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FROM SPACE TO PLACE IN G. PLEŞEA'S NOVEL *BITTER BE THY BREAD*

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Abstract: *The main goal of the present study is to analyze—from a cultural studies perspective—the debut novel* Bitter Be Thy Bread (Aruncă pâinea ta pe ape) *of the Romanian-American writer Gabriel Pleşea. To this end, the concepts of 'space' and 'place' will be first decoded and then applied to the aforementioned novel. Special emphasis will be placed upon the process of exile and its representation in the book as a transition from the individual's sense of alienation to a subsequent rediscovery of one's true identity.*

Key words: *space vs. place, alienation vs. acculturation, exile, identity.*

1. Space vs. Place

Almost a decade after having gained his Bachelor's Degree in Philology (English major) from the University of Bucharest (1967), Gabriel Pleşea fled the country in January 1976, following his wife Ana Cristina who had settled down in New York City two years earlier. On American land, he realized that his academic background was not going to be recognized and accepted by a highly competitive labor market, and so decided to extend his educational profile by joining the Columbia University's School of International Affairs, from which he earned a Master's Degree in 1979.

Gabriel Pleşea's literary pursuits started in the early '70s in his native Romania, with translations of essays, poetry, short prose and novels (which he published in literary magazines such as *Ramuri, Secolul 20, Romanian Review, Tribuna, Viaţa Românească*). In the United States, after receiving his Master's Degree and while studying computer programming and system design, he developed a great interest in novel writing and journalism.

Since 1989, he has published four novels, one volume on contemporary American writers and one on Romanian writers in New York, along with four volumes of collected articles. In parallel he filed a series of literary columns with *Jurnalul literar* and *Luceafărul*, two famous literary magazines in Bucharest. Since 1993, he has signed special correspondences on U.S. events for the daily *România liberă*, particularly from the United Nations headquarters. Currently, Gabriel Pleşea is also a frequent contributor to the Romanian weekly *New York Magazin* (N.Y.), after having published for several years in *Lumea liberă românească* (N.Y.) and the monthly magazine of culture and politics *Dorul* (Denmark).

Pleşea's debut novel *Bitter Be Thy Bread* (1989)—later on translated into Romanian as *Aruncă pâinea ta pe ape* (*Cast Thy Bread Upon the Waters* - 1994)—is literally the passage from 'space' to 'place', charted with the tools of fiction.

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At first glance, there seems to be no major distinction between the above-mentioned concepts. At a closer look, however, they mark semantically distinct (even opposite) locations in the physical environment, according to the subject's affective perception of it.

The discussion of space vs. place formally starts as early as 1977, with Yi-Fu Tuan's book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Here, the author understands space in terms of a place without meaning, or to reverse the concepts, place is space that has been given meaning by the human mind. In other words, this binary opposition space/place is a projection of the more famous anthropological duality nature/ culture: just as nature does not exist prior to culture but is rather a cultural construction that makes 'culture' salient, space is the necessary 'other' of place.

The issues of 'space' and 'place'—particularly influenced by Foucault and his exploration of the intersections of discourse, space and power—have been addressed by cultural studies with a growing interest since the 1980s. In this context, "a place is understood to be a site or location in space constituted and made meaningful by social relations of power and marked by identifications or emotional investments. As such, a place can be understood to be a bounded manifestation of the production of meaning in space." (Barker)

The organization of human activities and interactions within a spatial framework is fundamental to social and cultural life. French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs dwells on this intimate and profound relationship established between space and the collective memory (which ultimately defines the individual's sense of identity and belonging to a specific community). Halbwachs considers how both individual and collective memory take their "anchoring point on spatial images" and, more specifically, on the "material environment," "the home," and "the material appearance of the city," so that "the place … has received the imprint of the group, and vice versa." This imprint becomes part of the identity of the group, the individual, and the place, binding the three together. In the opening of Chapter 4, *Space and the Collective Memory*, the author analyzes how the physical surroundings influence and shape the human mind. He maintains that the presence of familiar objects around us ensures a sense of mental equilibrium, orderliness and tranquility. Whenever there is an inability to recognize objects of our daily contact, the environment becomes "fluid and strange," "lacking familiar reference points," as it is the case with mental illness:

"We ourselves may experience a similar period of uncertainty, as if we had left behind our whole personality, when we are obliged to move to novel surroundings and have not yet adapted to them."

Halbwachs' words accurately reflect the early stage of exile, when the subject of migration has parted with a familiar and significant 'place' to reach a strange and meaningless 'space'. As I mentioned before, Gabriel Pleşea's debut novel is a remarkable and heartfelt depiction of the individual's removal from a familiar place to a new space that has, at the beginning, no recognizable landmarks, but later on becomes 'home'.

2. Exile as a Transition from Alienation to Acculturation

The novel's original title *Bitter Be Thy Bread* conveys a stereotyped image of how difficult it is to earn your living on foreign land. The bitter taste of foreignness is always associated with a sense of alienation on the part of the immigrant, "effected both internally by keeping

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oneself apart and externally by being perceived as 'other' or not at all" (Kaminsky 39). Interestingly, the title of the Romanian version *Aruncă pâinea ta pe ape* (*Cast Thy Bread Upon the Waters*)—a famous line in the *Book of Ecclesiastes* (11:1)—displays, nonetheless, a rather optimistic approach to the process of exile, focusing on the hope of finding a new identity and a new reason for living in the host country.

The Preacher's urge, "Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days,"—which prefaces the novel as a motto—is a *mise en abyme* of the novel's main theme. If we symbolically understand 'bread' in terms of 'body' or 'self', then the message becomes quite clear: Go across the seas (to America), and you will rediscover yourself and your freedom. This is in fact what the novel's protagonist Jon —a reflector-character and the author's *alter ego*—actually does: he has left behind a country oppressed by the communist regime and is now engaged in a "bitter" but eventually rewarding process of acculturation.

The story in itself is quite simple and linear. The epic discourse follows Jon's existential trajectory from his first year of postgraduate studies at Columbia University throughout the Commencement. In this time span, we witness a mosaic of events that compose a true to life diary of exile, a chronicle of solitude and sometimes desperate efforts to establish relationships with others.

The novel opens up with the scene in which Jon and Jane enter an obscure, underground restaurant in New York, willing to converse in Romanian, their native language. The characters' unfamiliarity with the space can be noticed from the very beginning, when Jon orders "two coffees and brandy", triggering the waiter's perplexed remark: "These must be foreigners."

We learn that Jane was married to a high-profile political activist back to communist Romania and worked as an editor with a publishing house, being also a most promising, successful poet. The dialog, as well as narrator's frequent probes into Jon's mind, reveals an acute sense of uprootedness that the two characters are confronted with in their everyday life on foreign land:

"Now he was here, in New York, in a foreign country! He could still remember his mother's witty words: 'Bitter is your bread among foreigners!' Back then he didn't know what she meant or why she would tell him such things."

The difficulty to adapt is obvious even in the two characters' culinary preferences, incapable of appropriating the new, cosmopolitan cuisine:

"Oysters! As far as I'm concerned, a steak will do."

The sense of loosing one's national identity is overt in Jane's final remark, when she expresses the great impediment to resume her literary career in the host country:

"To write in a foreign language is extremely difficult, especially when it comes to poetry. The coordinates are different, your sensations, moods, perceptions—all are different. … What could I sing about, Jon? I'm so overwhelmed… forsaken… lost…"

To "sing about" a place not fully assimilated as yet, in a language not mastered to the most refined details, means far too great an artistic challenge for Jon's compatriot that ultimately amplifies her sense of uprootedness and alienation.

In the opening of the second chapter, the narrator's voice provides us with a substantial insight into the protagonist's mind, thereby connecting us to the inner tensions of the exiled individual, forced to abandon their old identity at the point of their departure from the 'place' of birth, and to adapt to a new and highly heterogeneous 'space':

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"Jane seemed to be really lost in this new world, disoriented and helpless in deciding what to do next. Like himself, she did not know how to prove herself. He did agree. It was more than proving oneself. It was starting anew, from a clean slate. Forget what they had done before, in their home countries. Now they had to readjust here, enjoy life."

The tendency toward identity loss in a cultural 'melting-pot'—thinks Jon—no longer poses a threat to contemporary America:

"Nowadays, the many ethnic groups resisted the melting pot—they wanted to remain what they had always been. They had their own schools, their own churches, temples, meeting houses, their own parades, their own festivals."

Jon advocates the necessity to adapt to the new living space, as long as the individual's identity and ideals remain unscathed:

"The work ethic of the people here must be adopted by all means—one must work to earn one's bread. But that had nothing to do with one's personal goals. Some kind of 'peaceful coexistence' must be achieved among so many traditions."

In Gabriel Pleşea's novel, the trajectory of the exiled person from alienation to acculturation is symbolically charted through the protagonist's relationships with three women: Sue, Judy, and Chrissie, with long intervals of bitter solitude coming in-between.

Sue, "an American girl, the uninhibited type,"—Jon's faculty mate—is the one who initiates the main character into the liberty of sexual experience (while giving him at times irksome lectures on the American work ethic). Their relationship proves rather superficial and ephemeral, and ceases to exist the moment Sue leaves for Paris to spend her summer vacation, where she meets her new boyfriend, Stanley.

After having desperately tried to establish an affective liaison with Jane—who meanwhile forms a deep attachment to her new boss, Norman—Jon gets engaged in a fleeting relationship with his older but very cultivated work colleague at Optical Industries, named Judy. This stage in the protagonist's erotic odyssey provides him with a sentimental and spiritual initiation. In fact, Judy is the only person to attend Jon's Commencement, thus becoming the hero's spiritual guide in his journey toward a new cultural identity.

On affective level, a final stage in culturalizing the space of exile is marked by the relationship with Chrissie, a Stomatology graduate whom Jon meets accidentally at the end of the novel. The instant magnetism between the two characters materializes in a flight to Paris in the novel's epilogue, leaving the reader's imagination to conceive a beautiful love story.

Gabriel Pleşea's *Bitter Be Thy Bread* reconstructs—with artistic tools and pure emotion—the exile's physical and mental transition from 'space' to 'place', from alienation to acculturation.

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