HOW CAN ONE BE A EUROPEAN IN AMERICA?

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Abstract

The difficulties of defining European identity have always been obvious, given the dimension of conflict that has always shaped interaction between the nations of the continent. Under these terms, it seems that exile of the Europeans on another continent (which is, in most cases, the American one, as privileged place of rebuilding identities) acts as a contrasting substance for revealing the true features of the individual coming from the Old World. Each of the narratives/theories on American culture unfolds, in fact, the European narrator or theorist's background, identity and difference. In such cases, we are always dealing with a dichotomy, the one that separates Western European perspectives from Eastern European ones. This paper aims to discuss some examples of Romanian exiled writers in America and evaluate the impact of displacement (or re-placement) in their memoirs, journals or theories. The main personalities chosen for this analysis are Matei Călinescu and Virgil Nemoianu, their work embodying a distance from European culture, as well as a struggle to preserve European identity and a certain nostalgic discourse. If exile is a variable that may legitimately trigger a re-evaluation of the relation between a theorist's biography and work, this paper will attempt to outline possible directions of such an endeavour.

Keywords: *literary theory, exile, criticism, identity, rewriting, displacement, replacement.*

Somewhat paradoxically, by adding the reference to a spatial circumstance to the existential question "How can one be a European?", we might imply, by the adverbial phrase, that the answer becomes easier to reveal, without being, though, reductionist. The particular instance of this identity might suggest some general features of its essence. By looking on European identity in the processes/ texts where the main aim is not to define itself, but only its reaction to cultural differences, we might better observe an empirical dimension versus a

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purely conceptual one. If we consider viewpoints such as the one expressed by Pascale Casanova, speaking in his article *European Literature: Simply a Higher Degree of Universality?*, we might agree that "a unity (…) remains if not problematic at least far from being achieved" (Casanova 2009: 121), given that Europe itself is "a space in the making" (*idem*: 123). Thus an internal attempt to circumscribe European identity is from the very start confined to the discovery of heterogeneous cases, whereas researching European self-perception as it regards the American one, or as it is viewed by it, from the American space, might result in a more productive endeavour. The cases of European writers travelling to America illustrate sometimes how they read a different culture and how they read from another culture. Many times this reading is indirectly an expression of their homelands or of the interaction between European identity/tradition and American culture. Starting from the well-known image of the "voyageurs philosophes": "As for Rousseau, the philosopher's journey would thus seem to pose somewhat of a double bind. On the one hand, one can only be a "real" philosopher as opposed to a "philosophe de ruelle [salon-dwelling philosopher] if one travels; on the other hand, one should already be a philosopher in order to travel." (van den Abbeele 1992: 162); travel as method of intellectual enquiry is an important perspective, which will interest this paper greatly.

There are two types of dichotomies for the categories of Europeans in America that we envisage here – first of all, the temporary journey versus the permanent, often thought as irreversible, exile; second of all, the pair of Western Europeans on the one hand, Eastern Europeans on the other. Finally, another type of relation between representations of European/American identities would refer to the fictional constructions on America, those underived from travels but springing from imagination only.

What does Europeanity mean for Americans? Certainly, in some cases, it may be a label for snobbish, stiff obsolete culture, but in many other ways, it still configures a model of connecting with perene values or attitudes. There are countless examples of "Americans in Paris" being thrilled of the world capital of letters, but also controversies such as the one expressed by the volume co-authored by the American critic Donald Morrison and the French professor Antoine Compagnon *What is Left of the French Culture?* (*Que reste-t-il de la culture française?* and *Le Souci de la Grandeur* – rom. transl. *Ce mai rămâne din cultura franceză?/ Preocuparea pentru grandoare*, Art, Bucureşti, 2010). Both of the studies in this volume re-discuss the possibilities of the universality of French culture and the present results of its competition, in a commercial dimension, with the American one. This comparison of the two cultures on international markets reveals, of course, a decrease in French popularity worldwide, losing to its ultra-pragmatic, rich twin.

Americans shape their attitude by arguing at times their radical difference from Europe and sometimes their European heritage that would always prevent

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them from being anything but Europeans. Immediately after 1945, there was even the idea that the new Europe would be entirely an American project and that "the Americans of the Marshall Plan age were the real Founding Fathers of an Europe saved from shipwreck and degradation" (Lévy 2007: 15)

On the other hand, American identity is in all cases regarded as a type of European-otherness, and the perspectives on the topic are reflecting, automatically, involuntarily, the traits of the European identity at its various moments and from the angle of the different European authors.

Goethe's 1827 poem on America, "To the United States", dismisses European scenery as plagued by conflict, disputes, and idealistically projects an image of rational, Enlightenment-rooted peace over America: "You have no ruined castles' rot/ Nor marbles cold.// Nor is your inner peace affected/ In your present active life/ By useless thought which recollected/ Lead to useless strife." (translation quoted in Christian F. Melz, "Goethe and America"). Two centuries later, Kafka's *America* displays the excess of bureaucracy and extreme pragmatism, both of them derived from and distopically mirroring their European equivalents. If the beginning of the novel fills with dark or satirical symbolism the protagonist's friendship with two other European immigrants and their work in "Hotel Occident", the last chapter of the unfinished novel was meant to provide a solution by creating an idealizing *topos* of a "Nature Theatre" as a new workplace for Karl Rossman – far away from Europe's shadow and influence. The idea of this contrast might be confirmed by the fact that Kafka's first draft of the novel emplotted the directions of two brothers, one of which remains in a prison in Europe, and the other one leaves to the United States (Deleuze/ Guattari 2007: 55). Separated by two centuries, Goethe and Kafka's texts ask, subtextually, the same question: "how can one be a European?" and the purpose of the journey to America would be, among other things, to lose one's Europeanity/ Europeanness, an identity flawed by the historic evolution of the old continent. Kafka's protagonist is not tempted by revolutionary behavoiur, but guided by the fear of mechanisms of power (Deleuze/ Guattari 2007: 101).

If Western Europeans are more often than not rather disappointed with the outcome of European aspirations and projects (at least until the second half of the 20th century), Eastern Europeans must face a double inferiority complex: towards Western Europe and towards America – the latter having been for them, in turns, a saviour and a deserter. Consequently, in the case of East-European authors, the discourse of humility will sometimes intertwine with the nostalgic voice of the intellectual who was forced to leave his homeland due to political or economic causes.

The story of Romanian exiles in America contains also a subtle debate on European identity – first of all, since Romanian theorists continue to deal mainly with European literature.

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As far as Matei Călinescu is concerned, the parallels between his journal and his theoretical work cannot be ignored. *A Sort of Diary* (*Un fel de jurnal*, 2006) and his theoretical studies show us a trajectory of concepts and ideas that might reflect some aspects about European identity, and about the connection between certain data of biography and literary theory texts. First of all, he does write that the American experience of *kitsch* triggered the view on one of the *Faces of Modernity.* Second of all, his concept of re-reading, beyond references to spatial metaphors such as Proust's "book as a cathedral", alludes also to approaching a literary text not only from a different time perspective, but also on the grounds of reading from a different culture and reading from exile. The struggle for a balance between adapting to a different culture and daily language and constant thoughts on homeland gives birth to a very particular type of reading.

There is, of course, a question that Matei Călinescu quotes at least twice in his work – first of all in his diary, the second time in "Rereading". The question is "Comment peut-on être Roumain?". The first time he mentions, it is in the diary entries from june 5th 1977 and 19th of March 1979 (Călinescu 2007: 90, 133), after reading Paul Goma's *Le Trémblement des Hommes*, and it is given the meaning of "how can one be a Romanian against all odds", or "how can one still look at things in a Romanian manner", since he declares that the author's lack of distance and depth, his egocentrism bother the reader. The second time he invoques the question is in his 2002 *Addendum* to *Rereading*, referring explicitly to Cioran in his *La Tentation d'exister* and comparing his attitude there to the attitude of the characters in the novel he discusses in his study – Mateiu Caragiale's *Craii de Curtea Veche ("The Old Court Libertines").* He draws a parallel between Paşadia's bitterness toward being a Romanian and Cioran's question. Călinescu dubs this attitude "self-ironic masochism" (Călinescu 2007: 323) and includes in it the feeling of treating one's identity as a misfortune and a punishment, but nevertheless exploring this suffering with a certain persistence, thus engendering a particular type of (self)exile.

Călinescu's diary is abundant in references to his own rereading of his work – the work he had written before his 1973 departure from Romania. He often expresses dissatisfaction with these writings and event claims, about *Zacharias Lichter*, that he must rewrite the entire book in English, without translating, in fact without looking over the Romanian version at all, rewriting it from his "imaginative memory" only (Călinescu 2005: 108). The necessity to rewrite a novel in the language of the adoptive culture stands for a desire to blur the identity which had engendered the original writing. It stands for an impossibility of publicly being Romanian in America, though his diary and his personal conversations are in Romanian. On the other hand, the author complains about the rootless form of his English, noticing how unnatural it sounds when talking to his child, in a manner lacking interjections and other spontaneous or childish language games. Being a Romanian in America also

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triggers, thus, the loss of innocence and a stiff maturity in language. In stating his reasons for leaving the country, Călinescu names the impossibility of handling excessive doubt – as a feature of the communist regime. In his account of Rene Wellek, he also mentions that "The most abstract of books, the most complicated ideas stay in your mind as narratives. Narratives in a double sense: firstly because, unwillingly, one integrates them into the narrative morphology of ideas, which is essentially simple, with limited combinatory possibilities (which is an aid for memory); and then in the sense that they can be connected to the human side of their author, of his "story", be it reduced to its more visible, thus shallow, elements" (Călinescu 2005: 183). Hence, Călinescu himself makes legitimate a certain connection between the theoretical work of an author and his identitary narrative. He is actually even referring to the possibility of reading theory as a sort of journal in disguise, referring to the potential success that Schopenhauer's work would have had, if the author had inserted for each paragraph merely the date when it was written. What is, in fact, one of the remarkable features of Matei Călinescu's diary is the very absence of entries having as main topic the description or the critique of American culture and the presence of narratives of the self as neither American, nor quite Romanian – in fact, confessions of a reminiscent nostalgic Romanian self caught in the attempt of rethinking his existential project, always wondering why the need to write a diary persists.

His diary also contains references to his "typical dreams of an exile" (Călinescu 2005: 211) – various situations in which he finds himself back in the country, either for temporary pleasant purposes or in an impossibility to leave Romania again. This haunting occurrence of dreams set in his homeland also suggests an only manner in which it is possible to be a Romanian in America – in a dreamland or in repressed images of the subconscious.

The work of Virgil Nemoianu also uses identity narratives in order to express his position in the field of theory or criticism. In referring to his mixed origins in his autobiographical volume *Arhipelag interior (Inner Archipelago)*, Nemoianu exploits the multiculturalism of Banat, his native region, in order to underline a continuity instead of a fracture of identity, in fact the Western vocation of his identity (Nemoianu 1994: 8). Thus establishing his position in the cultural field, his religious options and his liberalism and displaying them in almost every text, Nemoianu resembles the Western European travellers to America. Moreover, he plays around the dimensions of exact truth versus fidelity as Philippe Lejeune defines them in *The Autobiographical Pact*, designing his account according to the purpose of defining himself. His signs of displacement are not as serious as the others'. In his Berlin conversations with Sorin Antohi, *România noastră (Our Romania)* (Nemoianu 2009), he redwells on the subject of continuity versus disruption, dissociating himself from what the core of Romanian identity means. In literary theory, the trauma of having lived in a totalitarian regime structures a liberal discourse which endeavours to

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outline a defence system for literature in front of the pressure with which the political field confronts it – in "A Theory of the Secondary", and raising imperfection to a rank of virtue, converting it into a synonym of freedom. He associates utopia with left-wing imaginary. Therefore, his preferences for certain literary works are guided by the political views de-codable from the texts.

Lacking a published diary, Thomas Pavel's work can also offer us suggestions of interpretation for the relationship between exile and favouring. A privileged place in his critical writings is given to Classicism, in its European/French instances, treated as *L'Art de l'Eloignement" (The Art of Distance)*. Pavel claims that Classical imagination resorts to building fictional worlds as distant as possible from the circumstances of its present – constructing thus a radical difference to the age that produced them. In opposition, contemporary art, Pavel sustains, is defined by transfiguring the ordinary and sacralising the commonplace. Based on this scheme, exile would be a decisive trope of distance, as Pavel indeed puts it: "exile, allegory of distance, defined simultaneously the human condition and that of its artistic representation" (Pavel 1999: 257 – "Aeneas or Celadon's exile distances them from their native city and the presence of their beloved, just as the real world distances people from the splendour of imaginary worlds"). A sort of trace of the Formalist *estrangement*, Pavel's approach to Classical art and its strategies contains also an internalized view of his very own condition. Dealing with a topic by making use of one's experience and the discourse in search of analogies between the object of study and the experience of the subject makes the literary theorist construct his very own "engrenage" of concepts and metaphors transfiguring personal experience into conceptual activity. Distance is, in this case, the basis for exemplarity, and also an exercise for the readers' phantasy. Pavel's search for structures to define a type of artistic imagination draws a resemblance between the critic's biography and his theoretical work, which is not to be regarded as a cause-effect relationship, but rather, to quote a famous distinction, as signifier of a signified content. His critical distance from his home country and its political regime at the time is as consistent and as exemplary as the distance between Classical fictional worlds and reality. Also, when discussing the "linguistic mirage", Pavel compares the tendency of literary sciences to place linguistics at their peak and derive their principles from its laws and afterwards the linguistics' "decay", to a country resigned to become a republic after it has unsuccessfully demanded various foreign royal families to rule it (Pavel 1993). The hint to 19th century Romanian Principalities is obvious.

All of the authors mentioned notice, not without a certain surprise, the amount of political consciousness present in their works after leaving Romania. If debating political issues had been out of the question at home, in the United States they do not hesitate to express political views. Their new home defines itself as a place making people prone to tackle politics regardless of their origin

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and that is what strikes all the exiles. Similarly, all the authors note or prove the lack of association projects of Romanians in America, as they do not define a unitary movement or a school of thought, and their occasional cooperation does not trigger the need for an institution. Being an Eastern European in America involves, thus, according to them, rather isolated clusters of people interacting without an organized basis. Moreover, aspects of their European literary options are redefined. The linguistic turn or almost structuralist perspectives they had approached while in Romania are now identified as choices made only to avoid political engagement of their theoretical work. The apparent accident of exile converts to a principle that guides the writing of the authors, thus differentiating them from the initial examples of references to America and Europeanness we had mentioned in this paper.

The various perceptions of the relation between European and American identity we resorted to in the introduction might seem arbitrary or lacking an obvious link to the postures of Romanian exiles, but it is important to emphasize that their very differences from the quoted perspectives serves to the shaping of a portrait – by delineating other accounts. If Western Europeans, regardless of the historic period of their writings, express mostly hopes or disappointments related to America, if Eastern European writers stress the differences between themselves and the adoptive culture, Romanian theorists perform a discrete distancing from both environment and build, in their studies, subtle references to their forlorn culture in comparison to the new, thriving one. If the heuristic purposes of Western-Europeans are declared in most of their journeys to America (e.g. "I went there to get informed/to gain knowledge not only about yourselves, American friends, but also about us, the Europeans, the French especially", B.-H. Lévy 2007: 13), Romanian theorists inevitably convert both personal experience and conceptual knowledge into a multiple-core type of text, at the same time concealing and revealing, on separate levels, their identitary troubles.

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