FICTIONS OF DISPLACEMENT: CĂTĂLIN DORIAN FLORESCU AND HERTA MÜLLER

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Drawing on contemporary theories concerning migration, displacement and cultural transfer, this paper explores the specific ways in which fiction and literary discourse contextualise the complex representations of the homeland in the works of Herta Müller and Cătălin Dorian Florescu. It aims to integrate this issue into an analytical process that correlates memory, trauma and nostalgia, understood as fundamental identity components.

Keywords: *exile; nostalgia; homecoming; Eastern Europe; postcommunism; Romania*

Cătălin Dorian Florescu has recently been included in the mainstream of German language writers focusing on Eastern Europe, along with other writers, such as Herta Müller, who had already been an acclaimed author before she received the Nobel prize in Literature, in 2009. This fact, among others, signals the growing interest in the transformations the region has undergone in the past decades. Both Müller and Florescu were born in Romania and have contributed to the integration of Romanian themes and motifs into a growing literature concerning the communist recent past and its historical legacies after 1989 in Eastern Europe. The authors rely in their fictions, to a significant extent, on biographical elements, and they often revisit in their writing, in various forms and contexts, their homeland, the Banat, the extreme Western region of Romania. Florescu and Müller have documented their lives in communism and their emigration to Western Europe, yet their approach and premises do not coincide. I intend to briefly explore the particular modalities in which these authors project specific aspects and images of their homeland in their works. I also argue that their perspectives articulate different representations of identity, foreignness and cultural belonging that originate in similar geographical and political circumstances.

Although they share this topos, Romania and the Banat, their attitude and reflections are divergent and problematic. Florescu fled the country with his parents when he was a teenager and has lived in Switzerland since 1982. The topoi of home and homecoming play a cardinal role in his writing. He considers both countries his homes, as he emphasised in a recent interview: ”I am a son of the Banat, of Timișoara. It is what I know best of my native country. When I leave my Swiss «home» and I go back to my Romanian one, the first thing that opens before my eyes, welcoming me, is the endless plain of the Banat. More than the Carpathians or the sea, to me this means «I have arrived»”[1] (Florescu 2013). In one of his most comprehensive interviews, when asked about the Romanian subjects of his novels and the personal meaning of this permanent connection, the author replied concisely: “It means a part of me is still at home, it means I have Romania in my blood, it means that the Romanian parts of me have more substance than the

[1] All translations from Romanian are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

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others. Perhaps this is a sign that Romania is still a strong «home» in my heart. On the other hand, documentation is minimal when I write about something Romanian" (Florescu 2010: 63).

Müller's struggle to make sense of the past appears more dramatic, as she had lived in a state of double alienation: from the community of the Banater Schwaben (The Swabs) and from her country, a space pervaded by an all-encompassing sense of despair, fear and hopelessness. Florescu is a nostalgic observer, a traveler between worlds, who turned his Romanian experience into literary material. His protagonists are young and their experience with communism is basic and limited. This detached position signals little, if any trauma; for Müller, trauma is one of the key concepts of her work. She was forced to leave Romania by the Securitate, Ceaușescu's secret police. Her protagonists, uprooted and displaced, fail in their attempt to acquire a sense of home and belonging. However complex, the relationship of these writers with their homeland reactivates questions similar to those invoked in James Clifford's critique of Edward Said's *Orientalism*: "What does it mean, at the end of the twentieth century, to speak . . . of a `native land`? What processes rather than essences are involved in present experiences of cultural identity? […] From what discrete sets of cultural resources does any modern writer construct his or her discourse?"(Clifford 1988: 275).

These questions can be addressed in light of the relevant remarks made by John Neubauer (2009) in an introductory chapter to the extensive compendium dedicated to specific exilic discourses from this region, *The Exile and Return of Writers from East-Central Europe*: "In twentieth-century East-Central Europe exile usually meant a self-motivated or, occasionally, forced departure from the home country or habitual place of residence, because of a threat to the person's freedom or dignified survival, such as an imminent arrest, sentence, forced labor, or even extermination. The departure was for an unforeseeable time irreversible" (Neubauer, Török 2009: 8). The authors discussed here illustrate two distinct cases: Florescu fled the country with his family, while Müller was forced to leave by the communist authorities, as she was considered a threat to the internal order, one of generalised submissive complicity.

Heavily relying on autobiographical elements, Florescu's first three novels, *Time of Wonders* (2001), *The Short Way Home* (2002) and *The Blind Masseur* (2006) offer an accurate account of the transformations undergone by their protagonists, projected as fictional alter-egos of the author himself. This process begins with *Time of Wonders*, where the child protagonist of Florescu's debut novel delivers a naïve yet coherent and fluid account of everyday life in a communist country stricken by poverty and dictatorial megalomania. When the family decides to flee Romania, not without some adventure, Florescu's long journey in search of a home begins. *The Short Way Home* (2002) and *The Blind Masseur* (2006) both focus on the development and essential moments of this jouney. Now a young man, the writer's protagonist, having reached an age of self-discovery, is eager to revisit his native Romania. The journey back home, the rather brutal contact with a country undergoing a painful transition, the difficult task of connecting memories to a bleak present time, the unescapable nostalgia, the constant need to adapt, all these elements shape the contexts that prompt the interior metamorphoses of the protagonist. In both novels Florescu turns homecoming into a failed return of the exile (Haines 2011: 215-230) as the journey back reveals an imperfect, precarious version of the imaginary home. Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity "is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return" (Hall 1990: 226). From this perspective, homecomings are unavoidably challenging and incomplete, since an "absolute return", as Hall argues, is impossible. In his seminal essay, *Imaginary Homelands,* Salman Rushdie speaks of the impossible return of writers who are "exiles or immigrants or expatriates" (Rushdie 1992: 10). As he argues that their sense of loss

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could only be alleviated by an attempt to "create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands" (10) Florescu`s intentions in writing about his real and imaginary Romanian homeland seem to be connected to a subjective project of self-discovery.

The author`s in-betweenness[1] is easily detectable, and it derives from the hybridisation of his Romanian roots with a strong formative connection to the German language and culture. It plays a key role in reuniting the numerous underlying threads of cultural, political and social reference of his prose. Although Florescu's native Romania is an overarching theme and a fictional homeland in his entire oeuvre, the language of his literature is German. However, the linguistic component does not emerge as problematic at any point. In his version of the Odyssean pattern (Jankélévitch 1972) detailing the dramatic return of a nostalgic hero to his homeland, Florescu, much like the Homeric Ulysses, turns his arrival into a starting point or, in his own words, "the return is at the same time an end and a new beginning" (Florescu 2010: 65). This could be considered a recurrent strategy in the writer's first four novels, as they all involve a homecoming that becomes the starting point of a new journey.

This subjective material also informs his latest, visibly more accomplished novels, *Zaira* and *Jacob decides to love*. Exploring the spectrum of identity in direct relation to territorial and geographical attachments, both Zaira and Jacob`s stories are also rooted in the fictional ground of the Romanian provinces, intertwined with their historical fatalities and myths. While Zaira`s return to Timișoara can be considered a valid reflector of Florescu`s version of the generic theme of homecoming, it also marks a departure from the author`s autobiographical scheme – Zaira`s homeland is not the writer`s city or the region of Banat, but, in fact, her family`s mansion in Strehaia, in Southern Romania; her recurrent memory flashes certify a deep nostalgia not only for a long lost space, but also for the irreversibly dissolved social order and ethos of the Romanian interwar period. In *Jacob decides to love*, Florescu`s detachment from biographical determinations seems definitive: here, his exploration of the Banat and its quintessential representation, the village of Triebswetter, preponderently express historical questions surrounding the troubled history of the Banat-Swabians.

Herta Müller's problematic relationship with her Romanian past generated heated debates is Romania, especially after she was awarded the Nobel award in 2009. The main issue was if Müller could be considered, even partially, a Romanian writer, or a German language writer from Romania. Müller had not been included, up to that moment, in any historiographic work concerning Romanian literature, and few of her works had been translated and published in Romania before 2009. Despite the sudden general interest in her life story and work, Müller remained skeptical and unwilling to be celebrated in the country she had left as a political refugee in 1987. Her double belonging inspired her to write, but it was also a source of alienation and pain. In a widely quoted statement, she declared:

"I have no choice but to write. If I didn't want to write about this, I wouldn't have to. One is not obliged to write, why would they? [...] If I didn't have to do all this for myself – so that I can hold my own hand – I wouldn't do it. I do not want to be a writer. That is not the reason I write. I have no choice. I did not choose this. I didn't choose the life I lived in Romania, I didn't want it. Every second I tell myself that I would rather I never wrote anything. I wish I had a different job, did something else in life and none of it had ever happened. That's it. And if I

[1] In an interview for the Romanian literary magazine "Suplimentul de cultură" ("The Cultural Supplement"), Florescu declared "I am a traveller between worlds, a wanderer who has very few certainties" - http://www.suplimentuldecultura.ro/index.php/continutArticolNrIdent/Cronica%20de%20carte/2443.

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won't have to put my thoughts in order I won't write. I hope that moment comes" (Müller in Liiceanu 2010: 3).

Conflict seems to be the central dynamic force of Müller's entire oeuvre. It generates a concentric structure, with the writer's native village of Nitzkydorf and her family's past lying in the middle. The first circle, corresponding to her earlier writings, reunites novels such as *Nadirs* (1982), *Opressive Tango* (1984) and *The Passport* (1986), all focusing on the community of the Banat Swabs in communism. In *Nadirs*, Müller openly reveals the moral corruption, violence, abuse and indifference that govern all relationships in her remote native village. The portrayal of the locals has little if anything in common with the good reputation and positive image ethnic Germans have always had among the Romanian majority. No idyllic imagery or pastoral bliss can be traced in this harsh, realistic depiction of a community that has never acknowledged its turbulent past (the direct support of Nazism). The protagonist and first-person narrator is a child, but unlike Florescu's main character in *Time of Wonders*, the world she observes is more brutal, much darker and unforgiving. *Nadirs* is a gesture of separation from a community doomed to conform, simulate and hide behind the protective veil of hypocrisy. If, as she once declared, her childhood and adolescence were mostly silent, due to the linguistic enclavisation of the Swabs, with *Nadirs*, she starts to speak uncomfortable truths. The first part of this collection of short stories, *The Funeral Sermon*, focuses on a surreal premonitory scene in which the protagonist, Müller's alter-ego, attends her father's funeral, and, in a nightmarish procession, the village people denounce her father as a murderer, accusing him of adultery and rape. Then, in a Kafkaesque climactic moment, they ask her to speak, and when she fails to conform, they pronounce their verdict, condemning her to death: "We are proud of our community. Our achievements save us from decline. We will not let ourselves be insulted [...] We will not let ourselves be slandered. In the name of our German community, you are condemned to death" (Müller 2012: 10). Indeed, the book caused a terrible scandal and Müller was considered a traitor by the Swabs of Nitzkydorf. From this perspective, the homeland is a construct accurately described by Thomas Cooper: "If the figure of the exile is constructed by means of the notion that the homeland is a unified ethno-culture, Herta Müller's *Nadirs* upsets this process by revealing this identity to be a narrative built on denial of the past, intolerance with respect to difference and a tenuous interlinking of social custom and language." (Cooper in Neubauer 2009: 479).

Hertzier, published in 1994 and translated into English as *The Land of Green Plums* is a very dense narrative that combines a poetic tone with surrealist accents and a dramatic perspective on Romanian life in communism. It also reveals the isolation and loneliness of the writer (Haines 2011), a theme the writer has linked to the effects of totalitarian power. The novel is the story of a group of four ethnic German students who became friends at a time when the very notion of friendship had lost its meaning. The Securitate had become a powerful and efficient means of control, and the whole country lived in fear of its agents and informants. A land of spies and terror, Romania was an internationally isolated country with a population impoverished and forced to live in precarious, humiliating conditions. The four friends - the unnamed narrator, Edgar, Georg and Kurt are all Banat Swabians, students at the university in Timișoara. They share books smuggled from abroad, read each other's literary creations and refuse to betray each other when interrogated by the Securitate. Although they often think of emigrating to Germany (as fleeing the country was the nation's supreme fantasy in the 1980s and they could have easily left, as German ethnics), they believe it would only aggravate their of alienation. The narrator addresses this concern unhesitantly: "We did not want to leave the

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country. We did not want to get on the Danube, nor up in the air, or on goods trains. We went to the unweeded park. Edgar said: if you-know-who left, all the rest could stay in the country. But he didn't believe it either. Nobody believed that you-know-who would leave. Everyday there were rumors about the dictator's old and new afflictions. Nobody believed them either" (Müller 1997: 48). Florescu described his adventure of crossing the border with Yugoslavia through a corn field in humorous tones (the family got lost and, after wandering aimlessly and not being able to see where they were going they discover they were back in Romania); leaving the country is, for Müller, a traumatic event. The first friend who leaves is Georg, but after only two weeks he is found dead beneath an open hotel window in Frankfurt. Edgar and the narrator leave as well, and Kurt dies in 1989, shortly before Ceaușescu's execution. It was common for the Securitate to kill its opponents and make things look like a suicide. Although far away from their impossible homeland, both Edgar and the narrator (the fictional alter-egos of Müller and her then husband, Richard Wagner), still feel the burden of their unresolved past: "When we don't speak", said Edgar, "we become unbearable, and when we do, we make fools of ourselves . . . The words in our mouths do as much damage as our feet on the grass. But so do our silences." (Müller 1997: 5) Speaking about one's homeland and the traumas it reactivates has become just as painful as reliving a past that still haunts those who lived it.

Probably the most consistent element that connects Florescu's and Müller's representations of the homeland is the sense of in-betweenness emigration entails. Müller's novel *The Passport*, written when she was waiting for her emigration papers to leave Romania for Federal Germany, is an elegy of the disintegration of the Swabian community of Banat. Although the novel focuses on a village man named Windisch, his family and his efforts to leave the country, it inevitably reveals the dire circumstances all peasants had to face during communist colectivisation. Moreover, Windisch becomes aware of the fact that, in order to get the family's passports, Amalie, their young daughter, had to prostitute herself with the priest and the policeman (back then, the militia man). As Valentina Glajar argues, Müller also depicts (in *Herztier* and in other works) an extreme patriarchal society deeply influenced by National Socialism (Glajar 2004: 125). Windisch associates his waiting with a freezing in time, and the prospect of leaving the country is rather bleak: "Since he decided he wanted to leave, Windisch sees the end everywhere in the village. And time stood still for those who wanted to stay." The novel *Traveling on One Leg* focuses particularly on the mythology of the homeland and homecoming. Irene, a German ethnic, an Aussiedler who seeks to make Germany her homeland, finds herself suspended between worlds, with an acute feeling of being and outsider to both.

Brigid Haines remarks in her study concerning "writing from eastern and central Europe" (Haines 2011: 218), referring to literature from Germany or written in the German language that "one of the commonest tropes of recent years has been the return of the exile from western Europe […] to the land of their birth, in search of an authentic sense of belonging, which inevitably fails" (218). Along with authors such as Richard Wagner and Carmen-Francesca Banciu, Florescu and Müller's works focus on the fluid consistency of cultural identity of German language writers who have an Eastern European experience. Haines considers Romanian-German writers a significant group that, even before 1989, were called "the fifth German literature (after the literatures of East and West Germany, Austria and Switzerland)" (216). After the events in 1989, these writers have been gradually integrated into a growing critical scholarship targeting authors who had lived in Romania and, after their emigration to western countries, continued to write about their Romanian home and experience.

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The surreal image of a tree eating its own apples in Müller's *The Passport* could be considered emblematic for the divergent attitude of the writers discussed here: while one seems to enjoy the fruits of experience, memory and nostalgia, the other is symbolically devoured by the past that produces them.

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