The Artist's Hardships of Adjustment to Exile

Briscan ZARA CIOCÎRLEA*

Key-words: *exile, exiled artist, exile literature, literature and exile, émigré literature, psychological impact, creativity, adaptation*

Besides the luggage ready for departure at all time, the exiles always carry with them the customs, traditions and their language, the entire cultural bags and suitcases that mark the most valuable link with the old identity. But all of these exposed to a totally new environment, lose part of their beauty and utility. The customs become useless, the same happens with traditions, and the language is not understood. The subtleties of the style, crucial to understanding, established by unwritten conventions and perfectly mastered by a native speaker, outside borders are empty and broken instruments. Literature in particular, the comic of language, the poetry face the most difficult problems in translation: "In exile, a writer's gag may be loosened, but his tongue is tied" (Redfield and Tomášková 2003: 80). For most of the exiles home doesn't represent just a comfort zone, but the place where they feel part of a community by right, not by obligation or choice, and above all, the environment where, by means of common language, they are best understood.

The "case" of Ovid is probably the most convincing in this matter. In those times, translation being an almost inexistent area of study, once moved to another territory and becoming a foreign language speaker, one became a prisoner of silence, of the incapacity to express oneself by means of words. Almost nobody in Tomis spoke Latin at that time and the poet was seen as being incapable to speak at all. The abrupt discrepancy between his language and the one in the new environment gave this great man of culture, whose life had been dedicated to writing, a feeling of absolute uselessness: "Writing a poem you can read to no one/ is like dancing in the dark" (Ovid 2005: IV. 2.33− 4). Finding himself in this place, far from the initial starting point, the poet fears that he might forget his own language and lose his powers as an artist, a fear we find in the majority of those who decide to abandon their origins, even for a short period of time. A part of Ovid becomes close to wilderness that he discovers as a speechless being, in solitude, where he finds the essence of things, and the other part belongs to the civilized, social and glorious past.

For those forced to leave their native land for political reasons, on the way to acculturation, the old and rich language is perceived as both the mother tongue and the one of those who banished them, the murderers of their parents and brothers.

* „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, Romania.

BDD-A1148 © 2013 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:05 UTC)

And for a writer who is overwhelmed by the difficult challenges of the uncomfortable and newly acquired idiom and by the uncertainty that appears when using this idiom for creative reasons, it all turns into an existential dilemma of the one lacking his environment of communication and interaction. Some of them become bilingual in their writing and speech or use their adopted language for professional reasons only (newspaper writings for example), and the native one for creative purposes. Some publish for audiences of both languages and some of them, the radicals, are the ones who refuse to use the mother tongue ever again, suffering too much after losing the former audience or despising it too much.

Thus the difference between generations of exiles is made according to the degree in which the native language is used. While the surviving generation tends most of the time to hold on to the old tongue, the next generations – which are also in pace with the models of acculturation – write mostly in the host language. What all of them share, due to the bilingual condition, is the writing/speaking "between languages", an effect (not the only one) which manifests itself by the frequent using of the other idiom words and phrases in their writings. These narrative mixing between the new language, the native tongue and the personal interpretation of the author are expressed on a linguistic level by using the "wrong" words (wrongly translated) from the host language in the text.

The adjustment to the new language is long and difficult: "you go and build a plank patched up of dictionaries, a narrow bridge of careful translations, through which to reach others…" (Weiselberger 1947: 103). But this proves insufficient since the new acquisition must become part of a reflex, must come naturally, and for a long time this makes it seem like an object out of reach:

> At first you feel the new language like a stranger's coat on your body, uncomfortable, embarrassing, with sentences too long or to short like misfitting arm-sleeves, while the buttons of verbs and conjunctions which should close two thoughts are missing. Years of struggle until you get used to wear the new idiom (Weiselberger 1947: 103).

The adoption of the new language and the abandoning of the old one resembles a great deal with the loss of the self reflection in the world or like the character Peter Schlemihl in Adelbert von Chamisso's story, the loss of one's shadow:

> Your genuine shadow lost [!], you grow an artificial one. And a bit proudly, you walk your small ersatz shadow through the columns of English newspapers. […]There are thousands and thousands of Peter Schlemihls wandering through the world now, people who have lost their shadows (Weiselberger 1947: 108).

All the pains of the newly "reconstructed", "remodeled" man have no other purpose other than reaching normality he lost after crossing the borders between the father land and the unknown; each and everyone tries in different ways to be like the others, the majority, "the ordinary human beings who are not ghostly specters, but cast black, earthly shadows in the sunlight" (Weiselberger 1947: 144). There is a profound connection between language and identity. Thus, once adopted, welcomed into the house of the spirit, the new language produces its own changes in the structure of the mind itself of the new citizen; it shapes him, it fits him into the new background for a complete integration, placing him away from the old one because

BDD-A1148 © 2013 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:05 UTC)

"a language shift entails a loss of self" (Utsch 2005: 37). As an example, we bring up Joseph Conrad who was adopted by the genius of the [English] language more than the other way around, and the new idiom fashioned his still plastic character through an "implicit equation of language and identity" (Kreisel 1985: 126), a process "too mysterious to explain". This probably is the main reason for the lack of Polish identity in his English works.

Logically, in the opposite direction, the exiles who keep their old language should not give up on their selves and remain untouched by the overwhelming influence of the new background, a fact proven by the numerous exiled communities linguistically isolated from different corners of the world which live in the way, the pace and style of the native country, as if the spatial mutation hadn't taken place at all.

The individual who decides at one point in his life to transfer himself not only from a space to another, but from a language to another, must be aware of the fact that this decision brings with it a radical change in the existence of the individual himself:

> I wanted therefore to embrace, totally, the language, and with it the attitudes, the cast of mind, the way of thinking and feeling of [English] civilization. I was only dimly aware that this would mean, on a very deep level, an entirely different approach to feeling, and therefore an alteration of basic parts of one's identity (Kreisel 1985: 120).

For this reason the exile's decision to adopt the new idiom and give up on the mother tongue, if not entirely, at least partially, for a strictly family or personal correspondence usage, is decisive. And for this reason also, not a few times, the dimensions of this decision trigger a crisis that will last or leave marks on the course of the entire adult life who will feel all the time that he "tears out the very roots of the psychic being, obliterates the very core of consciousness of which language is the prime instrument" (Kreisel 1985: 122).

Identity is associated with elements like language, environment, space in which one lives and objects that offer a familiar sense of continuity. All these elements ensure the individual of the certainty and stability of a normal life, of the possibility to achieve predictable goals. But when this situation is abruptly interrupted and a sudden change appears, the lack of balance resulting immediately afterwards creates an extremely difficult situation which constrains the mind to appeal to surviving instincts and skills, accessing the ancestral information which until then had been kept on hide, unused. In such a context the subject tries to regain balance, to force "readjusting the environment with the self" (Brennan 1988: 85−87). The almost mandatory consequence of this process is that the identity of the individual, being on a suspended state, must be rehabilitated, reconstructed. Consciously or not, the self in exile tries to search out for memories, recollections which, after a while of repeating trials to regain balance, successfully or not, start "betraying the self" (Brennan 1988: 85−87), sending it into an even more unbalanced state. The individual who until then tried intensely to keep everything in order in his mind, and protect it as it was, finds out that he is about to lose it altogether through his fingers. We find here correlations between the representation of identity and the key concepts of the Freudian theory on the self: displacement,

BDD-A1148 © 2013 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:05 UTC)

selective memory, symbolization, suppression, sublimation. This situation is a constant battle in exile.

Looking at things from the outside, identity is formed of a "multitude of social identities" (Zavalloni 1983: 207) which consists of "self identity" (*ibidem*) elements such as sex, nation, profession, age group, social class, religion etc. and other elements of "alternative identity" (*ibidem*) such as foreign groups, opposite sex, different religious origins, political tendencies etc. A stable personality ensures not only a balance between external and internal factors, but also a certain balance between "self identity" elements themselves. Ideally, all these facets of one's personality should coexist harmoniously, but this doesn't always happen because of the influence of the "external forces" represented by the "alternative identity" elements and, as a consequence, a conflict takes place which leads to profound mental discomfort. In everyday life these conflicts are "minor nuances" (everyday family or professional problems), but on intense cases, they can develop to situations in which the subject might feel ostracized either by a community or by himself, in which case the situation becomes unbearable. In such an extreme case the individual tries to replace the social environment with another one more bearable or searches for a surrogate. This surrogate depends on the individual's capacity to use his imagination, to create fiction. Thus it may be a completely imaginary world in which all the external negative elements will be eliminated or a "filtered" version of the real culture in which only the positive needs and expectations are allowed to pass. In consequence the individual will perceive only the elements considered as "good", "beautiful", "just".

In the process of adjustment to the new experience, migrants give up on aspects of their identity prior to their departure and assimilate new ones. But not everything old is abandoned and not all new is accepted. Many of them, because of the fact that they were forced to exile, remain deeply attached to the previous identity, refusing to give up on many aspects of it and, meanwhile, neglecting the potentially new and productive identity. Meanwhile their children integrate themselves more rapidly to the new circumstances and the new culture, allowing a gap between generations. This is explained through Erik H. Erikson's perspective referring to the connection between identity and the cultural context: "The individual must learn to be most himself where he means most to others – those others, to be sure, who have come to mean most to him" (Erikson 1959: 109). In other words identity depends a great deal to mutual understanding between the subject and the cultural environment, a big part of that being due to similarity between the individual self and that of the people he interacts with. In this circumstance there is a mutual sharing of information of the same kind, essential to all individuals. It is all about the cooperative position in society, if not a central one – the idea Mircea Eliade was mentioning when talking about the "symbolism of the center" (Eliade 1982: 100) –, otherwise, as Joseph Brodsky, would say, an exile is sentenced to "being lost in humanity, […] between billiards: becoming a needle in the proverbial sack" (Brodsky *apud* Albahari 2007: 6). Abandoning a small center where almost everything is known and familiar to some other place where nothing is like that is a real trauma, but finding another center in which your part is at least just as important as before, this is a real victory.

BDD-A1148 © 2013 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:05 UTC)

Such a perception of the influence of the external factors, the foreign elements, on the identity of the individual derives from the fact that every subject is characterized by the difference between himself and the social environment he belongs to and lives in at a certain point of his life (Ricoeur 1995: 39). The individual is in a permanent connection and trial to adapt to the above mentioned environment, through a feedback process which, under normal circumstances would give the individual a balance, a sense of stability. But when a drastic change occurs, the adjustment routine becomes much more intense, exceeding its usual limits, this thing leading in most of the cases to an estrangement of the individual to his/her self which tries too much and succeeds too little to adapt; "the discontinuity on the outside mirrors the discontinuity inside" (Berg 1996: 5) as in every trauma known to psychologists. The exile doesn't feel himself as being the same as the one before and he doesn't fit in the present either, he is a stranger to himself and the people around him, "he remains outside looking in, whether critically or longingly" (*ibidem*). The task of the self evaluation becomes much more difficult, if not impossible, the real belonging being a permanent dilemma ("I no longer belong there, but here" or, even worse, "I no longer belong there, but I don't belong here, either").

The above mentioned process doesn't apply only to the real exiles, banished from their native country or the self exiled, but to the ones feeling banished in their own country, the ones who live outside the community and social interaction. Those find it impossible to communicate constructively and eloquently with their co-citizens. This communication turns towards their own selves, becoming a "dialogue" by oneself. Artists especially, inspired by "muses" (entities outside perception), are always giving the impression of being foreigners in their own country; they describe and write about themselves firstly for their own sake as a result of the permanent dialogue mentioned above with their own selves. In this perspective the artist's condition is that of a being almost completely displaced from everything familiar, a condition allowing them, with the price of a permanent lack of security and stability, to see the world through the objective eyes of the intruder. This highlights the truth behind Maria-Ines Lagos-Pope's assertion about the "coincidence" that "it is significant and not coincidental that among the most recent Noble Prize winners for literature one finds several exiles" (*apud* Berg 1996: 5).

The battle to regain identity is kept constantly by the exile on a double front. One is that from the inside where he tries to regain balance and clarity of the self image, the second is against the new society he lives in. In other words, the war was started in the first place to conquer two strongholds: self identity and collective identity. If in the country of origin he was a citizen like any other, in exile he becomes one of a different origin, nationality. There he stands out, without doing anything special (for example, if in Romania, Norman Manea was a Romanian writer, in USA he is a Romanian American writer). Losing both his self identity, he turns into a representative for his original nation, this thing leading to a fight for regaining the simple name, the normality, recognition as being a self defining part of the new environment.

Once pushed towards exile, people might lose their titles attached to the citizenship, but meanwhile they can become more attached than before to what is perceived as "the national spirit". The nationalism and alienation are tightly connected

BDD-A1148 © 2013 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:05 UTC)

to each other: the more one is a nationalist, the more painfully he will feel the exile and the other way around. The latent dimension of the collective identity which many times is ignored, being included "in bulk" among the advantages of belonging to a certain area that come for free, while in exile it will be recognized as a true and desired value. Outside borders, being in a state of "suspended" citizenship many of these nationals discover, rediscover or invent their own countries, their "collective souls". As long as the exile is in a continuous war with his own self and the society, he will be the "healthy carrier" of a multiple identity which brings with it a multiple social life and an experience just the same. He learns in time to constantly fight until the complete identification with the new collectivity or to accept the situation as a given destiny, as an incurable disease that forces him to see beyond the everyday illusions and to create his own citizenship, anywhere, with open borders and always changing.

The continuous battle to adjust identity to the new environment creates the impression of fluidity, lack of physical stability. The fluid character of the exile gives it the capacity to take any shape and in the end to picture not just one idea about life and the world or eternity, but multiple conclusions. Because of that one can only have the feeling of one's incapacity to understand the world around, to encapsulate in a single recipient the whole flowing mass of existence.

"The metaphysical condition of exile" (Brodsky *apud* Ugrešić 12) and the permanent tension it lays on the subject determines many times the occurrence of surrendering, giving up the fight, in which situation the exile might give himself in to violent acts of self destruction. On the other hand, the individual who successfully went through the whole crisis and managed to rebuild from ground up his own and new "persona" finds himself in the position of a hybrid social and cultural identity with elements borrowed both from the society of origin and the new one. In the situation in which the exile was caused by conditions inside the individual, from his deep spiritual structure, the presence of which existed before the moment of departure from the mother land, in the condition described by Julia Kristeva when "one becomes a foreigner in another country because one is already a foreigner from within" (Kristeva 1991: 14), then the displacement might not only be towards the father land, but also towards the idea of father land in general, in which case the adjustment to the new environment, whatever that might be, and the battle for regaining a new identity are much less disturbing and last significantly shorter periods of time. Those "local conflicts" are in fact reoccurring episodes on a larger, but diluted scale in the course of the entire existence of the individual in question.

Tristan Tzara, for example, tried his whole life to escape from nothing else but himself, "the instances of his self-image he (negatively) perceived as developing into well-defined, «crystallized» personalities, with a clear public function and (all too) easily classifiable by his peers" (Boldor 2005: 60). He always tried not to belong to any place and achieve no goal. This fact was the reason he always rejected the idea that he was the father of the Dada movement. This kind of artist reaches the point in the end where, out of the infinite desire to touch absolute freedom, he invariably hits absurdity in everything he does or says: denying the denial itself. Like in the cases of involuntary exile, this endless evasion is the main source for creative energy of the artist, its only condition of existence being a constant and

BDD-A1148 © 2013 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:05 UTC)

never-ending search for things to deny. Otherwise, once hit the rock bottom and all the energy being drained the inspiration also disappears.

In the life of any exiled artist there exist a moment in which he becomes aware that all the possible ways to return home had been exhausted and that there is no hope left to do it. This turning point has an impact on the individual's mind just as strong as the first one, of the actual departure, and is the source of unpredictable behaviour, even violent ones. He turns into a man led by the survival instinct only, the fight or flight reflex, a savage. The senses are sharper, he viciously rejects any label one might address him, and refuses to be characterized in any way. He feels dominated by a terrifying anxiety and paranoia which he experiences in direct connection with the wasted ways and methods to run for salvation. He doesn't trust anyone, is hopeless regarding the future, cannot get close to anyone, feels alone even when in the company of others. His immediate actions and implicitly his creations are anarchic. In other words, he becomes a difficult person. If he cannot get over this crisis and his condition worsens, he will become a foreigner in his own body, own house, with his luggage always ready at the door, living a life outside the norm and being seen and characterized by the others as a genuine intruder, a disturbed "other", irritated and potentially dangerous. Having enough time (he can easily be spotted in a bar or a café) to think about the past and to remember endlessly the scenario of his misery, he strengthens his hatred towards the entire world. His creative power pointed towards positive or negative things is unstoppable and is hardly ignored by the people in charge (art critics or the Police).

In every exiled artist there is an Ovid or a Dante, an ever unfortunate and a perfectly adapted who moves between the two definite inner modes. Ovid couldn't give up on his memories of the past with the splendors of Rome and he could hardly survive, Dante found the strength and inspiration in the pain of exile where he wrote *Divina Commedia*. All these elements (balance, central or active role in the society, assimilation of new values etc.), that the exiled artist picks up in order to define himself and to maintain a coherent discourse on an as long as possible period of time, represent references, key points of his physical, psychological and intellectual entity. From the creativity and art point of view, exile, migration, displacement in general, having as a result the alienation of the human spirit represent some of the most important influences on the evolution of the human kind.

Bibliography

Albahari 2007: David Albahari, *The exiled fragments*, in „In exile", Ljubljana: Institute of Art Production KITCH, <http://www.kitch.si/livingonaborder/files/Albahari%20The%20Exiled%20Fragments.pdf>.

Berg 1996: Nancy E. Berg, *Exile from exile. Israeli writers from Iraq*, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press.

Boldor 2005: Alexandru Boldor, *Exile as severance*, dissertation, Louisiana State University, <http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-07122005-112749/unrestricted/Boldor_dis.pdf>.

Brennan 1988: Andrew Brennan, *Conditions of Identity: A Study in Identity and Survival*, Oxford, Clarendon.

Eliade 1982: Mircea Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.

Erikson 1959: Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*, New York, Norton.

BDD-A1148 © 2013 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:05 UTC)

Kreisel 1985: Henry Kreisel, *Language and Identity: A Personal Essay*, in "Another Country: writings by and about Henry Kreisel", Shirley C. Neuman (ed.), 119–134.
Kristeva 1991: Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, New York, Columbia University Press.
Ovid 2005, *The Poems of Exile. Tristia and the Black Sea Letters*, Peter Green (ed.), University of California Press.
Redfield and Tomášková 2003: Peter Redfield and Silvia Tomášková, *The exile of anthropology*, in "The concept of foreign. An interdisciplinary dialogue", Rebecca Saunders (ed.), Lanham-Boulder – New York – Oxford, Lexington Books.
Ricoeur 1995: Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Kathleen Blamey (trans.), University of Chicago Press.
Ugrešić: Dubravka Ugrešić, *The writer in exile*, Institute of Art Production KITCH, Ljubljana, <http://www.kitch.si/livingonaborder/node/11>.
Utsch 2005: Susanne Utsch, *Vergnügen und Qual des Englisch-Schreibens: An Approach to the Literary Language Shift of Klaus Mann*, in "Helga Schreckenberger: Die Alchemie des Exils. Exil als schöpferischer Impuls", Viena, Verlag Edition Praesens.
Weiselberger 1947: Carl Weiselberger, *The Man without a Shadow*, Ottawa, Citizen.
Zavalloni 1983: Marisa Zavalloni, *Ego-ecology: The Study of the Interaction between Social and Personal Identities*, in „Identity: Personal and Socio-Cultural", Anita Jacobson-Widding (ed.), Uppsala, Almqvist & Wiksell.

Abstract

Once displaced from the birth territory, the artist becomes at first an easy prey to disorientation, uncertainty, lack of spiritual balance and, as a consequence, to nostalgia, desire to return to the land of certainty, where almost everything was where it should've been, and where it was easy to find. In such a situation, little things, easy to overlook, at hand or ignored become of an immense importance, revealing overnight an entire universe which until then had been placed in shadow and which becomes the main target of the exile. Nostalgia triggers after that a crisis that manifests itself on many levels of the exiled artist's structure: time, space, language, culture etc. Each of these components creates a dialectal tension which is hardly or at all solved and with which the individual fights his/her entire life, having the feeling of perpetual pain, associated many times with the torments of Purgatory. Pain which is transferred automatically one way or another to his/her art.

BDD-A1148 © 2013 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:36:05 UTC)