# HOMEBOUND OR HOMELESS MINDS. RETURN MIGRATION IN THE 21ST C. ROMANIAN LITERATURE

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*Abstract*

Migrant writers have long been associated, in the history of the 20th C. Central-East European literatures, with the tropes of exile and Diaspora. After the political overturn of 1989, the intellectuals willing to leave behind their "developing" native countries had to face a different set of hardships and challenges, mostly related to work, social integration and resettlement. Return migration has become frequent not only among scholars, but among people of all walks of life. The mirage of the "developed world" faded away, disenchantment took its place. Drawing on their own failed experiences with migration, Radu Pavel Gheo (2003) and Adrian Schiop (2009) imagine different types of "misfits" who, for some reasons, decide to come back home. But the narrators propounded by the two writings have different senses of belonging. Using and playing on a phrase coined by Peter L. Berger, one of them is a homebound, while the other is a homeless mind.

***Keywords:*** *return migration, home, homeless mind, Radu Pavel Gheo, Adrian Schiop.*

## The Sadness of the Visa Lottery Winner

Radu Pavel Gheo was an up-and-coming writer and literary journalist when he won the lottery visa in 2001, and decided to emigrate to the U.S. He had made his debut as a science-fiction writer, authored an impressive number of articles in well-known cultural magazines. He had joined the respected underground literary group *Club 8* in Iaşi, and he was teaching English at the city's university. By and large, he fitted the profile of the young Romanian intellectual, in his late twenties or early thirties, who tried his best to achieve

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recognition in his field of expertise, at the expense of a modest, if not precarious, financial situation.

Before leaving to Seattle, he wrote a pathetic essay about the daily frustrations that finally led him to the decision of moving abroad, together with his wife Alina. *Adio, adio, patria mea, cu î din i, cu â din a* (*Farewell, Farewell, My Motherland, Spelt with î from i, with â from a*) gave the title of a book which comprised, beside this text elaborated on the verge of departure, around 40 "letters" written in the US for some Romanian magazines (*Timpul, Dilema, Obiectiv, Monitorul*), an epilogue of the author and a final "file" of comments on the book, posted by the readers on several forums, either Romanian or American. The book had two editions, in 2003 and 2004, was acclaimed by the critics, and won a literary prize. As we will later see, it was generally perceived as a cornerstone in our migration literature, mirroring a new psychological pattern of economic migration.

The opening text, written a couple of months before the first American "letter", renders the feelings that accounted for the hasty departure, after winning the visa lottery. Predictably, it is a heartfelt critique of the socio-economic reality of Romania. The strongest feelings that detach themselves on the gloomy backdrop are frustration and anger. Gheo's portrayal of his friends and coevals leaving the country corresponds to a common perception within his age group:

> "Then I noticed that the group of friends and acquaintances around me and Alina started to grow thinner. Within two years, seven-eight close friends (nobody has too many of them, do they?) had already settled there, on *the other side* (this phrase reminds of the Great Passage, with a subtle sadness). Some in Germany, some in the US, most of them in Canada: Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa... Guys who were valuable, skilful, intelligent, adaptable, all in their thirties, all good at what they were doing." (Gheo 2004: 21).

The phrase written in italics – "*the other side*" (*dincolo*) – is a metaphor that used to designate, informally, the capitalist world beyond the Iron Curtain. Mostly, the youth of the late '80s used it in their idiom to talk about emigration (i.e. "going to the other side"), or with the quality Western products that could be hardly sneaked into the country by the bravest, through the almost impenetrable customs houses (i.e. jeans, clothes, sweets etc. "from the other side"). But, at the same time, *dincolo* means "the realm of the afterlife", alluding to the ungraspable distance between the "Communist block" and the "free world", as perceived by a population who was bound to remain within the country's borders, in most of the cases, for their lifetime. The implicit ambiguity of the Romanian word is seized and enlarged on in the following explanatory parenthesis, where the author associates it with Lucian Blaga's phrase "The Great Passage" (*Marea Trecere*), a famous metaphor describing death as the ultimate metaphysical experience. We have, in these few lines, an indirect self-portrait of the author. Gheo tries to legitimate himself as the

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standard-bearer of the young generation of the late '80s, the one who is said to have started the Revolution. The symbols that he invokes are part of the pop culture that the youth of the 80's recognized as their group values: blue jeans, foreign movies, the mirage of America, more or less subversive jokes etc. His discourse is reminiscent of the 2001 collective volume *În căutarea comunismului pierdut* (*In Search of the Lost Communism*), written by his coevals Paul Cernat, Ion Manolescu, Angelo Mitchievici, Ioan Stanomir, in that it seeks the coherence of the generation in the "simple things" of a teenager's everyday life. The sensitivity to (the hidden message of) the mass culture is their trademark. On the other hand, Gheo wants to be perceived as what he actually is – an outstanding member of the group of Romanian *literati*. That explains the allusion to Lucian Blaga, but also the enumeration of Eugen Ionescu, George Emil Palade, Mircea Eliade among the prominent personalities who were "elegantly thrown away from their own country" (Gheo 2004: 26). Obviously, there is a significant difference between these political exiles and himself, who falls roughly in the category of economic migration. Nevertheless, his account sometimes takes on the overtones of a lampoon against the Romanian society which throws out its most valuable and well-meaning sons, in order to indulge in corruption and mediocrity (Gheo 2004: 27). This is a commonplace of the 20th c. critique of the Romanian society by the *elites*, starting with D. Drăghicescu and Ştefan Zeletin (the first of a long series to enlarge on the old saying *ca la noi la nimenea*, "nowhere is as bad as in our place"). This double lineage – the non-conformist, cosmopolitan youngster and the highly-educated intellectual – is to be seen through the whole book. It is represented even in the title of a "letter": *Amerìcă, Amerìcă, am să-mi iau maşină mică...* ("America, America, I'll buy myself a car..."). The wordplay staged here draws on a complex set of references. The first level is the obvious allusion to Joe Dassin's travel song *L'Amérique.* Then, the writer, who takes pride in being born in Banat, reveals that the unusual pronunciation belongs to the peasants of his province who, at the turn of the 20th c., used to migrate to the U.S. But, on the third level, this page of social history is closely connected with the famous postmodern novel *Femeia în roşu* ("The Woman in Red") by Mircea Nedelciu, Adriana Babeţi and Mircea Mihăieş, which playfully describes, in a complex narrative, the adventures of such an emigrant.

It was said that, in the "letters" from the U.S., Gheo takes on the air of a field anthropologist (Liviu Antonesei in the preface of the book – Gheo 2004: 10). As an ethnologist, the author is the first to admit that he is primarily interested in what we could call the "reverse connection": the reconstruction of "home", in parallel with the ongoing construction of the "host" country. The process of simultaneously imagining the West and the East by the East European traveller was touched on by Wendy Bracewell, and associated with an inferiority / superiority complex (Bracewell 2009: XIII-XVI). Gheo's case is... complex enough to encompass

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both. Anyway, the U.S. are imagined from the first to the last "letter" as the real Otherness, while the observer can't help seeing himself as totally immersed in and identified with his Romanian nationality. The failure of his attempted immigration can be foreseen by the attentive reader who pays attention to the distribution of the personal pronouns, throughout the narrative: "they" are always American, "we" are always Romanian. The author himself admits, by the end of his stay, that he has always stood "with his face turned" to Romania (Gheo 2004: 338). The Otherness of the U.S. is usually defined in terms of temporality, "their" advanced stage of development showing the relative belatedness of "ours". The U.S. are the homeland of multiculturalism, multilingualism, postcolonialism, ecology, political correctness – they represent a peak of human progress that we can only look forward to. The integration of poetry and visual arts in public spaces is the theme of one of the most enthusiastic "letters". But, as months go by and temporary jobs succeed one another, a second image, more ambivalent, takes shape. The U.S. have now a more complex drawing, they represent postmodernity and its discontents: consumerism, expressed by the culture of shopping; simulacra, including junk food and credit cards; enhancement of security with the loss of personal freedom, as in the case of the fire alarms that go off annoyingly, and uselessly, in the immigrant residences; pragmatism, ruthless capitalism, cynical employment and lay-off policies; the "working dogs", specially trained for public service, who lost their natural playfulness. All these snapshots make up the collage of a disquieting postmodernity, desired as much as dreaded. The Eastern European doesn't feel at home in this futuristic environment anymore. Gheo makes it clear that "for me, it would be almost impossible to become anti-American". Nevertheless, he adds, "I couldn't live there" (Gheo 2004: 335). This mixed emotion is the essence of the book; this is why the publishing house decided to put this fragment on the front cover of the second edition. But it can also be read as an indirect discourse on "home". The author realizes that he can't possibly fit in as a "successful immigrant", because he feels irresistibly drawn back by a sense of "nostalgia". His experience repeats, at a hundred years distance, that of his great-great-grandfather, who could resist in America only for a couple of years, to make some money and come back to his beloved Banat (Gheo 2004: 328). As a writer, he feels even more rooted in his native language and culture. The book itself is an unmistakable proof: the experience of the wannabe immigrant is turned into a series of articles, which is, later on, turned into the first book that brings him notoriety. The end of his displacement is the (literary) reconstruction of "home", the growing awareness of his inescapable sense of identity: as a Romanian, as a Banatian, as a writer. Aesthetic experience and "home" are mysteriously entangled:

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> "[Y]ou can't kill the loves of your youth. It may sound pathetic, maybe even like a line of soap-opera, but didn't Oscar Wilde say that life imitates art? For each of us, there is a place we call 'home', associated with the most luminous memories of our existence and that we can't give up unless we become estranged from ourselves. For me – as well as for Alina – the chosen place is Timişoara. Once we understood it, we realized that one can love a place exactly as one can love a person." (Gheo 2004: 336).

"The most luminous memories of our existence" are halfway between experience and imagination, this is why "home" lies between a writer's life and art. With this confession, we are still in the sphere of high culture. Gheo's rhetoric always switches between the straightforwardness of a youngster and the refinement of a man of letters.

The novelty of this book doesn't consist in its style, though. What it brings new is the normalization of our relationship with the "West". Unlike the political exile, Gheo's economic migrant finds himself in front of a fair choice: between a more developed, but unfamiliar, and a less developed, but familiar world. In such a situation, the choice can be, and should be, emotional. The myth of the "West" (the unattainable world of *dincolo*) has been replaced by the more down-to-earth image of *afară* ("the outside"), with its more realistic ups and downs. As a young reviewer noticed, *Adio, adio, patria mea, cu î din i, cu â din a* seems to put an end to the "histerical" immigration of the nineties, a belated reflex of the pre-1989 political exile (Rogozanu 2006: 197), and start a new assessment of what is "home" and "abroad".

### Legal / Illegal Immigrants, Travel Addicts, Nomads

The same theme of return migration is addressed in another writing of the generation, *Zero grade Kelvin* ("Zero Kelvin"). Adrian Schiop, three years younger than Radu Pavel Gheo, loosely based his 2009 novel on his 5 months experience as an unskilled worker in New Zealand. The policy of the publishing house (the inclusion of the volume in the collection *Ego. Proză*), the blurb on the last cover (written by Dan Sociu, a well-known author of the genre), and even some interviews of Adrian Schiop suggest that the writing should be read as an autofiction. The term must be used in a very broad sense, though. Beside its sandwiched structure – as a "self-narrative" inserted between two science-fictional parts –, there are enough fictitious elements sneaked into the "central story" itself. The unnamed narrator, who used to teach literature in Romania and works on several "3D jobs"[2] in N.Z., is interested in homoeroticism, and feels attracted especially to pedophilia. From this point of view, unlike Gheo's character, he falls between the categories of

[2] A 3D job is described as "dirty, dangerous, or difficult, and very often a combination" of the three adjectives (Koser 2007: 32).

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labour and social migration (Koser 2007: 17), combining economic hopes with the longing for a better integration in a society more open to sexual minorities. Emotional unfulfillment (the inability to find a life partner in Romania) played a major role in his decision to leave the country. His outings in the bars, pubs, and nightclubs of Auckland are desperate attempts to find traces of human warmth, to rise above the icy level of "Zero Kelvin" of affectivity.

One of the dreams taken from home was to establish "a grunge family" in the emancipated, multicultural N.Z., together with the friends he would make in the hostels or caravan parks where he stayed. The institution of the heterosexual couple being worn out, a new form of human togetherness must emerge:

> "A grunge family is when you wake up alone with a handful of friends that you live with, but you don't make love, you don't have babies." (Schiop 2009: 54).

But even this spontaneous idea of sharing-without-commitment is hard to attain and even harder to maintain, since most of the hostel residents are legal/illegal immigrants or travel addicts, who come and go every now and again, in search of new jobs or simply new horizons. "Home" becomes a highly volatile image, as mobile as a caravan, and the provisional members of the "grunge family" are examples of postmodern nomads:

> "'What do you say it's home?', he stops and looks at us, 'there's no home, home', I remember, 'home is where you're loved and have a lot of sex', K remembers, 'you trim the lawn in front of your house and it smells of dry air', Hansie remembers [...]" (Schiop 2009: 55).

Contrasted with the deep rootedness of Gheo's narrator, Schiop's characters are instantiations of what Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner called "homeless minds", and connected with the human condition in (post)modernity:

> "*[M]odern man has suffered from a deepening condition of 'homelessness'.* The correlate of the migratory character of his experience of society and of the self has been what might be called a metaphysical loss of 'home'. It goes without saying that this condition is psychologically hard to bear. It has therefore engendered its own nostalgias – nostalgias, that is, for a condition of 'being at home' in society, with oneself and, ultimately, in the universe." (Berger, Berger & Kellner 1974: 77).

The position of the modern mind toward "home" becomes even more ambiguous in the latest decades of postcolonialism, postcommunism, and globalization. Domnica Rădulescu touches on the ambivalence of the exile's image of "home", showing that their nostalgia is not only a longing for rootedness, but for uprootdness as well. Nomadism, in a Deleuzian and Guattarian sense, engenders a special form of identity which requires a versatile relationship with society, in terms of integration and / or marginalization:

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> "The modern exile, who often is a self-styled 'gypsy' and the actual gypsies, both ultimate nomads and exiles, are defined equally by a longing for rootedness and uprootedness." (Rădulescu (ed.) 2001: 4, *apud* Neubauer & Török 2009: 587).

Schiop's "grunge family" is close to Rădulescu's concept of nomadism: weak enough to allow movement and avoid commitment, but strong enough to provide a (surrogate) sense of belonging. But the author provides an even clearer symbol of his narrator's nomadic experience: the music of *manele*, a style of ethno-pop which sprang during the Romanian "transition" of the '90s, and has been associated with the "low", uneducated and marginalized gypsies. The *manele* that the Romanian labour migrants play on their CDs are a condensation of "home", in a Freudian sense. Not only do they remind the enthralled listeners of their native culture, but they also epitomize their condition as nomad "3D" workers, themselves discriminated in a society which at the end of the day proves to be as conservative as the one they have fled from. *Manele* encapsulate their inferiority complex (as poor, nomadic, marginal, postcommunist beings), but also give them a sense of identity that they end up coming to terms with:

> "'Do you have any *manele*? I haven't been listening for a long time', she asks. 'I have a CD in my car – do you like them?' NP wonders – the *manele* exploded later in Romania, around '98, Astrid couldn't have been there. NP says they were due to appear, there was no other way: after the fall of Communism, Romania turned into a ghetto, a loo with 23 million scared people who, in their poverty, were dreaming of money, women and power. [...] Originally, the song is pathetic as hell, for dumped girls, but Astrid is singing it in a flat voice, with r'n'b monotonous trills, like a lousy actor reciting – obviously seduced by the tune and completely unaware of the lyrics. 'And there, on my pillow, on my very bed/ You sleep with someone else, and make me feel bad.' I would have put my fingers in my ears so as not to hear her, people are ashamed to sing in front of an unknown public, only kids can afford doing that." (Schiop 2009: 132).

The playing and humming of the song trigger one of the few moments when emotional barriers seem to drop and give way to a stream of uncensored feelings, that the narrator is afraid to pursue. The uncontrolled display of affects seems to tip over a precarious inner balance. Throughout the novel, the narrator imagines not only "home", but also music. Heavy-metal fans have strong, oppressive identities, and tend to make up "heavy-metal families" (Schiop 2009 [1]: 151). In the fragment above, the mixture of cosmopolitan and ethnic pop references – r'n'b and *manele* – accounts for a composite consistency of the selves, constructed in the manner of a *bricolage*.

The language of the novel seems to stem, similarly, from Romanian roots "hybridized" with the colourless international English of hostels, world-wide-web, or personal development seminars. The stylistic experiment was carried out

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before by Dan Sociu in his 2008 autofiction *Nevoi speciale* ("Special Needs"), to the same end of imagining a decentred, rootless, vulnerable self engulfed in an identity crisis, within an international environment. Both authors break their narratives into countless, meaningless little episodes, fragmented even more by their narrators' use of recreational drugs or alcohol. Both conceive their texts as self-analyses – different from psychoanalysis in that they don't rely on the presence of the professional analyst (Gasparini 2009 [1]: 159) –, trying to internalize the "regard of the Other". Later on, Schiop will confess his conception of literature as therapy, meant to cure the writer-patient of his lack / excess of serotonin, and subsequent depression. Therefore, "artistic" writing would express a neurosis, while the preference for nonfiction / docudrama would signal recovery (Schiop 2010). Schiop's stress on the analytical side of autofiction reminds of Serge Doubrovsky's first approach, of the late '70s and early '80s (Gasparini 2009 [1]: 29, 54).

The connection between the immigrants' sense of identity and the *manele* also points to a subtle sociological analysis which is interweaved throughout the novel. Now, Schiop draws closer to what Annie Ernaux called "récit auto-socio-biographique" (*apud* Gasparini 2009 [2]), the middle term of the compound word showing the implicit social dimension of any attempted self-analysis. Later on, he will author an unprecedented sociological survey on the phenomenon of *manele*, and reassert his allegiance to the values of the "low", working class culture, as opposed to the "high" culture that legitimizes the *élite*. His autofiction, he will claim, is written about and for the likes of *căpşunari* (strawberry pickers working abroad), and not for the strata of "urban cool" or "corporatist" intellectuals (Schiop 2009 [2]).

The distance between Gheo's and Schiop's accounts of their experiences with return migration looks now considerable. Both believe in their capacity to represent a certain generational outlook on the relationship between migration and the remodelling of the individual / national identity. Still, in what concerns their commitment to the "national heritage", they take different sides, in terms of "high" vs "low". They are also different in the way they imagine their private selves. While the former draws from his tantalizing sense of belonging the ingredients of a "home"-centred discourse, the latter is the centreless narrative of a character who qualifies as a typical "homeless mind" of the 21st c.

**CORPUS**

Gheo, Radu Pavel, 2004, *Adio, adio, patria mea, cu î din i, cu â din a*, cu o prefață de Liviu Antonesei, Iași, Editura Polirom.
Schiop, Adrian, 2009 [1], *Zero grade Kelvin*, Iași, Editura Polirom.

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