

ESSAY

A Few Considerations upon Romanian Literary Exile in America

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Abstract: The delusion of the American mainland, or in other words *the American Dream*, as it is known in the entire world, has conquered Romania as well, penetrating almost all the domains, and culture in general, but literature particularly – because the latter is the subject of the present paper – hasn't made an exception.

Keywords: *Romanian writers, English language, exile, America*

An unknown situation in the Romanian history, but met in other cultures, neighboring ours, because the literary exile doesn't start with the Romanian one, an important number of Romanian writers live today in U.S.A, being in the same time present by their new books, in the literary and culturally environment of their mother country. Most of the culture people, and I'm referring here especially at writers, emigrated in the last decade of the Communist ruling when, as the studies made after the Revolution in December 1989, show the biggest „cultural and literary bleeding in Romanian history”¹ took place.

Monica Spiridon², analyzing the experience of a few Romanian writers, who managed to impose themselves over the Ocean, remarks that “America remains the only place where you can be an immigrant without being as well an exiled [...] leaving your native country being equivalent with a symbolic spacing which is going to prove itself as auto-revealing and catalyzer for creativity”. The essayist remarks also in the discourse of the exiled from over the Ocean a series of common features as it is the problematization of their own, dual condition – that of a Romanian on one hand, and that of an immigrant on the other, in a world different from the native one – or the

¹ Iorgulescu, Mircea – Departures, Returns, Presences – in 22 Review Year XIV (715) Bucharest, 20 – 24 November, 2003

² Spiridon, Monica – The Defence and the Illustration of the Criticism , Didactical and Pedagogical Printing House, Bucharest, 1996

consciousness of belonging to two different cultural systems.

Moreover “for a lot of the Romanian expatriates, the arrival in the New World doesn’t represent a displacement in space, but mostly a jump in time which is anticipating the future development of Europe”³. We can mention here Mirela Roznoveanu, Carmen Firan, Alexandra Târziu, Mircea Săndulescu or Andrei Codrescu.

For some writers, as Monica Spiridon says, the exile is a kind of therapy for “the inner schizophrenia” to which they were sentenced by Communism “In America , the two halves of the cracked identities are put into accordance, remaking thus the inner balance[...] as an identity catalyzer, and mostly as a form of fulfillment through reaction towards the native background as well to the adoptive one”.⁴

Gabriel Pleșea through his work *Romanian Writers in New York*, dedicated to the Romanian diaspora concentrated around the American metropolis, makes a personal selection of writers, starting from “ the desire to demonstrate to the ones in the country (as well as to the ones from the Romanian communities in exile in America or wherever) that the writers who settled here continue to function as writers – writing, publishing, participating in the cultural life of the Romanian community and as each is capable being ambassadors of Romanian culture”.⁵

The writers comprised in the volume mentioned above, settled themselves in New York within 1976-1991, leaving their country by emigrating, self exile, scholarships, visits followed by applications for political asylum. The volum’s aim is to point out “the effort of these expatriates to continue their concerns which defined them as writers before they came in the United States. The truth is, that in spite of the fact that they had to adapt themselves to the new socio-cultural environment – being forced to “recycle” themselves, by taking up again studied, changing or varying the professional profile [...] continued their work over the Ocean, writing in Romanian and publishing in the country their literary products, especially after 1990.” A common feature that can be found at all the analysed writers is the predilection to national themes: “Even in the singular case of professor Constantin Virgil Negoită, who wrote prose only in English , the subjects are deeply rooted into a Romanian world”.⁶

Most of the critics who started to analyse Romanian literature, written in

³ idem 2

⁴ ibidem 3

⁵ Pleșea, Gabriel – *Romanian Writers in New York*, Vestala Printing House, Bucharest , 1998

⁶ idem 5



English, in exile on the American mainland remarked a common feature, positive for the artistic act, synthesized very well by Tania Radu: “It is very interesting what happens to our novelists transposed into the American literary space. Most of them suffer a positive transformation, they “lack laden”, they simplify their way of writing. Writing in other geographical and social backgrounds, they approach without any complexes the themes of reality, without fearing facility and thus manage to find much easier the sincerity of their tone.”⁷

The Genetics demonstrated that each human being is unique, not even one is the same as another, not even one person thinks or feels the same as an other, and thus the perceptions of each person upon the surrounding reality is different.

The exile, as a phenomenon of the exterior reality was and still is perceived by everyone in a different manner, no matter if we speak from the point of view of the person who is in such a situation, chosen or imposed, perceived physically or mentally or from the point of view of the ‘spectator’.

As Laurențiu Ulici remarks in his essay dedicated to exile, the first manifestation of the imposed exile is due to the social or political conditionings brought by the Communist regime: “the exile of the Romanian writers represented, morphologically speaking, a run, an option and a denial, and was determined by political reasons: the persecution of the Communist regime, in its Stalinist phase, against anything which represented the «bourgeois-landlord past» including the literature creators raised in that «past» and the hostility of the same regime, in the phase of Ceausescu’s dictatorship of nationalist essence, towards any attempt of free ideological expression.”⁸

If the reason for leaving is probably the same for all the writers we talk here about, the critic distinguishes a certain category of emigrants, for which the exile meant something else besides a simply liberation or relieving from the Communist regime namely the retrieval of the lost land: he refers here to the Jews returned into Israel.

In the foreword signed by Alexandru Paleologu to Georgeta Filitti’s volume – *The Voices of the Exile*⁹, he makes a few essential remarks regarding the perception of exile. In order to illustrate exile in its best shape, he gives the example of the first

⁷ Radu, Tania – *The Sweet Abused Happiness*, in *22 Review*, no. 795/2005

⁸ Ulici, Laurențiu – *The Avatars of Ovidius*, in the review *20th Century*, no. 10-12/ 1997, 1-3/1998, 391-396

⁹ Filitti, Georgeta – *The Voices of Exile*, Enciclopedic Printing House, Bucharest, 1998

great exiled of the Latin world, the illustrious poet Ovidius.

The example is very interesting because, as Paleologu sais, it presents exactly the opposite what exile meant in the Communist era. Ovidius was outlawed, at the borders of the world, on the shore of a hostile and unfriendly sea, lacking current navigation, into an isolated and barbaric world, while the exiled writers in the Communist regime dealt with the opposite situation. From the cultural medium, flat and ideologically contaminated by the Communist doctrine of the working class, where the intellectual and culture were desconsidered up to humiliation and even annihilation, to the liberating exile, which for most meant the rescue from a certain death.

We can find an illustration of this idea in the novel *Life on the Run* by Mirela Roznoveanu. It is certain, the critic concludes, that this doesn't mean that the „bread of exile” isn't still bitter, and the dislocations and the changes of destinies, the familial or professional fractures, the nostalgies and other inner feelings are less painful.

Thus the liberation from the Communist terror brought the freedom of thinking, but for many also a great inner sufferance, the handicap of not adapting to a new culture, the homesickness due to all that has been recorded in the matrix of Romanian soul, namely the attributes of the homeland which are impossible to replace or simulate.

Because this paper is referring to writers, we have to point out that most of them have published at least one book in Romania, before they chose the way of exile, and less of them managed to follow the path of the literary history, imposed to the Romanian writers who stayed in the country to resist the system. This thing was due to the fracture that took place, the distance and probably the new culture to which they had to adapt too.

A part of the exiled writers managed to adapt succesfully and and overrun their condition, becoming famous and well-known, even if in the country they couldn't get the success they gained in the adoptive country. We mention here : Petru Popescu, Carmen Firan sau Andrei Codrescu.

In the same context we have to notice that a part of the Romanian exiled writers on the American continent, abandoned any contact with the native country, some made that for fear, others were relieved because they had managed to escape from a nightmare, with which they didn't want to meet ever in their lives. The two worlds which are so different, give the impresssion that they exclude themselves,

and Tocqueville's sentence is not an unusual one, but one that simply asserts the antagonistic realities: „ When you cross from a free country into one which is not, you are struck by an extraordinary show: there everything is movement and activity, here all seems calm and imobile.”¹⁰

The inner fuss, the characteristic movement of the free world brings with it the disturbance of the soul, the search, and the relation of the individual with the present in which he lives is probably not the most comfortable. This is the point when solitude or inner loneliness associated with the idea of exile occurs.

An interesting affirmation regarding the ontology of exile is pointed out by Laurențiu Ulici : „this thing, apparently non important, has an important significance, considering the ontology of exile . You can run from a hostile medium, you can run from political or economical pressures, but you can't run from yourself. Whoever knows that, can choose to run from oneself, which is not a paradox if we report to the run from yourself; it is just homeopathy.”¹¹

The quote brings into the discussion the interiority of the individual, the one through which the exile is perceived. Thus, for some the exile has a physical or geographical materiality, for others we can speak about the inner exile.

Starting from the idea that the exile is not an attribute of the modern world Adrian Paul Iliescu, speaks about the inner exile.¹² He starts of course with the Antiquity, and continues with all the essential stages, pointing out the meanings of the term exile. What the author remarks is the fact that as we come closer to modernity the shape of exile changes, seldom transforming itself into an autoexile: „If exile doesn't distinguish modernity, autoexile is in fact a postmedieval project, which once initiated, follows permanently the individual modern way. Not only that the modern exile is itself a form – direct or disguised – of autoexil, but even from the experience of a 'tout court' exile it is distilled in post-renascentist Europe, through the retorts of the sensibility of an auto-exiled, in the measure in which a certain auto-banishment comes to define the moral profile of the modern individual, the way of reaction in front of the accidents happening in the public life and his report with the institutional

¹⁰ De Tocqueville Alexis - *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, în Alexis de Tocqueville, *Oeuvres, papiers et correspondance* (tome I-XIII), édition définitive publiée sous la direction de J.-P. Mayer, tome I, vol. 1, p. 252.

¹¹ Idem 8

¹² Iliescu Adrian Paul – *Exil, exil interior, modernitate* în revista *Secolul 20*, nr. 10-12/1997, 1-3/1998, 391 - 396

or spiritual communities to which he/she is exposed to”.¹³

The explanation goes on, revealing the idea according to which not the actual exile, would give a specific note to modernity, but the interiority of exile. The withdrawal into internalness is seen as an appanage of modernity, potentated by the new promoted values and the new imposed social rules.

The need of the contemporary man of what the Americans call „privacy” is with every day more acute, penetrating all the life’s compartments. The man tends nowadays towards individualism, wanting to be self sufficient, because he/she is not ready to confront any obstacle in his/her search for the long dreamed happiness . Thus the modern man wants to achieve happiness individually, without depending on others or without being conditioned by the contribution or participation of another individual. If this kind of selfishness primes, it is obvious that the moral and existential auto-exile is impossible to surpass.

In these conditions even if auto-exile may seem a secure land in which the individual is protected – because there is no one around who could threaten his/her status – he/she doesn’t find what he/she is looking for, doesn’t find the happiness he/she is dreaming about, and the road he/she is travelling on is not an easy one, because the enemy he/she is fighting with is not a real, palpable and material one, but a hidden one, unknown and maybe abstract: the self interiorness, revealed only in parts and full of surprises.

The author of the article above cited speaks about the aspiration towards interior exile due to „the thirst for decisioness” exemplified with authors like Montaigne, Machiavelli, Descartes or Berkeley. This thirst can be translated for the modern man by stating his own truth. A personal, intimate truth belonging exclusively to an individual. In this stage appears the idea of the exile into a selfmade world. If the individual is capable of creating a personal, intimate truth, then he/she is able to create in the same time his/her own world, his/her own reality, but where he/she wakes up alone, in other words exiled. Going on with the idea launched in this article I already mentioned we can say that the writer is able to auto-exile himself/herself in his/her own reality, created in his/her artistic attempt, through which he /she states his/her own truth.

¹³ Idem 12



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