization of the rural and urban spaces in Romanian prose fiction. Also, the author discusses the problem of transnationality, exposing the consequences of capitalism on the older Romanian generations: migration and reevaluation of the rural context and its economic reactions.

In the last review, dedicated to Sașa Zare and her debut, *Dezrădăcinare* (*Uprooting*, 2023), the author points out a certain return of vitality and a contestation of the patriarchy. The volume, considered both a novel and a manifesto, can be taken as a conclusion to this large chapter dedicated to Romanian literary fiction, not without noticing the relevance of this novel in the local debates regarding LGBTQ+ discourse and the toxic intergenerational relationship between mothers and daughters (pp. 167-171).

The second part of the volume concentrates twenty-two chronicles dedicated to the Romanian criticism after the 2000s. Goldiș delves into some of the most prolific critics with the ambition to show their relevance in the literary field. Depending on the figure taken under interrogation, the author knows how to tackle all the relevant topics that must be questioned.

One of the most complex chronicles is the one dedicated to Nicolae Manolescu. Goldiș, aware of the importance and the complexity of such a critic, gives us an exhaustive chronicle to *Istoria critică a literaturii române. Cinci secole de literatură* (*The Critical History of Romanian Literature. Five Centuries of Literature*). Systematically, Goldiș follows the mechanisms that form the Romanian literary canon. He dedicates sub-chapters in which he makes the critique of post-war criticism; the main target is its aestheticism and impressionistic strategies to evaluate fiction, as well as the belief in the autonomy of the aesthetic. After that, he takes a closer look at the author, Nicolae Manolescu, focusing on his evolution as a young critic up to the way in which he guided the younger generation through the communist regime in order to maintain a certain distance from the influence of the political apparatus. Furthermore, Goldiș does not forget to place every detail in perspective, zooming out and exposing Manolescu's relationship with his teacher, G. Călinescu. Pointing out that G. Călinescu offered a history of Romanian literature in the inter-war period, Goldiș makes parallels between the two daring volumes, exposing the innovations and updates that Manolescu had to offer. For example, the author mentions that *Istoria critică* is more exclusive regarding the number of authors introduced. Even more, he reproaches Manolescu that there is no attention for literary groups, collectives and cenacles. With a keen hermeneutical eye, Goldiș knows where the most important part of such a literary history written by a post-war critic lies: the postmodern literature. On this note, the 2000s critic exposes how Manolescu fails to consecrate his own national literary life.

Against canons and hierarchies, Goldiș puts in his volume a series of reviews regarding broader literary life. Chronicles dedicated to Nicoleta Sălcudeanu, Mihaela Ursa, Andrei Gorzo, Florina Pîrjol, Grațîela Benga, Adriana Stan and Cosmin Ciotloș are meant to offer a scenic view over some groups (Cenaclul de luni – The Monday Cenacle), theoretical approaches (structuralism) and literary topics (2000s poetry, autofiction or the erotic motif in literature).

On the other hand, some of the reviews are dedicated to authors that concentrated their work on only one figure. This is the case for Mihai Iovănel (a study on Mihail Sebastian), Teodora Dumitru (a study on Eugen Lovinescu), Andrei Terian (a study on G. Călinescu), Sanda Cordoș (a monography on Ion Vinea), Laura Pavel (a monography on Dumitru Țepeneag). The author engages in meta-critical analysis in order to give the public a professional introduction to these academic volumes. Goldiș gathers up reviews that, from a reader's perspective, become a manual for contemporary criticism that is linked to the broader field of Romanian literary history.

It might seem that Goldiș refuses to give the public a clear exploration through the contemporary literature domain, but, in fact, he succeeds to portray the evolution of a critic chronologically, while displaying the thematic vectors that impregnated the last twenty years of humanistic autochthonous life. His aim is not to delineate rough patches between authors and academics, but to bring the public closer to the humanities.

The last part of the book, the shortest, is oriented towards international theory. Encompassing ten chronicles, Goldiș does an impressive job by introducing the public reader – from academia or outside it – to the contemporary emergent theories.

The main theory that dominates the chronicles is *distant theory* and World Literature Studies. Goldiș comments on authors such as Franco Moretti, Matthew L. Jockers, Martin Puncher and David Damrosch, highlighting not just their theories, but their possible connection with the Romanian field.

The author remarks, in his review of Franco Moretti's and Matthew L. Jokers' theories, two main obstacles that could slow down *distant theory* from entering academia. Because of the post-war tendency of practicing an impressionistic criticism, *distant reading* could be seen with a skeptical eye. Even more, Goldiș observes a pragmatic reason: the deficiency in electronic archives, without which a quantitative analysis cannot be done completely.

One of the most important articles that stands out in this chapter is not a review, but a short study regarding the prejudices formed against quantitative studies.

Goldiș turns his attention to five misjudgments made by the Romanian humanistic field. The first one tackles the idea that quantitative data ruins the critic's hermeneutical input. The author of the volume points out that these kinds of studies do not function only on digital effort, but they need a clear hypothesis and a conclusion that can be formulated only through a critic's interpretative skills.

A second issue tackled by Goldiș is the belief according to which quantitative data ruins the old aesthetic and theoretic categories. Therefore, he explains how, through Moretti, quantitative studies keep count of the old aesthetic structures after a postmodern era in which, through deconstruction, the old forms were demolished (p. 338). Linked to the idea that these studies do not care about old forms, Goldiș highlights the third misjudgment, according to which quantitative studies do not pay attention to the text.

The author explains how distant reading and computational analysis work together with the close reading processes, in which the computer or the critic must interpret the themes, the recurrence of words, phrases etc., using a microscopic view to recognize specific or more general features of literary texts.

The fourth observation is linked with the idea that individuality and specificity are lost. Goldiș exposes the shifts that take place once literary movements, themes, motifs are well connected and intertwined through computational analysis. The author invokes a study over the recurrence of certain words in Kafka's fiction, arguing how one novel is rather individualized from another, by the use, for example, of neutral words (p. 340).

Lastly, the fifth misjudgment that Goldiș comments on is the lack of interaction between quantitative studies and socio-political contexts. The author evokes a study from 2007, through which Matthew L. Jockers observes the dynamics of Irish-American fiction over the course of 250 years.

Throughout *ZOOM IN/ZOOM OUT*, Alex Goldiș, professor of Romanian contemporary literature, showcases his skill in analyzing and contextualizing contemporary literature. As I mentioned before, there is no unity between chronicles, but they manage to highlight the evolution of a critic. Structured as a collage, the volume brings together authors and theories, forming a pluralistic space for the contemporary literary landscape. On this note, the volume becomes an intriguing archive of articles that, otherwise, would be lost in online folders where the public rarely looks.

Horațiu TOHĂȚAN

Master's Student, Faculty of Letters

Babeș-Bolyai University

Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Email: horatiu.tohatan@gmail.com