Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov • Vol. 2 (51) - 2009
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies

HOMO EXSILIUS OR THE PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A WANDERER

Mihai ION[1]

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to tackle the phenomenon of 'exile' from the standpoint of the 'sufferer', of the person who is directly and irreversibly involved in it. The paper focuses on two main issues, each being allotted a separate subchapter. The first is a psychological portrayal of the migrant – and the exiled writer in particular – from a double perspective (insider vs. outsider), revealing his/her most troubling complexes. The second traces a set of existential 'shocks' that the migrant (writer) experiences at his/her destination. In conclusion, the exile's psychological transformations are highlighted, with particular emphasis on the writer's degrees of adaptation to the new cultural environment.*

Key words: *exile, (e/im)migrant, existential 'shocks'.*

1. Introduction

Almost everyone who approaches the topic of 'exile', whether from the inside or the outside, as a researcher or a simple observer of the phenomenon, admits being confronted with a complex, multifaceted concept. In the most common sense, the *exile* represents the state of being sent away from your native country or home, especially for political reasons or as a punishment. It may also define the person who lives away from his/her own country by choice or because forced to do so.

In this paper, I shall be rather concerned with the second definition, more precisely with *homo exsilius*, the leading actor of this most interesting social phenomenon. While discussing the dual nature of the migrant and his existential shocks at entering a completely new world, special emphasis will be placed upon the exile as a writer, considering his dependence on both his language as a creative tool and his fellow countrymen as a reading public.

2. The (E/Im)migrant and his Complexes

'By definition, going into exile means taking a one-way road. Yet the exile in itself can only be understood in terms of a double perspective: the exile leaves/ emigrates from his native country and reaches/immigrates into his adoptive country.' (Alexandrescu 217-218). This is the dual perspective, of the *insider/outsider* type, which S. Alexandrescu suggests in analysing a bicephalous character: **the (e/im)migrant**, without whom the phenomenon of exile cannot be imagined.

The (e/im)migrant is an 'interstitial' species, destined to oscillate between the poles of two different spaces/cultures: one native and 'peripheral', the other adoptive and 'central'. His drama resides in both losing contact with his *source*-culture and taking a feeble grip to the *target*-culture; hence, his fundamental complex: the sensation of *invisibility*. His transparency is given by the fact that at the two poles of his existential itinerary he is perceived in contradictory ways:

[1] Dept. of Foreign Languages, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

BDD-A20249 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:49:23 UTC)

'At the two extremes of his journey, he is regarded differently: the emigrant's departure is felt with a sense of relief («we got rid of him!»), regret («what a pity he left»), envy («what a shame we stayed») or resentment («another one has made it!»), while the immigrant's arrival is tackled with indifference, annoyance («what's this one doing here») and, again, resentment («he's coming to teach us the alphabet!»), although sometimes, especially on formal occasions, when it is not fit to speak otherwise, he is declared that «your presence is a great honour to us». In both situations, the (e/im)migrant is looked askance at.' (Alexandrescu 218).

He displays a deviant behaviour with regard to both communities: he leaves from where the others stay and reaches the place where the others have been forever. It is a paradox he cannot overcome. Whatever he may do, he is aware of his 'otherness': 'Every (e/im)migrant's dream is therefore to abolish the difference, in the same way as other typical deviants dream of removing their stain or stigma: a black person wants to look like white people, a child and an old man wish they were adults (at last and again, respectively), the crippled – a healthy person…' (219).

S. Alexandrescu shows an astute psychological grasp in noticing the fact that the immigrant can gain some access to the *public* life in the host country, but never will he enter the *private* life, the circle of friends of a native person, because of his allogeneous nature: 'This means the immigrant's integration into society, to some extent, as far as his *public* life is concerned, but it is never the case for the *private* one. The law compels the majority to (formally) respect the minority, but not to make friends with it.' (219). Hence, the minority's centrifugal tendency to organise its private life in *parallel worlds*, or cultural 'enclaves', beside that/those of the majority, with no interference, or strictly incidental contacts.

This 'psychological profile' of the (e/im)migrant as depicted by Prof. Alexandrescu seems extremely useful to me in understanding the emotional background and the moral traumas which the Romanian writers of the exile felt and almost invariably confessed.

3. The Exile and his Existential 'Shocks'

In a very interesting article, *The Provisional Exile*, the poetess and art critic Magda Cârneci traces a series of existential *shocks* experienced by any individual of a specific cultural, religious and ethnic background, transplanted in a foreign environment. The starting point of her discussion is the following:

'If you really want to wake up from the slumber inevitably inculcated in you by an existence lived within the steady and protective limits of your being, your environment, your class, your culture, your homeland, then impose a temporary living abroad on yourself.' (313).

Heeding her own advice, after having won a scholarship to Paris in 1997, Magda Cârneci will experience a self-imposed exile, discovering and charting a set of 'initiating trials'.

3.1. The Shock of Civilisation

Emerging from a marginal, isolated world, distorted by a totalitarian regime, the author faces a 'hi-tech', opulent civilisation: 'The shops and motorways make you feel humble. The automatic offices in public institutions and banks scare you. The excessive luxury of shop windows outrage you. The extraordinary richness of bookshops and libraries are breathtaking.' (314). This very first shock is perhaps the easiest to overcome; in this case, adaptability seems to work quite fast and effectively.

BDD-A20249 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:49:23 UTC)

3.2. The Cultural Shock

This is precisely the moment of disillusionment, at which you cease to believe that you belong to a European civilisation, that you have got a sound knowledge of French culture, that you are well-equipped with the necessary skills and techniques to function properly within an allogeneous cultural environment: 'Only gradually do you begin to realise that you understand much less than you have expected. The actual French culture is clearly far more complex than the rough draft from the books' (314-315). The contact with the 'profound France', with the every-day, palpable world, reveals the sense of otherness, 'your status of an «alien», a «foreigner», in a sense both surprising and disturbing' (315).

3.3. The Linguistic Shock

The author encounters serious difficulties in speaking the 'real' French. She realises that her language skills learnt during the school years and focused primarily on the written, formal language, only provide her with an artificial tool of communication: 'The French you've learnt back home is obviously an artificial language, learnt from the books and used only to read books, to convey abstract information, and not to conceptualise and handle a real, socio-existential diversity.' (315).

3.4. The Instructional Shock

The author's contact with the French academic environment is astonishing. Comparatively, her native educational system proves its fallibility, fuelled by various factors, from the lack of a deep-rooted academic tradition to the existence of a political climate that fully embraced the policy of censorship: 'due to this discrepancy between the two educational systems, you begin to perceive or merely presume the probable frailty, the possible approximation of your own cultural constitution. Descending from a world in which the institutions have often had a precarious existence, in which information has long been incomplete and censored, the contact with an age-old and free academic tradition may trouble your mind' (316). It is the time for self suspicion, when you start to question your cultural background and become aware of your belonging to a 'provincial' culture as opposed to the 'metropolitan' one, into which you have just stepped.

3.5. The Shock of the Political Dimension

It is the 'quake' which you experience when passing 'from a social regime entirely pervaded and controlled by the terrifying administration of a unique political party' (317) into a regime 'of concepts, institutions, even cultural battles which animate and periodically change Western society' (318). Accordingly, you realise that notions, words, concepts have different meanings in the Western and Eastern worlds, as they denote socially and politically incompatible realities. Thus the exile (be him merely 'provisional') has to learn this '*political language* which contains – invisibly and yet significantly – all forms of manifestation in Western life' (318).

3.6. The Cosmopolitan Shock

The Western world, with its large crowded cities and a multi-ethnic population, always exerts great pressure upon an individual of a relatively homogeneous ethnic background: 'it is not enough that you have to swiftly assimilate one or two industrial ages: within the huge, cultural melting-pot that every Western metropolis stands for, you still have to bear the encounter with numberless people of

BDD-A20249 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:49:23 UTC)

different languages and customs, equally entitled to existence as you are' (319).

3.7. The Shock of the Mass

This final shock naturally derives from the previous, being a sort of corollary or logical consequence of the cosmopolitan vertigo: 'You have to (…) resist the terrible pressure which the enormous ocean of people joined together exerts upon you, brutally revealing your solitude and obscurity, your common, possibly superfluous, condition among myriads of similar beings, where you can lose and dissolve yourself quite readily.' (319).

Under these stresses and strains, the exile inevitably suffers a series of radical, irreversible mutations in his being and consciousness: 'Left under the inner rubble of your unexpected deconstruction, you are experiencing an illness specific to the exile, which is technically referred to as *the terrifying show of the identity's crumbling*' (319).

4. Conclusion

The exile is an experience which most often leaves permanent marks on the individual's consciousness. Disconnected from a *source*-culture, cast in the middle of a brand-new, unknown environment, the immigrant faces the difficult problem of adopting new cultural stereotypes if he wants to fit into the host society.

Being a writer is even harder, as not only does one lose contact with the native language, the vehicle of the artistic expression, but also with an audience whose presence is vital in justifying one's own existence as a literary creator. Some writers abandoned writing altogether, dedicating themselves to some more practical schemes; others decided to carry on, heeding their inborn drive for writing fiction or poetry in their mother tongue, and thus preserving their innermost identity. Very few, though exceptionally gifted (such as Cioran or Ionesco, for example), adopted the language of the host culture and became prominent figures of worldwide recognition and fame.

References

1. Alexandrescu, Sorin. "Invizibilitatea emigrantului". *Secolul 20*. 10-12/1-3 (1997/1998): pp. 217-219.
2. Cârneci, Magda. "Exilul provizoriu". *Secolul 20*. 10-12/1-3 (1997/1998): pp. 313-319.

BDD-A20249 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:49:23 UTC)