LANGUAGE METAMORPHOSES IN EXILE[1]

Abstract: *The problem of language has always been placed at the central core of various discussions issued by exile in general, and by the writers' situation in this specific context in particular. More than in any other case, language refuses now to be a mere means of communication through which one can satisfy and accomplish their everyday needs and necessities, becoming the very raw material with the help of which the artist can make himself or herself understood, can express his or her ideas, feelings and thoughts, can reach the readers' sensitivity.*

By making direct reference to the very situation of two Romanian exiled writers, my paper focuses on different possibilities of reaction, identifying not only the threats and perils involved in this process of changing mentalities and destinies, but also the advantages which, nevertheless, attempt to counterbalance this usually bleak picture of alienation.

Keywords: *language, exile, alienation.*

In the attempt to chart and, at the same time, highlight the implications triggered off by the concept of exile, namely its definition, tone, modulation, position and expansion in time, one should, first of all, resort to its traits and connections with other related terms, and also to its justification in the larger context of globalization, multiculturalism, and pluralism. As a political, economic and social phenomenon, it has mainly been defined through notions such as displacement, abandonment, negation, otherness, challenged identity, assimilation, integration, diaspora, migration, hybridity, and only by understanding the entangled complex of values that govern someone's life and their mentality can we hope to reach an almost complete projection of the entire structure.

However, the general tendency which seems to prevail in the attempt of pinpointing the features of this complex phenomenon is that of relating it to a terminus point, a traumatic experience, the direct result not only of a physical displacement from the native land, but also of cultural and linguistic deprivation (Lagos-Pope, 1988: 8), an uprooting synonymous with a "translation from the centre to the periphery, from organized space invested with meaning to a boundary where the conditions of experience are problematic" (Edwards, 1988: 16-17).

The problems raised by the concept of **language** have always been related to the phenomenon of exile, too. Language plays an essential role in the process of adaptation. It represents the means through which one can make himself or herself known and heard, this being the necessary condition to be accomplished for it to trigger off the materialization of all the other dreams and desires a person might have. If the process of transmutation from the mother tongue into the adoptive language represents an almost impossible to surpass obstacle even for an ordinary individual, this has become an unbearable ordeal for a writer. Consequently, for this privileged category of exiles, namely the writers, the endeavours of changing their own language and the difficulties encountered in adopting the language of their new home, in order to preserve their gift of handling words, are perceived as a terminus point heralding the very projection of a perspectiveless destiny.

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In his suggestively entitled article *Dog Words*, Abdelfattah Kilito (1994: *xxvii*) tries to describe how the act of speaking a different language threatens to strip the speaker of his or her self, transforming him or her into an animal.

> No matter what he does, he will be seen as an animal. When two languages meet, one of them is necessarily linked to animality. Speak like me or you are an animal. I would have to speak from a position of strength in order to speak in this way, otherwise I would be considered an animal. There is no way that we can speak of conflict in this case: for a conflict to arise the two opponents must be on equal, or at least comparable, footing. Lions fight tigers, but are quite content to simply devour rabbits or dogs. The state of bilingualism does not evoke the image of two adversaries approaching one another, armed with nets and tridents. In this case, one of the gladiators is already on the ground and is getting ready to receive the death blow.

Interestingly enough, the animal chosen to embody the position of the stranger, of the outsider, is the monkey, imitating not the language of dogs, but their barking, the act of speaking being no longer something normal, natural, but a constant, perpetual trial.

> He knows himself to be a monkey, and an asthmatic one at that. Every time he opens his mouth, he must exert a significant effort, an effort that sets him apart from the others who speak comfortably, like people playing themselves, who speak as they breathe, and whose breathing is calm and regular. It is the effort that marks him as a monkey and mimic (*ibidem*).

The difficulty seems paradoxical if we take into account, not necessarily the language that Abdelfattah Kilito makes, in a way, reference to, i.e. French, but another language, namely English, which presently occupies the position of *lingua franca* in the world. However, according to Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew (1999: 37), "it should be noticed that we are talking about an international auxiliary language and not about a language to replace all the others". As a consequence, the growth of English should be perceived "more as a result of globalism rather than linguistic or cultural imperialism" (*ibidem*).

Nevertheless, things are far from being as simple as they may seem. The imposition of a new language, instead of being perceived as the best way of interpersonal and international communication, for the majority of writers had mainly the effect of creating a cultural *other*, a marginalized, confined, and silenced individual, deprived of his or her self or identity. The only possible solution left is the challenge of translation which, in its turn, brings about a series of new problems and dilemmas.

In his book *Despre traducere* (*About Translation*), Paul Ricoeur (2005: 66-67) compares this complex term to a "relationship between two partners": *the stranger* – a concept which includes the literary work, the author and his or her language and *the target reader* of the translated work. The translator occupies the central position, being thus subjected to two masters, serving the needs of the *stranger* in translating his or her work and, at the same time, serving the needs of the *reader* in bringing him or her closer to the final result. This condition seems paradoxical, fulfilling two functions or roles: the first one consists in the translator's vow of devotion, while the second one is represented by the very suspicion of *betrayal*. In the article *How to Read a Translation*, Lawrence Venuti (2004) refers to the same problem, stating the fact that in the process of translation the already mentioned vow of devotion is usually overtaken by the interest manifested in satisfying the desires of the target audience. So, the accusation of *betrayal* is generally justified, the translator being in the position of a "resourceful imitator who rewrites the original to appeal to another audience in a different language and culture, often in a different period. This audience ultimately takes priority, ensuring that the

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verbal clothing the translator cuts for the foreign work never fits exactly" (*ibidem*), this reflecting mainly the ideas, the meanings and the symbols in which the receiving culture is likely to take interest.

Nevertheless, Paul Ricoeur (*ibidem*) identifies another problem involved in the process of translation, i.e. the *resistance* coming from the receiving culture, this, in its turn, also bringing about the pretension to self-sufficiency and the refusal to encourage the stranger, all leading to a so-called "linguistic ethnocentrism" and "cultural hegemony". And this very fact brings us closer again to the marginalized position of the *other*, of the exile forced to sacrifice his beliefs, set of values and moral precepts, language, and why not, the entire life on the altar of a new country and culture.

A Romanian writer of Jewish origin, Norman Manea belongs to the last exiles that left the country during Ceauşescu's communist system and dictatorship. His destiny seems to have been prone to various changes, the author beginning his life odyssey in an internment camp of Transnistria, at the tender age of five. But the initiation does not stop here, the artist being then subjected to the oppression, perversity and perfidy of a communist system, which offers him no other possibility than the terrifying prospect of his leaving the country. Manea's encounter with exile, then, at the age of fifty, brings him in the position of facing his own re-birth, this situation being now easily translatable into a new traumatizing experience, a new initiation: taking everything from the very beginning, learning the steps, the gestures, the movements, the words, life actually in itself, this strange amalgam of different existential patterns, of different influences and ways of being offering the writer the perfect *raw material* for his literary work.

Trying to justify the equivalence between exile and the very act of committing suicide, the writer (1999: 90) places the accent on the artist's ordeal of finding his own identity, his own voice, under the circumstances of being dispossessed of the very happiness of taking refuge in writing and literature.

According to Eva Behring (2001: 181), exile has placed Norman Manea in the position of a hermaphrodite being, divided between his mother tongue (from which he will never be able to separate), and the new life that offers him the possibility of preserving his intellectual and artistic freedom. Nevertheless, the most painful loss for a writer is the language, the author constantly underlining this fact, both in his books and in his interviews. When defining his condition of an exile, Manea (2003: 290) mentions the term *Hypocrino*, this actually representing the exiles' salute. By analysing all the implications and significances gathered in this simple term, the writer defines it as: "a set of meanings sliding from simple speech, to orating, to acting on stage, to feigning or speaking falsely". Thus, according to this point of view, the newcomers are in the position of learning words and meanings the way children do in nursery schools. The new language no longer represents their possession, being merely rented, and functioning as a means of survival. Under such circumstances, the position of a writer is far from being simple. As Manea confesses, the main tragedy for an exiled writer is his language, this being both his home and his country, the only thing impossible to abandon and leave behind.

> The mother tongue can hardly be replaced. For a Jewish writer, even more than for other writers, language represents an official recognition, a spiritual home. His handling of the language is more than a simple achievement. Through language he feels rich and stable, and when he finally takes possession of it, he has obtained his citizenship, a sense of belonging (1999: 173 – translation mine).

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In taking into discussion the experience of translating his work, Norman Manea (*ibidem*: 115) identifies it with a struggle for spiritual survival, a continuous negotiation and simplification, in order to facilitate the translators' task, this fact being fatal for a writer. Sometimes the result is different from the original, the new text undergoing a certain change or distortion. The author (2008: 429) gives a good example in this respect, one of his articles, initially published in an American magazine and then subsequently translated into Romanian, losing its original meaning and essence. In this complex process of translation, Romanian artists and writers are generally handicapped by their cultural isolation and by the lack of a revealing comparison with other literary productions. The author's confessions from this perspective are essential in defining the exiled writers' ordeal of communicability in a new country, and in a totally different culture.

Manea (*ibidem*: 398-399) defines the situation of an exiled writer in terms of a bewildering contradiction. The feeling of relaxation and freedom experienced after being released from the penal colony of a communist system is instantaneously suffocated, in a writer's case, by the ghost waiting for him on the border, with the express purpose of cutting his tongue. Exactly the moment he has got, more than ever, something to say, he loses the possibility of doing it. The writer has earned a freedom which he cannot use, the freedom in itself becoming actually a trauma.

A friend's wish written on a postcard after five years of American experience: " 'I wish for you that one morning we will all wake up speaking, reading, and writing Romanian; and that Romanian will be declared the American national language!' " (2003:290-291) is important in revealing the difficulties involved not only in the process of changing languages, mentalities, patterns of thinking and feeling, but also in the attempt to adjust to the new adoptive context and environment. And yet, when the imagination comes with the 'perfect' solution of a Romanian-speaking America, the rough reality obviously contradicts the secure imaginary projection.

> The apartment building's doorman suddenly greeting me in Romanian? Bard College's president speaking to me in rapid Romanian? My accountant explaining to me the American tax regulations in Romanian? The loudspeaker in the subway announcing the next stop in, at last, an intelligible language? A sudden relaxation in my relations with my American friends, students, publishers? A joy, or a nightmare? No, the American environment in which I now live must stay as it is; the miracle imagined in Cynthia's message would only have added a new dimension to an already grotesque situation (*ibidem*).

As the writer confesses (1999: 185-186), after the age of 50, the literary language is difficult to change. It can undergo some transformations, but its essence remains mainly the same. The everyday language, on the other hand, is subjected to the general linguistic context of the receiving country, this fact being actually the one leading to the tragicomic perspective of a Romanian-ized America.

Poet, novelist and essayist, Andrei Codrescu, on the other hand, cannot be easily included in a certain category of artists, his sinuous life initiation, translated into an impressive bibliography, testifying to his capacity of projecting a multi-faceted personality, which escapes the rigours of classification. As he actually confesses in the preface to the Romanian edition of his book *The Hole in the Flag: a Romanian Exile's Story of Return and Revolution* (2008a: 7-8), he was born in Sibiu in 1946, became American 20 years later, in 1966 and experienced a new rebirth, a spiritual one, in 1989, as a Romanian citizen again, although an exiled one this time, pleading for hope and trust in his native country's future. The writer's words are essential in understanding his

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simultaneously situating himself, and also proclaiming his belonging to two separate national identities: Romanian and American.

The exile, and all its implications, i.e. material difficulties, the initial inability of using the language and consequently of expressing himself and his own feelings, thoughts and ideas were, at the very beginning, perceived as drawbacks to the writer's attempts of continuing his literary activity begun in the country; but soon, they became a real catalyst for identity, for the artist's unchaining all his creative valences and potentialities.

In what concerns the problem of the language, the author, in spite of encountering a series of difficulties at the beginning, succeeds in reaching an indisputable level of proficiency, which can be easily proven by his prolific literary activity. But, as he actually confesses (2008b: 66), the language he uses is not that kind of English which can be learned in school. It is the result of a process of osmosis, i.e. absorbing words with their entire repertoire of gestures, body language, places and contexts, the words, under the given circumstances, becoming just a small part of the human communication vocabulary. What results is a language in which the writer can prove his artistry without any difficulty, this language being also considered the main reason why he has, so often, been labelled a surrealist.

> What people usually mistake for surrealism is a different way of speaking. The metaphorical echoes of Romanian into English sound surreal. By that token, anyone sounding strange to a listener is a surrealist: we are all each other's surrealists. Given the increasing strangeness of human voices compared to media voices, we are all becoming surrealists. In a world inhabited by involuntary surrealists, silence becomes a real alternative. But I am not a surrealist; I am a Romanian, an exile (2001b: 158).

From the artist's point of view, there are obvious differences between American and Romanian. The former is brisk, precise, honest, factual, whereas the latter is metaphorical, onomatopoeic, lyrical, exaggerated. But in choosing his own means of expression, Codrescu does not completely neglect, or give up one of them, in order to adopt the other one totally, without any trace of reticence. His magic formula is a bit more complex: an American English infused with Romanian, which offers his style freshness and unique resonance. Nonetheless, in the process of his gradually becoming accustomed to the new adoptive society and culture, the transition from Romanian to English has occurred naturally, to the detriment of the former.

> He noticed a discoloring of the natural universe. He had translated himself into American. Even his dreams, which Alice said were usually in foreign languages, started speaking American. He had a hard time remembering his native tongue. He gave an interview for Radio Free Europe in a savagely distorted version of his language. He could not, entirely, speak the new language, so he felt suspended between them, like a clumsy acrobat (2001a: 154).

Swinging between two cultures, two societies, and two identities, Andrei Codrescu manages to reach the point where he can declare and consider himself a transnational citizen and writer. He seems to be somewhere in-between, neither inside, nor outside, or maybe simultaneously inside and outside the American and Romanian literary contexts, being actually a well-integrated immigrant who doesn't accept assimilation. His liminal position seems to be best captured in his poem "Bi-lingual" which underlines, once again, the author's attitude in what concerns the complex process of language learning and acquisition.

> I speak two languages. I've learnt one of them in a trance, for no reason at all, in a very short time, on horseback, in glimpses, between silent revolts. One is the

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> language of my birth, a speech which, more or less, contains my rational mind because it is in this tongue that I find myself counting change in the supermarket and filing away my published poems. In a sense, these two languages are my private day and night because what one knows without having learned is the day, full of light and indelicate assumptions. The language of the night is fragile, it depends for most part on memory and memory is a vast white sheet on which the most preposterous things are written. The acquired language is permanently under the watch of my native tongue like a prisoner in a cage. Lately, this new language has planned an escape to which I fully subscribe. It plans to get away in the middle of the night with most of my mind and never return. This piece of writing in the acquired language is part of the plan: while the native tongue is (right now!) beginning to translate it, a big chunk of my mind has already detached itself and is floating in space entirely free…(2000:122)

The conclusion one can easily reach under such circumstances is that the phenomenon of exile involves shifting contexts, crossing boundaries, and negotiating difference, the outcome being measured according to a certain scale of assimilation, or domestication. Thus, there are writers who perceive it (i.e. exile) as a terrifying, inhibiting experience, their entire work being dominated and animated by a sense of melancholia, nostalgia, and sometimes despair. This is exactly Norman Manea's case, the prototype of the migrant figure, always on the road, but struggling for cultural locality, analysing and interpreting his condition in categories of alterity, his literary work testifying to a tormented, fragmented subjectivity. But there are also writers who take advantage of the initiating experience to which they have been subjected, exile becoming in their case an exercise of flexibility, adaptability, and sagacity, a kind of "accomplishment through Reaction" (Spiridon, 1997:230), reaction oriented not only towards their original home, but also towards their new, adoptive country. Andrei Codrescu's case seems to be exemplary for this category of writers, his swinging between two universes, two cultures, languages and mentalities offering him the very raw material for his literary creation.

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