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Memory and Heterotopic Geography

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the novel *Când ne vom întoarce* [*When we return*], a biographical work about the people from the historical Bukovina county and their identity conflicts, related not only to their ethnic otherness, but also to their own marginal Romanianness, to its symbolic, heterotopic geography, traceable in the condition of being a Romanian, and not in its territory. The novel follows the destiny of the individual, who fights against the grand history regarded in its catastrophic aspects, or who is concerned with the fictional retrieval of an originally lost space.
Keywords: Identity, otherness, war, memory, fiction.

"Yet an invisible and imperishable thread passes underground, or through the air, I don't know, beyond the cursed customs of Siret and it fades in the North, in the fens of the Dniester, because in my secret delusions that is where I come from. This is exactly what I talk about in the dangerously exciting novel with which I will be hitting the shelves this fall", said Radu Mareş, a novelist from Bukovina, in an interview (2010).

Când ne vom întoarce [When we return][1] is, above all, the reconstruction of a world impossible to trace in its original data, which is inscribed in the memory of the author himself: that of the Romanians from a peculiar Bukovina kept under Austrian domination, ignored, after the Great Union, by the Romanian administration, thrown into crisis by politicians, assaulted by nationalistic ideology (which was haunting the entire Europe) and, at the same time, by the hope of the national reconstruction and integration of a territory divided by multiple ethnic identities and by the clichés of their mentality, whose connections with the old world, Romanian as well as Habsburg, were suspended. It was the last shelter for those oppressed by the global terror of history, which seemed to foreshadow the future tragedies, as represented by the couple formed by Herr Frantz,

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[1] Mareş, Radu, *Când ne vom întoarce [When we return]*, Editura Limes, Cluj-Napoca, 2010.

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the vagabond soldier, blinded in World War I, and the Russian woman Olesia, the landlady whose mind had become unhinged, both of them, having settled in this space.

The theme of the novel seems to be the need to recover one's identity, which is figured by analepsis, dominating the narrative discourse through the voice of the station master, Octavian Vorobchievici, and through other embedded reminiscing voices. The scriptural spring, which is revealed towards the end of the text by the main narrator, when the Romanians seek refuge from the Russian troops, is the fear of the void: "You will never understand what was truly there. I am afraid that even history has created for itself a deceitful slip of memory here and it won't help you. As for us, we, the wise men, when we return, we will find nothing else but the void."

There is a note of fatality in this conclusion which assumes both the fantasizing and the resentful evocation of the tragic destiny of Gavril M., a technical agronomist, a native of Bukovina at the mountains' feet, who settles in, sent by his former professor, Volcinschi, in the spring of the year 1934, as an administrator, at a farm on the shore of Dniester, a farm abandoned by its ex-administrator, Wagner the Tyrolese, because he had gone to the Russians; he then marries schoolmistress Katria and in the end he is murdered by the court policemen sent also to execute his iron-guardist friend, Iliuţă Motrescu "the Theologian", who had come to hallow the farm's church, which had been rebuilt by Gavril M. His destiny symbolically portrays that of the Romanian ethnic community, situated at the edges of the civilized world, colonized by the Austrians, faded into the distant unknown, for the Romanian administration.

The young man tells his fiancée about his family background, his childhood and his adolescence, spent in his native village and in Cernăuţi [Czernowitz], and about the two types of education that he received, a rural one, full of his mother's religious fervor, fatalist thinking, and harshness, and the other – an urban one, in the spirit of civic activism, of order, of tenacity and of loyalty, which had professor Volcinschi as a mentor. What impresses the most is the story of his childhood visits to Suceava, where the peasants used to come to the fair and to Saint John's monastery for the feast of the Sânziene "as to a stranger's house", all the way through Volovăţ, to Cajvana, where Grigore was telling people's fortunes by opening the *Bible*, to Cacica, on the feast of Holy Mary and to the fair in Rădăuţi, where he met his future friend, "the monklike" Ilie Motrescu. What also draws attention is this image of a mixed world that, besides the picturesque, emanates the atmosphere of isolation, of uproodedness and capitulation, which eventually leads to the dissolution of the community and of the individuals, as suggested by the religious conversion of his sisters to a neoprotestant sect.

Organizing his new life, he meets the locals and the representatives of the Romanian administration, the mayor Gheorghe Hojbotă, the chief of police Gogu Popescu, the priest Posteucă, the school headmaster Radu Opaiţ, the station master, Octavian Vorobchievici, the farm's accountant, the old man Onofrei, who was educated in the spirit of the Austrian administration, and the cook Tina, the gipsy witch, who practices witchcraft and exorcism for disease and drought, in order to save the master's crops, to whom „nimic n-a fost mai important decât ploaia. Când spun asta, înţeleg că a

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fost important pentru sufletul meu, poate mai important decât pentru ogoare […] De ce se încăpăţânase? Poate pentru că toată lumea se îndoia că de la seceta îngrozitoare mai există ceva care poate fi salvat […] Adevărul e că nu-şi propusese să dovedească nimic. Poate pentru că era imposibil. Iar imposibilul, ca un vârtej nebunesc, i se păruse mai important ca orice. Râvna păcătosului îi place lui Dumnezeu." [2]

In one of his major works, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*, [The *history of Romanian literature from its origins to the present-day*] G. Călinescu emphasizes the peculiarities of the Bukovinian imaginary, the abstruse thinking, the confused sentimentality, the bizarre mysticism and the mixture of the rural and the modern spirit. Radu Mareş, a writer, who, due to his literary vision, belongs to late modernism, filtering realism by his analytical style and his technique of transposing the aleatory flux of memory, seems to confirm this idea, through the voice of the main narrator, who also motivates the discursive practice of embedding and assumes the inability of knowing the truth and its partial loss of credibility: „Toată iarna care a urmat n-am vorbit decât despre cele întâmplate la fermă […] Cam în acest fel haotic, urlând (unii la alţii – n.n.), am refăcut de zeci de ori cele întâmplate, punând cap la cap ce ştia fiecare cu ce se spunea în sat. Cunoşteam mijlocit prea puţin, şi asta e valabil pentru fiecare, parcă pentru a dovedi că luciditatea de care facem atâta caz e o păcăleală. De fapt, trăim ca în somn, într-o semiaţipire a conştiinţei. Tresărim doar la o împuşcătură, când un glonţ ne şuieră ameninţător la ureche. Deschidem însă ochii şi în jur e beznă. Starea de veghe, câştigată întâmplător, e degeaba." [3]

Memory can't be totally set free, through confession, from the feeling of alienation, which haunts the pages of the novel. That is why the lyrical fragments invade and slow down the epic progress, bringing about the triumph of the free indirect style, the dream, the psychological analysis, the description and the symbolic perspective.

Related to the spatial imagination, the book refers to the social practices produced by the positioning with respect to the border, which becomes a symbolic marker of the ethnic identity. Wishing to present history in its horizontal dimension, not through a particular ideology, the narrator confers the epic space the critical

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[2] "nothing was more important than the rain. When I say this, I mean that this was important for my soul, maybe more important for me than for the fields […] Why he had been so stubborn? Maybe because everybody doubted that something could be saved from the horrible drought. […] The truth is that he had not wanted to prove anything. Maybe it was impossible to do so. And the impossible, like a wild eddy, had seemed to him more important than anything else. God loves the ambition of the sinner.", my translation, SF (m.t.), *Op. cit.*, p. 168, 51.

[3] "All the following winter we spoke only of what had happened at the farm. […] In this random manner, yelling [at each other – my note], we put together everything that had happened dozens of times, by piecing out what everybody knew with what it was said in the village. We barely had a piece of information, and this was valid for each of us, as if to prove that our lucidity, of which we boast so much, is a joke. In fact, we live in a sleepy state, with a half-awakened conscience. We react only to a shot, when a bullet hisses aggressively past our ear. Yet, we open our eyes and everything around us is dark. Our vigilance, accidentally gained, is of no use." *Ibidem*, m.t., p. 436 - 438.

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function of denouncing the real, the self-hatred, self-contempt and self-betrayal of the Romanians in this part of the world, in which alienness is in their very home.

The synthesis of civilization in the autochthonous space, of the difference of identities, has a tragic dimension. The story of the main hero demonstrates the inability of the individual to become emancipated from history, from time, regardless of the episteme that constitutes the basis of its representation, temporal or spatial, modernist or postmodernist. For man is trapped in the clichés of mental representations of the individuals and ethnic groups to which he belongs even if he thinks he is free. This illusion is possible when the stake is the organic relationship of love, as in the case of Katria, who „vorbise prima dată germana, cu eleganţa ei geometrică, învăţată în casă de la mama şi de la bunici, dar şi, în paralel, aproape simultan, ucraineana cea muzicală, româna de la şcoală fusese mereu ca o pădure întunecoasă, fără capăt […] Gândurile ei secrete din ultima vreme cereau însă insidios limba română, cuvinte neînchipuit de fragile, nestăpânite cu tot curajul, şi care, ca în basme, se prefăceau în abur sau în pulbere atunci când le punea la încercare."[4]

On the other hand, her Ukrainian father does not like the Romanians; Onofrei believes, after one group of soldiers passes by the mansion, that "the Russian man […] is a stupid race, an animal, a beast, a brute"; Gogu Popescu is aggressive towards the Sudiți[5] who came to work at the farm, with their dark countenances, all having the same name; Wagner the Austrian never stepped into the shop of Horovitz the Jew; and Horovitz explains individual reactions through group reactions, in a perspective of suspicion: „E o prostie! Dacă a fost spionul cuiva, dacă e adevărată povestea cu spionajul, părerea mea pot să ţi-o spun. Până la urmă, ştii ce? Sângele hotărăşte. Wagner a fost şi a rămas austriac. Dar Hitler, mă rog frumos, nu-i şi el austriac?"[6]

It is professor Volcinschi himself who confirms, at the school of Cernăuți [Czernowitz], the clichés about identity, in his speech about the civic spirit, through which the new Romania should be built: „Nu suntem nici nemţi […], ca să avem câte o maşină pentru orice. Nu ştim nici să facem capitaluri, să le adunăm şi să le înmulţim din camătă, cum se pricep jidanii […] Sărăcia n-ar fi până la urmă o ruşine, din punctul meu de vedere. Toţi sfinţii creştini au fost săraci lipiţi. Numai că ţăranul nostru e rob şi analfabet, îl mănâncă de viu pelagra şi alcoolismul, sifilisul şi sărăcia îl distrug […] Cine

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[4] "had spoken in German for the first time, with her geometric elegance, learned at home from her mother and from her grandparents, but, in parallel, almost at the same time with the melodious Ukrainian, unlike the Romanian taught in school which was always like a dark forest without end. […] Her recent secret thoughts insidiously demanded from her the Romanian language, unimaginably fragile words that were untamed beyond all courage, and which, as in fairytales, turned into fume or dust when they were tested." *Ibidem*, m.t., p. 373 - 374.

[5] The spelling shows that this word is a proper name. The context and its referential meaning indicate these people's origin; persons who came from the South, from the Kingdom of Romania (Romanian: Regatul României).

[6] "This is stupid! If he was someone's spy, if the story about espionage is true, let me tell you my opinion. After all, you know what? It is blood that decides. Wagner was and still remains an Austrian. But Hitler, I beg your pardon, isn't he also an Austrian?" *Op. cit.*, m.t., p. 74, 226.

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va vrea să schimbe ţara asta, de la ţăran trebuie să înceapă. Şi să pună oameni noi, tineri, peste tot unde trebuie luate hotărârile mari […] Ca foşti supuşi austrieci, noi, cei din generaţia veche, am fost loiali coroanei imperiale până în clipa în care ne-am dedicat cauzei naţionale […] Acum vin şi vă-ntreb: voi pe cine slujiţi?"[7]

The novel denounces the myth of the Central Europe, of the interethnic tolerance from the inter-war period, the subtle linguistic domination and manipulation of the people. Gavril remembers that, in his childhood, while he was accompanying his mother (who got along naturally and easily with the Russians and the Slovak women, with the Polacks, with the Jews and the Hutsullians present at the fairs), a „sentiment difuz, ca o ameninţare. Descoperise între timp sau învăţase că toate oraşele, nu numai Suceava, erau ocupate, luate în stăpânire de lume străină. Străin însemnând ceva cu care, asemenea oloiului cu apa, tu n-o să te amesteci niciodată, oricât ai vrea […] Până la urmă tot la ei în sat, în văioaga uitată de sub pădure trebuie să se întoarne […], acolo sunt cimitirele şi în cimitire sunt cei dinainte, din moşi strămoşi. O linie precisă, ca de foc, le însemnase astfel pentru totdeauna. Dar linia era şi un obstacol de netrecut."[8]

Not even in Cernăuţi [Czernowitz], where, being under the protective wing of his professor, he was dreaming of "rebuilding other foundations for a new Romania," does this diffuse feeling leave him: „Încă nu-şi aflase locul în mulţimea pestriţă, vorbind într-o sută de limbi din acest colţ de lume de la marginea răsăriteană a României."[9] His so-called anti-Semitic inclinations, based on the reticence that he had towards Horovitz (in fact towards almost everybody), are rather caused by the attempt to protect his ethnic identity, which Horovitz had placed in the area of radical, evil difference: „Domnu' Iorga, când era mai tinerel, ca mătăluţă, bea dimineaţa, pe inima goală, două pahare de sânge de jidan… Şi uite că acum, încărunţit, umblă vorba că s-a mai potolit."[10]

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[7] "We are not Germans […] to have a car for everything. We do not know how to make money, how to capitalize it and how to multiply it by usury, as the Jews do. […] From my point of view, poverty eventually wouldn't be a shame. All the Christian saints were very poor. But our peasant is a slave and illiterate. Pellagra and alcoholism eat him alive. Syphilis and poverty destroy him. […] Who wants to change the country must start with the peasant. And he would have to put new people in charge, young ones, everywhere where major decisions have to be taken. […] As former Austrian subjects, we, those from the old generation, had been loyal to the imperial crown until the moment in which we dedicated ourselves to the national cause. […] And now I come and ask you: who are you serving?" *Ibidem*, m.t., p. 17 - 18.

[8] "confused feeling like a threatening overwhelmed him. In the meantime, he had discovered or he had learned that all the cities, not only Suceava, had been taken, had been occupied by alien people: Alien meaning someone with whom, as in the case of oil mixed with water, you can't ever mingle, as much as you would like to […] In the end they have to return to their village, in the forgotten dale beneath the woods […], where their graveyards and their forefathers are. A precise line, like that made by a fire, had marked them down in this way for eternity. But the line was also an insurmountable obstacle." *Ibidem*, m.t., p. 191.

[9] "He still hadn't found his place in the motley crowd, talking in a hundred languages, from this corner of the world at the eastern border of Romania." *Ibidem*, m.t., p. 247.

[10] "Mister Iorga, when he was younger, like yourself, he drank two glasses of Jews' blood in the morning, on an empty stomach… But now, as he got grey, word has it that he has calmed down a little." *Ibidem*, m.t., p. 226.

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Despite the quasi-religious fervor of his nationalism, the civic activism of the professor, who has designed a botanical garden for Cernăuţi [Czernowitz], implies a critical distance from the historical behavior of the Romanian people: „Mulţi români au uitat că există Bucovina. Profesorul repeta asta tăios, să audă şi ultimul surd […] Ambiţia sa […] era o sfidare, cu obligaţia prezumată de a-i face pe toţi să se întoarcă spre acest urgisit colţ de ţară…”[11]

The sensibility specific to Bukovina, whose strange harshness and introspection are historically determined by the conscience of a hostile difference and of an immature self-identity, unintegrated by "the new" Romanian spirit and, therefore, resentful, seems to be presented metaphorically through the comment of Vorobchievici on the relationship with his son: „În acest copil, îi va povesti el lui Gavril M., îşi recunoaşte adesea, ca într-o oglindă înceţoşată, propriul tembelism de la pubertate, în care era îndărătnicie şi răutate şi era sigur că, oricât va insista, nu va primi răspuns. De câte ori îl studia cu atenţie, ca şi acum, avea o senzaţie stranie. Micuţului, prăpăditului Oleg Vorobchievici […], cu urechile familiei Vorobchievici, clăpăuge şi trandafirii, cu picioarele lui subţirele îi descoperea o privire încărcată cu ură. Asupra acestui lucru de neînţeles îşi propunea de fiecare dată să reflecteze, dar uita şi nici n-ar fi avut calmul necesar pentru asta. Îl va plesni disperat, căci altă soluţie nu e, şi tot nu va afla mai mult. Cum poţi urî ceva ca- re-ţi seamănă perfect, ceva care – la drept vorbind – eşti tu însuţi?”[12]

The same distance from the reality of Romania, whose civilization is hidden "beyond the hills", as in the film of Cristian Mungiu, is confirmed by the accountant Onofrei, when Gavril settles down at the farm: „Încă din vechime, în Bucovina noastră venea lume peste lume, de te miri unde. Au venit unguri, sate întregi, care-s şi azi. Înaintea lor au venit moroşenii […] Cei mai mulţi au fost nemţii şi austriecii, dar asta la început. După ei au venit ruşii, care au adus cu ei puhoiul jidovilor. Şi nu numai pe ei… Numai că era o regulă şi la toţi li se ţinea socoteala […] Uite că acuma au venit [= guvernează – n.n., SF] românii şi au stricat rânduielile."

What is interesting is that the author chooses, as main narrator of this meta-identity story, a character whose name, like that of Gavril's spiritual mentor, has Slavic, Polack-Ukrainian resonances. Besides this, the word Volcinschi is phonetically

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[11] "A lot of the Romanians have forgotten that Bukovina exists. The professor kept severely repeating this, in order for the deafest to hear. […] His ambition […] was a defiant one, used with the probable obligation of making them all return to this abandoned back-country…" *Ibidem*, m.t., p. 263 - 264.

[12] "In this child, he will tell Gavril M., he often acknowledges, as in a blurred mirror, his own puberty idleness, in which there was stubbornness and evil, and he was sure that, no matter how hard he would insist, he wouldn't get an answer. Whenever he closely analyzed him, as he was doing now, he had a strange feeling. He discovered in the little one, in the weak Oleg Vorobchievici […], with his flapped, red ears of the Vorobchievici family, with his thin legs, a look full of hatred. He often wanted to reflect upon this incomprehensible thing, but he forgot and he actually wouldn't have had the necessary disposition to do it. He would desperately slap him in the face, because he didn't have any other solution, and still he wouldn't learn more. How can you hate someone who perfectly resembles you, someone who — frankly speaking — is yourself?" *Ibidem*, m.t., p. 157.

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connotative of the adjective "volnic" [meaning "free"] in Romanian, and the word Vorobchievici seems to connote the function of the character in the text, his role of the story-teller, through the verb "a vorovi" [meaning "to speak", "to tell"]. The foreign "coat" which seems to cover the Romanian meaning moves the accent from the issue of radical difference, to that of relative difference, of the organic coexistence of heterogeneous elements, of hybridization, which suggests that the most important thing is the rational assumption of identity, achieved by exchanging roles with otherness, the importance of the relations with the latter.

The novel written by Radu Mareş is one in which the main hero constructs his own identity, a monographic novel about the land of Bukovina north and south of its present-day border, a political novel about the rise and the repression of the Iron Guard. It is a novel about the identity and the marginality of the individual, who fights against the grand history, regarded in its catastrophic aspects, and, last but not least, it is a poetic novel concerned with the fictional retrieval of an originally lost space. *Când ne vom întoarce [When we return]* is a heart-stirring biographic novel, about the people from Bukovina and their identity conflicts, related not only to their ethnic otherness, but also to their own marginal Romanianness, to its symbolic, heterotopic geography, traceable in the condition of being a Romanian, and not its territory. It is a novel whose theme of reflection eventually turns out to be the responsibility imposed by the assumption of difference, by its integration in a public system of values and the position of power.

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