CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS IN RELOCATION NARRATIVES

Nicoleta-Loredana Moroșan, Assist. Prof., PhD, "Ștefan cel Mare" University of Suceava

Abstract : One of the elements underlying the material of transnational relocation narratives is cultural representation. The first-person narrative account of the events experienced when moving to a different country will actually be indicative of the author's view upon what makes his own identity, the identity of his fellow citizens back home, as well as the identity of the new people amidst whom he decided lead his new life. By way of consequence, the daily habits as well as the customs peculiar to the foreign locale become as many incentives to initiating a comparison process. The assessment of the newly-discovered ways of doing things by means of the parallels thus drawn between two peoples will result in a rethink of one's life and a reappraisal of the already-adopted system of values.

Keywords: relocation narratives, literature of accommodation, identity, cultural representation, foreign locale

Introduction

By its nature, the unfolding of relocation narratives is conditioned by the contact between representatives of two or several cultures. Consisting of first-person narratives conducted by individuals who, belonging to a particular culture, go settle down (for what is intended to be a limited amount of time or indefinitely) into a different country, this type of accounts relies on the harmonious interweaving or clash (and all the other stages experienced in-between) between two views on the world. As noted by E. C. Knox in his paper "A Literature of Accommodation" published in 2003, this modal narrative has become a full-fledged genre presenting in its beginnings "attempts by Americans to fit in, to belong at some level in France" (2003: 95). Actually, the French the foreign locale favoured by the representatives of the Anglophone culture in their escapist tendencies will be doubled by the Italian one. To be more precise, the French setting will be either Paris or Southern France, especially Provence, whilst the Italian one will be mostly Tuscany. The reasons for these rather fixed choices lie in the cultural representations nurtured by the expatriates turned narrators in relation to what will later become their new homelands, back when they were in their national background. Consequently, their accounts will deal with positive and at times negative representationsa on the foreign peoples in question. Starting from these rather stereotyped images building up a rather idealized version of what French or Italian life is like, the narrators will embark on a journey of self-discovery achieved through the effort of comprehending the otherness.

The Role of Stereotypes in Approaching the Otherness

In Michael Sadler's book *An Englishman in Paris, L'éducation continentale* first published in English in 2002, the incentives of the British transnational writer's desire to dwell in cultural difference are traced back to his childhood school years when he was introduced to the sound of the French language by his French mistress and later on by his French master. The representation of the French language prompts the schoolboy's wish he were living in the neighbouring country where this language is commonly spoken, France: "What exactly was I doing this hot Saturday on the Rouen-Paris motorway in my red Mazda

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with its unpasteurised flashing light? For a long time I had been secretly troubled by the idea that I wanted to live in France. First there was the language. I'd had a French mistress at primary school – she was married to a local businessman – and a French master at secondary. I was in love with the first and in awe of the second." (M. Sadler, 2003: 6). The sensory representation of the French language as mother tongue is particularly powerful, as it engenders valuable attributes ("exciting, electric") that will be automatically transferred by the child's imaginary to the personality of the people speaking it: "When they spoke French they were different, exciting, electric. I'd always wondered who I might be if I could speak it. […] I occasionally dreamed of packing a suitcase and heading for Dieppe." (M. Sadler, 2003: 6). Prolonging this cultural representation, the acquisition of the skill of mastering this foreign language is perceived as endowed with transformative virtues, enabling the construction of a new magical identity: "I'd always wondered who I might be if I could speak it.".

The place dimension specific to the French identity is, in its turn, ascribed with positive subjective connotations which render it a realm of bliss:"Then there was the country. I suffered from a kind of nostalgia for something I'd never known." (M. Sadler, 2003: 6). The attraction exerted by the idea of experiencing a long-term foreign residency, with the adjacent cultural encounter and identity redefinition, will be finally followed through and acted on: "Then, one day, a letter arrived on the amt offering me a year's sabbatical leave in France. I had submitted – not, I admit, with much conviction – a research outline to the University of Swindon. Specialist, until now, in the acquisition of English, I proposed to dedicate my time to studying how people forgot it. On the spot in France I would record ex-pats who had a tongue in each camp." (M. Sadler, 2003: 6).

And this was how the writer's immersion in the long-desired environment could then commence, but not before a farewell French party was thrown in his previous English village of residence, to celebrate the occasion. The detailed presentation of what the locals understand by the concept of "French party" becomes illustrative for the British territorially-bound stereotypes related to French culture. The invitation addressed to the writer stipulates: "Come dressed as a frog!" The genericity of this appellation on the card which prefigures the event in itself, quite common in the British stereotypes in relation with the idea of Frenchness and referring to a particular culinary habit (that of eating frog legs) is indicative of the host of prevailing cultural representations that are to be actuated on this occasion. All the parameters making up this situation of communication will echo a particular French reality. Summed up, they will portray a slice of France, as known by a British community.

Any party needs music. So, "Mrs Johnson came up with a collection of records by Yves Montand and Sacha Distel. The plumber's brother was an Edith Piaf fanatic. He had her photograph in his workshop in a frame made of copper piping." (M. Sadler, 2003: 8). The French singing repertoire of the twentieth century (with Montand of Italian and Distel of Russian origins) is "widely broadened" by the end of the party by means of nursery rhymes: the well-known *Alouette* and *Frère Jacques*. A party also needs food and drink. So the writer buys "some special-offer Boursin, a rather hard low-fat camembert which the check-out girl said could be crash-ripened in the greenhouse, and a pink *pâté de campagne* in a tube, which I contemplated serving on toothbrushes.[…] Glasses of Bulgarian chardonnay were raised in my honour" (M. Sadler, 2003: 8, 10). Remembering this event, the transnational writer concludes:"Everything was in place. All I had to do was to rub the walls with garlic and we were in business." (M. Sadler, 2003: 8). The garlic reference reminds of a common stereotype among the English relative to the French haute cuisine renowned to make abundant use of this ingredient.

Another important aspect of this fancy dress party whose theme resides in French landmarks consists in the array of French characters impersonated both by the writer on the verge of his leaving for the country of his choice and by the other English villagers. The range

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of characters is indicative of the range of the commonly known French cultural references standing out in the English collective imaginary in this respect. The series of personalities spans five fields. History is represented by Louis XVIth whose decapitation at the French Revolution marked the decline of the monarchy in France and the rise of democracy, by the general de Gaulle, the political leader who in WWII refused to accept the government's armistice with the German invaders, set up his base in London, organized the Resistance from abroad and overcame the Vichy regime, by members of the above-mentioned French Resistance and by the highest decoration in France, la *légion d'honneur* established by Napoleon Bonaparte. Literature is referred through the character of Major Thompson taken from the novel *Les carnets du Major W. Marmaduke Thompson* written by Pierre Daninos in 1954 and turned in 1955 by Preston Sturges into the film bearing the title *The French, They Are a Funny Race*, which dwells on the cultural discrepancy between the French and the English. The cinema stands out with the famous actor Gérard Depardieu. Sports are mentioned thanks to the prominent tennis man Yannick Noah. Last but not least, social types are designated through the Frenchman coming to England from Brittany riding a bike, holding a baguette and wearing a stripped black and white T-shirt and strings of onion (to be sold) round his neck, as well as through the description of the ladies wearing cabarets costumes specific to Place Pigalle in Paris.

While naming cultural landmarks, the depiction of the trivial way the stereotypes are activated during the farewell party makes fun of what stereotypical images can represent, by pointing out the discrepancy between reality and its interpretation. Thus, the descriptions are immersed in mild self-deprecating humour and gentle irony, which shows rather unsuccessful, than successful attempts of the English villagers at accurately embodying the French symbols: "The party was announced for seven. The guests began to arrive at five to. Anthony Brick, the interior decorator, confected a *képi* out of a cornflakes packet and came as General de Gaulle. Harold Holms came as a member of the French Resistance wearing the collar of his wife's trench coat turned up. As the mac was too small and buttoned tight he was very red in the face and looked more like Boris Yeltsin. Peter Blake wore the classic striped Breton pullover complete with a string of onions – which turned out to be real, smelly and uncomfortable for his dancing partners. Maurice Hope, an insurance agent who had a topiary head of Margaret Thatcher at the entrance to his thatched cottage, had made himself a red *légion d'honneur* for his buttonhole. We spent the evening pulling on it like a door bell and going rrrrriiiinnngggg. Brian Topps was very brown after his holiday on the Costa Brava and had found himself a rasta wig. He was supposed to be the tennis star Yannick Noah and everyone thought he was a mop. Robert Scott, fat and full of himself, was wearing a false nose. Everybody called him "mon général" and saluted, which made him angry as he believed he was the spitting image of Gérard Depardieu." (M. Sadler, 2003: 9).

As said before, it is the very gap between the English impersonations and the importance of the real French people and events they refer to that shows the writer's awareness about the danger of living according to stereotypes. The ironic and humorous mention of the triviality of the props used ("confected a *képi* out of a cornflakes packet") deride the party attendants' s poor judgment in choosing a stereotype with bad consequences either for the rest of the guests ("the classic striped Breton pullover complete with a string of onions – which turned out to be real, smelly and uncomfortable for his dancing partners") or for themselves, leading either to their feeling uncomfortable and awkward or to their being mistaken for somebody else ("wearing the collar of his wife's trench coat turned up. As the mac was too small and buttoned tight he was very red in the face and looked more like Boris Yeltsin"; "a red *légion d'honneur* for his buttonhole. We spent the evening pulling on it like a door bell and going rrrrriiiinnngggg"; "he had found himself a rasta wig. He was supposed to be the tennis star Yannick Noah and everyone thought he was a mop."; "was wearing a false

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nose. Everybody called him "mon général" and saluted, which made him angry as he believed he was the spitting image of Gérard Depardieu."). Likewise, the dry white table wine served at the party which originally is made from a grape variety grown in France, the chardonnay, actually originates from Bulgaria, while the French cheese, le Boursin, and the *pâté de campagne* have textures which are poles apart from what they are in their country of origin.

All of these elements warmly warn against the risk of judging reality exclusively by received ideas and of taking oneself too seriously, without leaving room for self-interrogation. The party ends in good humour, how else but with a French kiss, then an abundant reinterpreted French-style kissing each other on both cheeks, the receiving of a gift consisting of a copy of *A Year in Provence* written by Peter Mayle (another Englishman who settled in France, forerunner of relocation narratives), and farewell wishes cried out in French *Au revoir* and *Bonne chance*!

It is not insignificant that the last scene of the party, the resounding utterance "Vive la France!" triggers off "an immediate response from the drunk Bob Scott who sang "God Save the Queen" in the spectral orange light of the lamppost on to which he was hanging" (M. Sadler, 2003: 10). The parallelism in national assertions shows the potentiality of the successful coexistence of the representatives of the two cultures.

Cultural resemblance and dissemblance

The first-hand experience will give rise to new insights into the theoretical knowledge of the culture of the foreign locale. In this approach pertaining to cultural pragmatics, the pieces of information gathered from different directions, like fellow-citizens or written and oral press, will be reprocessed in the course of finally living in the long-desired milieu. For, created by writers like Sedaris, Kaplan, Mayle and Sadler who have "committed themselves to a place, another place", relocation narratives or "home-abroad books" do not represent a "literature of movement but rather a literature of staying put" (George and Sattin, 2002: VII-VIII). The emphasis will be less lain on traveling and more on the ways of adjustment to the new cultural environment. Hence, living there will not only be perceived at face value, but also interpreted in the context, in the settler's attempt of going behind the literal meanings and finding the hidden ones specific to the current situations of the new circumstances. Starting from what is common to their culture, the narrators of these travel memoirs will gradually unveil what is culturally peculiar to the Parisian, Provencal or Tuscan milieus.

Yet the travel memoirs like *An Englishman in Paris* will reveal the complexity of the interaction phenomena between the settler and the inhabitants of his new dwelling-place, when the inter-subjective life apprehension will also result in an intra-subjective discovery of self. The prevailing positive outlook on what life is like in the French and Italian cultures will lead the writers to leave their culture of origin in the pursuit of a particular kind of life style, that of *la dolce vita* and a certain *je ne sais quoi*. Each experience will contribute to building in-depth knowledge of both the resemblances and differences in the ways to construe life, through a constant process of analytical comparison. Preferring the phrase "relocation narratives or memoirs" for this kind of literature, to "home-abroad books" (George and Sattin, 2002: IX), "villa books" (G. Alù, 2010: 285) or "settlement literature" (S. Ross, 2010: 122), L. A. Mastellotto argues that what this type of literature actually does, is not speak about a specific abode *per se*, but about the "process of dwelling-in displacement and the central role narrative plays in reconstructing the personal experiences of lifestyle migrants" (L. A. Mastellotto, 2013: 9).

The engagement in the process of contextualization of the prerequisite images will strip them off of their initial fixity and sense of predetermination. The new thinking framework will leave behind the optimization paradigm, which advocates striving to make the best decision, the ideal one. It will then assume the adequacy paradigm, where the individual

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is seeking to make the best decision possible in a particular context, by annihilating ethnocentric practices (that is the vision where one's way of doing things, specific to their own national mentality, is taken as an ideal point of reference), and embracing an open attitude towards assessing reactions, taking into account the complexity of the parameters characterizing the situation under discussion. Although the dream is to escape from the already-experienced reality in the culture of origin, at first the cultural framework of reference shared by the narrator with the other members of the national social community he originally belongs to can but leave its mark on the interpretation of responses to various stimuli, for the acquisition of the cultural competence in the culture of origin is never experienced as the result of a selection process among several possible options (*cf*. Luc Collès, 2006: 10). By way of consequence, a transfer of values will then be operated from one's national culture to the adopted one, which, while being adopted, is in its turn critically evaluated.

The social challenge of integration implied by the home-making process in the foreign locale by people who have chosen to migrate in the pursuit of an ideal life style will guarantee the authenticity of the critical thinking process. Thus, when the ideal image confronts reality, the critical thinking may reinforce it, alter it to a certain extent or downright contradict it. By reflecting upon what makes possible the transfer of values, and subsequently the understanding of the new passers-by / acquaintances /colleagues / friends and so on, the transnational writer will deconstruct and then put together the pieces of the jigsaw represented by the ongoing mechanism of cultural identity (re)construction. Dependent at first on his guiding social imaginary regarding the new culture, following repeated exposure to the real environment, the inherited images and judgment will be ascertained or subjected to gradual change. According to Patrick Charaudeau in his paper "L'identité culturelle entre soi et l'autre", the social imaginary is the result of a specific way of relating to space and time, body, social relationships and language, (*cf*. L. Collès, J-L Dufays, F. Thyrion eds., 2006: 51-52). While pinning down the cultural differences, the relocation narratives do not see dissemblance as a hindrance to the coexistence of individuals of different nationalities. On the contrary, this is considered to be a source of mutual enrichment. To put it differently, cultural diversity breeds exchange of ideas, visions, and thus creativity and innovation attained by each individual in his culture. This particular kind of diversity constructively influences the dynamics of the social evolution, feeding the souls of the agents implied in nationally-mixed social interactions. This will contribute to the building of the intercultural competence which lies at the core of nowadays globalised societies.

Conclusion

The living in the foreign locale makes the transnational writer aware first of the backdrop against which his way of thinking is put into motion, and then of its arbitrary nature; this can but trigger the reappraisal of his own system of normative beliefs and value patterns, by means of drawing parallels with the recently-discovered one. His awareness will increase with each passing day and the formative experiences they all bring along against the background of the culture of residence. Parting from the view according to which the system of values assimilated in the culture of origin is the obvious universal one by which any fact of reality should be measured out, the foreign resident will open up to new conceptual tools of comprehending reality. First, he needs to acknowledge the possible risks of seeing a reality deformed by his clichéd patterns of thinking, leading to aspects which are not relevant to the culture of residence. Then, after leaving aside his dysfunctional subjectivity in classifying and organizing the social rites and daily practices, he will adopt objective views. The decentralization from one's own system of reference will bring along the questioning of social representation of the foreign cultures, the renegotiation of self, as well as the identification of the principles governing the living in the new national community.

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