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History, scenery and identity definition with Mircea Nedelciu and Andrzej Stasiuk

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Bringing together two different contemporary fiction writers – Mircea Nedelciu, a nationally-praised Romanian author and continentally-acclaimed Polish author Andrzej Stasiuk – the present article focuses on their common preoccupation with (and recurrent representations of) Eastern European identity. A rather meaningful autochthon counterpoint to "classical" approaches on the matter (such as Cioran's theory of the "historical void") emerges as their views (coincidentally) converge towards an original and up-to-date way of (re)defining Central and Eastern Europeanism.

Key-words: *cultural identity, Central and Eastern Europe, contemporary Romanian and Polish literature, history, totalitarianism*.

1. Preliminary considerations – an argument

Within the larger context of globalisation, "What does it mean to be a European?" is a question that (rightfully) troubles our present-day idea of identity, especially since we – as Romanians and Europeans – have to take into consideration the unsettling hypothesis that we might belong, in the meantime, to a secondary and (still) shady, fleeting cultural entity : that of the so-called Central and Eastern Europe, a somewhat oriental, marginal side of the old continent we have (politically, socially, culturally) re-joined after the fall of communism in the 1990s. But what does it actually meanto be a Central (or an Eastern) European? There are, of course, well-known philosophical hypotheses on the matter, such as those building a „Romanian perspective on being" (Noica, 1978, 1996) on Emil Cioran's view upon the tragic sense of history. But then again, there are still other, new perspectives on oriental Europeanism brought, among others, by its recent literary representations.

It is one of these perspectives that interests the present study, a point of view that (at least) two contemporary major writers of the above-mentioned cultural space seem to share in spite of their differences: Mircea Nedelciu (1950-1999) and Andrzej Stasiuk (born in 1960) – the latter being known and rather highly praised in Western Europe, the first still waiting to be discovered. But why this comparative

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approach, bringing together a Romanian writer of the 80s and a contemporary, post-communist Polish author? The question may arise especially since Andrzej Stasiuk is beyond the reason of a doubt focused on the legitimation of a Central-European identity, while Nedelciu – absorbed rather by particular, day-to-day existence under Romanian national-communism – is mostly preoccupied with the specific individual and local aspects of identity crises.

In order to motivate this seemingly improbable associative approach, I would begin by simply stating that both writers are – at least by some definitions of the term – Central-European. That is to say that beyond their different degrees of overt implication into the many debates concerning Europeanism, some visible similarities between the ways in which they literarily represent the world enticed me. In this sense, I am primarily referring not to a common, specific and overt preoccupation for Central-European identity definition (applicable to Stasiuk's works only), but to a certain coincidence of perception and fictional representation that could be relevant for (re)defining the Central and Eastern European "spirit".

2. Identity crises and disarticulations

Starting from here, a first arguable point of convergence between the two writer's *écritures* would be their irrepressible interest in identity definition. Even if the quest for self-construction is of "personal", "group" and diminutively local nature at most, as with Nedelciu, or rather super-national and "cultural", as with Stasiuk, identity quest and "identity crises"– as typical feature of the Central European space (Babeţi, 1998) – remain central to their writing.

With Nedelciu, on the one hand, the personal and local identity issues described in his stories are generally related to the idea of a fundamental incompatibility (and tension) between the genuine, naturally shaped mental space of the individual (or between that of small, marginal groups or communities) and the mental representations manipulatively forced onto them by communist propaganda. In Nedelciu's writings, most of the protagonists (sometimes associating into small social groups) infra-ideologically tend to resist the communist *ethos* through their immediate (and macro-socially) insignificant actions, rejecting, for instance, stachanovist ideals, or delation, communist family planning or self-sacrificial utopianism etc. These difficulties in assimilating the compulsory behavioural models lead, in Nedelciu's view, to the (unrighteous) marginalisation of these minority elements, and consequently, to their professional, affective or social un-realisation. Likewise, small rural communities unable to adapt, culturally, to communist sudden "modernisation" are, in many ways, excluded from the societal circuit, by means of vowing them to slow decomposition – like the village in *Cocoşul de cărămidă [The Brick Rooster]*(1979, 2003), the village of Boroana in the novel *Zmeura de câmpie*

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[Plain Strawberries](1984) *et al.* – or by forcefully transforming them into cooperativist or experimental placements – like Boroana in the novel *Zodia scafandrului [Under the Diver's Sign*] (2000) or Fuica-Temenia in *Tratament fabulatoriu [Fabulatory treatment]* (1986, 2006) and so on. To sum up, much of the 1980s Romania's individual and local (or anthropological) mental space is thus represented, with Nedelciu, as suffering from identity complexes and identity loss (or identity equivocation) generated by these artificially motivated communist exclusions.

As for Stasiuk's representations of identity crisis, on the other hand, they are, at the level of anthropological representation, rather different, even if personal and small community identity issues of a similar kind preoccupy him in his early works, such as *Tales of Gallicia*(1995), *White Raven*(1995), *Across the River*(1996) or *Dukla*(1997). In *The Road to Babadag* (2004, 2007) and *Fado* (2006, 2008), as well as in his essay on Central Europe (Andruhovîci, Stasiuk, 2000, 2003), the Polish writer focuses on the idea that within the continental European space, there is, in a cultural sense, a particular sub-space (or an "other place", as Michel Foucault would put it) with factual existence – by this referring to the Central-European cultural area. However, he perceives this Middle-Eastern super-national zone as (still) unable to consciously apprehend itself as being a space which presents common cultural identity features; that is to say, Stasiuk's all-time Central Europe is a cultural space forever facing – just as Nedelciu's individual and collective characters – a profound identity crisis, an apparently unsurpassable in-articulacy mainly due to centuries-old political differences at its national level.

This sense of an essential, chronic identity crisis that Stasiuk and Nedelciu share (beyond its utterly different representations and in its intended primary interpretations) would seem more significant from the perspective I am trying to construct here, if we were to consider Adriana Babeţi's idea of identity crises and disarticulations as a typical characteristics of the Central-European cultural *ensemble*. It seems important to me to note that Babeţi specifically argues in her essay *Europa Centrală şi identităţile vulnerabile[Central Europe and its Vulnerable Identities]* that individual, group and respectively cultural identity crises are "evidently […] interferent" (Babeţi, 1998: 66) and thus (paradoxically) equally defining for the Central European spirit.

3. History, fear and the "geographical" alternative to identity (re)construction

Returning to Nedelciu's and Stasiuk's recurrent representations of identity and its vulnerabilities, there is another essential link between them to be observed. I am referring to history as a concept closely linked to identity definition. Both writers associate history and identity quest in essentially similar terms – if opposed to the

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commonplace standpoints that make out of the concept of history (be it personal, local, national or super-national) the corner-stone of self or communitarian definition.

It is unavoidable to admit that the Central European "illusion" (Reszler, 1997: 109-121) never got closer to political existence than in Franz Ferdinand's never accomplished federative dream (Mitterand, 1998), as divergent or variable political geometries have often defined this somewhat indefinite space; some of its possible territories tend to be excluded from its mental or political map, while on the contrary, some tend to exclude themselves by rejecting its mere concept. These contradictory attitudes mainly seem to find their motivations, in Stasiuk's views, in historical suspicions and enmities not yet fully overcome. Even if he is miles away from discouraging in his conviction that the Central-European space is, if not necessarily culturally viable, at least fairly alive, Stasiuk gets nevertheless to disliking, conversely, the idea of its identity legitimation through historical justification. This is, in fact, precisely the *hiatus* the Polish writer tries to overcome by creating his own definition of what he calls "his Europe" (Stasiuk, 2003: 158).

The feeling of frustration towards historical legitimation of identity and/or the impression of historical void (i.e. the absence of a history of their own making) are common Central-European self-oriented cultural perspectives, which can be traced back to Emil Cioran's"anistoria" [non-history] (Cioran, 1936, 1990), for instance – even though historical anguish recently relates rather specifically to the fear and rejection of totalitarianism(s). Often perceived as an identity complex when compared to the West, this typical susceptibility regarding history is also discussed by Yuri Andruhovîci, as he co-authors Stasiuk in the double-essay entitled *My Europe* (Andruhovîci, Stasiuk, 2000, 2003). While Andruhovîci wonders if Central Europe could ever escape the many spectres of its history (among which, those of Hitler or Marx), Stasiuk finds his own solution to the problem: legitimation through what he (rather symbolically) calls "geography" (Andruhovîci, Stasiuk, 2003: 101): "My obsession has always been geography, not history on who's immense, half-dead body we have been feasting for such a long time in this part of the world. Geography, on the contrary, was given to us [Central-Europeans] as a revelation and is one of the very few things we haven't yet managed to destroy. Political and economic geography are nothing but its bastard progenies. […] They resemble the shadows on a dirty window pane and never manage to last longer than them, either" (Andruhovîci, Stasiuk, 2003: 158).

A very similar point of view on Central European identity and Romania's affiliation to it is expressed by Nedelciu in a series of letters addressed in the 1990s to writer Gheorghe Crăciun (Crăciun, 1999). Talking about the Walachian (to his mind, at least partially justified) waryness towards history, he argues: „The so-called 'writers of the [Bărăgan] plain' are people who first opened their eyes on a scenery with no terrestrial landmark: the fields are desolately flat, their borders meet the sky by day and by night become mere passages between the starry and the starless parts

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of the universe. The houses are nothing but huts or hovels […], not offering any impression of solidity or durability whatsoever. The plants are annual, not perennial. After growing up in such a space […], your mind will always remain impregnated by a certain 'perspective of the stars'. From this perspective, no building is strong enough to withstand the forces of nature […], no power can escape its own vanity, all is in vain and can be […] looked down upon, you can count on nothing an nobody on long durations" (Crăciun, 1999: 121). Just as with the plane spaces described by Stasiuk in "*Fado*", these open geographies prevail over a historical background perceived as not representative, not pertinent, not their own, in the end – oppressive and externally imposed.

Space and scenery (existentially appropriated) thus become, on the contrary, a coordinate gaining in importance what history has lost. For the Polish writer, geography is real, kaleidoscopic, fragmentary, a reality that bears power over one's mind and prompts one's imagination: "I rather wanted to write about geography, landscape, about the influence of material reality on the mind", he explains (Stasiuk, 2005), because "[…] it is out of such things that my Europe is made up of: details, a few seconds-long episodes, reminding me about this or that movie scene […], and beyond this whirlpool of episodes there are glimpses of scenery, furtive glimpses at the [mental] map behind" (Stasiuk, 2003: 158).

This is yet another important similarity between Nedelciu's fictional representations and Stasiuk's. For the Romanian "optzecist" writer, geography (and the map's conventional countenance) tend (or try) to prevail over history and time, as researcher Ionuţ Miloi relevantly notices in a study on Nedelciu's "significant geographies" (Miloi, 2011). In this sense, we may refer, for instance, to the colonists of the fabulous Phalanstery in*Tratamentfabulatoriu [Fabulatory Treatment]*(1986, 2006), who are apparently able to "shift their personal time reference" (Nedelciu, 2006: 149), i.e. they are able to ignore their communist contemporariness by hiding into the sinuous and deceiving plies of the scenery. Likewise, there is the utterly subjective approach to topography in the short story entitled *Tipografi şi topografi [Typographers and topographers]* (1983, 2003), where Nedelciu alludes to an idea that forms, in my opinion, the basic principle of his own, very particular sense of geography. As the first person narrator of the story takes up a job at a "topo-typographic" centre, he finds out that the maps drawn up there are far from being exact. Unavoidable measurement errors are being "corrected" according to fantasy in such a way as to fit the big picture, thus permitting unmapped marginal territories to exist unsuspected and relatively free, i.e. uncensored, uncontrolled by the communist Centre, able to escape history. In fact, Nedelciu's typical protagonists in general very often favour open or isolated, marginal, transitory spaces as they try to escape the "Ceauşescu era" realities and (re)define themselves as individuals. A feature of his prose bringing him closer, yet again – probably by means of a common (and significant) fascination for the "Sixties" counterculture in general and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* in particular – to Stasiuk's early prose, populated by

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wanderers of the Polish plains and its marginal spaces in search of their own identities, as well as to his later obsession for what he calls the "Slavic *On the Road*" (Stasiuk, 2010: 9).

In fact, space with Nedelciu, just as with Stasiuk's recurrent descriptions of vanishing sceneries, often acts like a genuine Mobius' Strip – as "engineer Ion Ion" puts it in *Tratament fabulatoriu [Fabulatory treatment]* (Nedelciu, 2006: 136) –, eventually pointing out to a sense of the utter instability and the transitory nature of civilisation's achievements and pitfalls. This same idea is literarily expressed with Stasiuk, too, in terms of *fata morgana* – like sensations – such as that of nowadays Warshaw, described as the sinister and obsessive spectre of a dead city built on its own tomb (Stasiuk, 2003, 2010) – or such as the recurring representations of the fleetingness of human settlements, too exposed in Central Europe, in his perspective, to the caprices of history (Stasiuk, 2010).

Thus, history and time eventually evoke with Stasiuk and Nedelciu an indefinite but paradoxically suffocating presence of Fear. Nedelciu repeatedly links together history, identity and fear through his own homo-diegetic voice in his last novel *The Diver's Sign [Zodia…]*(2000), referring primarily to both Romanian communism's terrorising realities and Man's general fear of dying. His horror of the aggressive expansion of the (communist) world on the individual self (i.e. over the individual's inner construction of identity and perceptions) is a constant presence throughout the novel and refers back to recurring similar, if more allusive representations marking his entire prose creation before the 1990s.

In that same sense, there are with Stasiuk different episodes in which he explicitly analogises time (past and future) with fear of totalitarianism, as he does when he describes, for instance, the terrible anguish the end of the Austrian Empire's domination (and implicitly the emergence of the Nazi menace) still provokes in his conscience as a Pole (Stasiuk, 2003: 165),or as he overtly states in an interview in *Die Welt*: "I fear both the Germans and the Russians, I despise them both equally, and I admire them both. […] Being a Pole means to live in perfect isolation. Being a Pole means to be the last human being east of the Rhine" (Stasiuk, 2007)."The world is fiction.", he concludes in *My Europe*, „Otherwise one's soul couldn't experience salvation, because even as it is – as I said – immortal, it can die of fear, never to wake up again. […]. The world must be fiction, to have stayed bearable for so long" (Stasiuk, 2003: 127-128).

4. Fiction, geography and identity construction: towards a poetics of presence

In that same vein, Stasiuk's essay in *My Europe* (2003) opens with these lines: "Geography, of course, is of much lesser importance than imagination, be it only because it rather tends to become a trap than a shelter. However, these two domains, so estranged from one another, are linked together by a bond more powerful than

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madness and reason put together. Be it only because the noblest form of daydreaming always takes space as its object. Time can only be of interest to those who still hope things can change – as to say, to hopeless goofies" (Stasiuk, 2003: 101). It is an idea that fairly resonates with Zare Popescu's alternative definition of history in Nedelciu's *Zmeura de câmpie [Plain Strawberries]* (1984). To Zare's mind (and he often is a *porte-parole* of Nedelciu himself), history is a continuum formed by four components: man, the man's name (identity), the object (objective reality) and the story that links them together (Nedelciu, 1984: 47 *et al.*); any crises of the "story" unmistakably lead, in Zare's conception, to war or historical catastrophe.

Space thus comes to symbolise with the two writers the dream of a possible refuge against time (and history), a polychromatic and moving "perpetual present", or else, a dimension permitting to flee the pressures of history, favouring evasion into the immediacy of space and existence as only acceptable realities. Nevertheless, this positively charged definition of immediacy works, with both authors, as a double solution, for it is composed, on the one hand, by the immediateness of individual action, enabling it with a spontaneity synonymous to liberty and consequently, with a sane non-permeability to the rigidity of ready-made mental patterns; on the other hand, the bare immediateness of this highly symbolic conception of space (just like that of the map), allures and gives way to imagination, to creative fantasising and ultimately to the numberless possibilities of the mind to re-construct identity and the world.

The map and the territory consequently come to justify, with Nedelciu as well as Stasiuk, a turn towards the aesthetical way of perceiving (and conceiving) everyday reality as *presence*, and become an alternative and specific way of defining Central and Eastern European identity – as opposed to both historically centred perspectives on identity definition (often perceived as unfavourable and improper) and Cioran-like musings over the "historical void", i.e. the absence of meaningful history and politics in the Balkans (Cioran, 1934, 1990). It is a solution that manages to leave behind the many "spectres" of history (especially represented by 21st century totalitarianisms) and ultimately focuses on the presence (i.e. the emerging presence of this part of the European map in continental politics) as well as on the present (i.e. its present-day reality)of a phenomenologically determined democratic consciousness –a point of view to be considered when discussing strategies for (re)defining the identity of (or the identities within) this "other" Europe.

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