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Exile, identity and the imaginary in Petru Popescu and Jeffrey Eugenides’s work

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My objective of projecting a coordinating relation between exile, identity and imaginary, was not based on the fact that the terms reject one another. Rather than analyzing the terms from this perspective, I was interested in the relation of recessivity between the three concepts. I took over the term “recessivity” from Gheorghe Manolache’s book, “Regula lui Doi” (“The Rule of Two”), which helped me build a non-dialectic relation between exile, identity and imaginary. I approached the exile from an institutional point of view, as both authors were forced to opt for an irreversible change of “home”. What is more, I was interested in the functioning of the “new identity” or “non-identity” within the text. Therefore, the relation of recessivity can be unraveled by referring to the imaginary.

Beyond the shadow of a doubt, the literature on exile is beyond plentiful. However, the general phenomenon of exile was not my main target. My goal was to offer an objective sample of the exile as such. I did not focus on the phenomenon of the exile in the eastern world, after 1948, nor on the colonial space. The thread that I follow is the experience of writing as a cultural, geographic, identity and imaginary trace of exile. The present thesis is not the outcome of a classical comparative literature research, but rather a genetic enquiry on the exile.

In Petru Popescu’s case the exile operates in two dimensions: geographic and cultural. He could have opted for the European paradigm, like most writers who were active after 1948. But he chose the dynamics of the postmodern imaginary instead, which only truly functioned in the United States. Petru Popescu opts for the best seller novel, as well as for screenplays, which, in my opinion, are traits of the postmodern marginalization. He is the epitome of the liaison

between exile, cultural identity and imaginary and is an illustrative example of the cultural exile in a geographic space. Thus, the theory of the communist imaginary is brought up to date. This specific imaginary is characterized by the traumas of the intellectual, brought up by the relation with the political power or the attempt to adapt to the dictatorship.

If Petru Popescu is part of the first generation of exiles, Jeffrey Eugenides was the author of my choice in my attempt to illustrate the continuity of the cultural recessivity specific to exile. He walks along the same path as Petru Popescu, only in the opposite direction, by leaving America and moving to Germany, in order to re-establish his connection to the self. Petru Popescu is also tempted to restore the pattern of returning, of recessivity, when he comes back to Romania and writes in Romanian once again.

The results of the new findings in this field were centered along two fundamental lines: the excluding relation between identity and globalisation, on the one hand, and interdisciplinarity on the other. Thus, a transfer of the narrative construction is to be observed. Petru Popescu's novel construction is multi-storeyed. The themes are general and represent the basis on which other elements are constructed: persona typology, types of imaginary and adventure. In Jeffrey Eugenides's case the construction of his novels is labyrinthic – a reminder of the Greek tragedy, except for the fact that Eugenides's choir is voiceless, not dynamic and alive.

My thesis is structured into seven main chapters. The first chapter, entitled “Exile – a cultural, geographic, identity and imaginary reality”, analyses the exile through the filter of the present day realities, where identity defines and redefines itself according to the multifaceted manifestations of globalisation. The concept of “exile”, be it geographic, social, cultural or personal, needs to be rigorously reanalysed in this new globalised world, interconnected to the point of identity disappearance. Loneliness, remoteness from the “other” and “otherness”, in general, have suffered major transformations during the last decades, not only due to the political and demographic mutations, but also due to the access to the community and mass-media, which is more effortless than ever before. Being lonely, isolated, dislocated becomes almost impossible in today's world. Nevertheless, a phenomenon impossible to ignore takes place and seems to contradict what I have stated before: the literature of exile, of loneliness, of isolation. This condition is visible in both Petru Popescu and Jeffrey Eugenides's work.

The second chapter, “Exile – between physical and spiritual – Petru Popescu and Jeffrey Eugenides” analyses the experience of exile, which is of major significance in the literary discourse of writers from various cultural spaces and is often lived acutely through writing. It is quite intriguing that, even though the socio-political conditions that have determined the exile have disappeared, the writers cannot detach themselves spiritually from their status of exiles. The aim in this chapter is to trace the spiritual and literary coordinates of the literature of exile produced by the two authors, who stem from radically different cultural spaces: Petru Popescu and Jeffrey Eugenides. The former, refugee in America, from the restrictive space of communist Romania, the latter coming from the Greek cultural space and acclimated in the United States

and soon after, in Germany. Although the reasons for their becoming exiles are completely different, the two authors share a few key-features: both see the exile as a *modus vivendi* and both succeed in transforming the socio-cultural isolation into new identities and spiritual horizons.

“Cultural association and spiritual dissociation in Petru Popescu and Jeffrey Eugenides’s work” is the third chapter of the thesis, which analyses the two concepts that are closely related to the process of individual perception, which, in its turn, determines our understanding of the self and the universe. The association refers to the self as an active part within the spiritual experience, whereas the dissociation hides the self and bestows it with the role of the, more or less, objective observer of events, feelings, memories, sensations, etc. Thus, the spiritual association and dissociation can be, more or less, equivalent to the notions of objectivism and subjectivism. An intense spiritual participation will always imply subjectivity, whereas the role of the observer can lead to objectivism. In other words, we are discussing about opposite existential attitudes: the active and dynamic participant and the almost passive observant. The dimension of this contrast is even more complex in the case of the two authors analysed in this thesis. In their case the polarity is not only between the two states of being active or passive, but between being integrated or exiled.

In chapter four, “National identity versus globalisation – an approach to the problem of identity in the work of Petru Popescu and Jeffrey Eugenides”, I have tried to offer a more complex insight on the mechanisms behind such concepts as “national identity” and “globalisation”, as well as their influence on literature and theoretical evaluation. There is a fine line between the terms “identity/individuality” and “nationality”. Even “nationality” and “national identity” are quite different. The first encompasses the relation between the individual and the state, that is to say, the *homo politicus*, whereas the last focuses on the bond between the individual and culture, civilisation and society, in other words, on the *homo economicus*.

The fifth chapter, “Interdisciplinarity – an opportunity of transferring the identity construction in Petru Popescu and Jeffrey Eugenides’s novels” is an analysis of interdisciplinarity, which is a global phenomenon and part of most higher education and research centres’ curricula nowadays. Even though, from a lexicological point of view, the term is straight forward, problems arise when trying to define its usage, perspectives and areas of influence. Literature is most often unique, an expression of personal values, as well as of human values. From this perspective, the association of literature and disciplines or interdisciplinarity may seem intriguing. Interdisciplinarity is semantically related to the phenomenon of affiliation, of overcoming the boundaries of a certain field and returning to different schools of thought and tendencies. Chapter five is the outcome of filtering some of the two authors’ novels through these theories.

Chapter six, “In the midst of the freedom of imaginary and the limitations imposed by the author’s exile”, explores the exile’s condition, which is characterised both by permanent and

temporary features. It is affected by the hopelessness of immanency, but, at the same time, it is dynamic and open to change. This change is not necessarily due to the modification of the context that caused the exile; it may come from the exiled author himself. Exile cannot end by returning home, but by a change in understanding the term “home”. Once the exiled person stops thinking about returning home and catches roots, the exile ends. It is the moment when the exile becomes the immigrant. In this chapter I have defined the two authors and some of their novels from the perspective of the multiple interpretations of the terms “exile” and “self-exile”.

“Excursion into the narrative world of Petru Popescu and Jeffrey Eugenides” is the final chapter, which represents an applied study on the texts of the two authors’ major novels. I have tried to approach the novels from different angles, ranging from mysticism and faith, to the authors’ multifaceted identity, text and subtext theory or the retrieval of the self through national identity.

The past can be retrieved through the imaginary, so that it may serve the reconstruction of the self and help in overcoming the state of spiritual exile. The individual can only survive reality through the imaginary. The two authors are illustrative examples of cultural recessivity, based on the connection between exile, identity and imaginary. The signs of this relation are diverse. While Petru Popescu opts for a sensationalist novel of best-seller type, Jeffrey Eugenides returns to an Anglo-Saxon type of novel, closer to the experience generated by James Joyce’s novel “Ulysses”.

The originality of my paper consists of the effects of this relation of recessivity within the analysed texts, finding a common denominator for the critical approaches that I have consulted, but also finding a meeting point for the essential studies on Petru Popescu and Jeffrey Eugenides. My paper is a highly personal approach on a literary phenomenon of great diversity. As far as we know, the two authors have not been associated, from a critical point of view, until now, neither have they been co-analysed using the exile and the imaginary as a guideline. One of the core issues that I have tackled in my thesis is the condition of the (self)exiled author in a world with unbelievable changes in the area of communication and literary interaction.

The paper may be of interest to students concerned with a coherent theory on the exile, identity and the imaginary, as pictured in Petru Popescu and Jeffrey Eugenides’s major works. It goes without saying that “exile” is a concept, as well as a multifaceted reality, a permanent presence in the work and life of both authors. They leave the past definition of exile as a physical state behind and transform the concept by adding a psychological component – the exile of their personas becoming metaphysical. My thesis is not an exhaustive study on the exile, which is why some elements may be a good starting point towards a future analysis of the two authors.

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