IDENTITY RE-EVALUATIONS IN THE EAST-EUROPEAN CULTURES OF POST-TOTALITARIAN AGE[1]

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The present study is focused on the identity-oriented discourses of the Eastern Post-totalitarian cultures so as to point out their openings towards the European milieu as well as their total rupture to the ideological past. The newly-occurred *identity as alterity* pattern mirrors the integration syndromes developed within cultures which have just surpassed their complex of the marginal. In quest for the European mirage, the Eastern cultures re-validate the national identity profile viewed as particular voice in the multicultural dialogue. Recent research carried out by trans-national cultural studies shows that focusing the identity traits represents the most functional policy in echoing global strategies of approaching the national literatures. Thus, Romanian literature stands for the best example of such integration politics. The active participation of Romanian space at dynamics of the European cultural market points to the use of interdisciplinary techniques coping with Post-Communist, marginal literatures which have already solved the "identity" issue by means of supporting valid national voices within the communicational EU space. Fokkema's "cultural relativism" ideologically backs up the re-evaluation of the Margin - Centre relation. Finally, on investigating and disseminating the results obtained from the new critical perspective, a series of common cultural strategies and principles will emerge, applicable in all departments concerning the trans-national cultural dialogue of the Eastern Post-totalitarian spaces.

Keywords: cultural policy; Eastern post-totalitarian cultures; evaluation criteria; integrating strategies; Romanian literature

INTRODUCTION

The integrationalist perspective that has dominated the South-European space for the past decades generates, within peripheral cultures, heated debates on the identification and selection if the identity markers to promote an appropriate voice for the national construct on the dynamic market of European interferences. At the end of the 60s, a new type of international/supranational community occurs, on the ideological-conceptual level, as well as on that of the extensive degree of functional applicability – "the global village" (Marshall McLuhan). At the same time, the voice of marginal culture claims, more and more fervently, its right to its own identity, to assuming an authority of pan-European orientation created out of national cultural

items which would be representative for the socio-cultural/ mental space of origin. The inter-cultural dialogue based on communicating *differences*, and not on the unilateral levelling imposed by a new European Centre, in other words, the deliberate and conscious assumption of the "unity in diversity," would represent the valid alternative to compensate for the postmodern "loss of identity," or for what Alvin Toffler calls transience – "Transience is the new «instability» in everyday life. It is expressed by a sensation, a feeling of impermanency." (1) –, while Vattimo names it *disorientation* (the onthos uprooted from the increasingly fluid and inconsistent reality and simultaneously projected in parallel virtual worlds, subject to technological and informational mediation). From this perspective, the postmodern socio-cultural paradigm comes with the compensating offer of the contemporary mentalities' dynamics, using pluralism, the decanonization of culture, tolerance, reclaiming the right to an identity for the minority as relativizing functional mirrors. This new status of the concept of cultural identity, even when belonging to a national community that experienced totalitarianism (as in the case of East-European countries and Romania, in particular), legitimizes principle values such as pluralism, heterotopia, relativization, ideological ecumenism, simultaneity and synchronism. The old Centre of influence, politically forged by the firm orientation towards soviet ideology, and the Western cultural model that mediated the complex of peripheral, minor cultures and which is brought into perspective in a modernist fashion, are placed under the magnifying glass in a South-Eastern European space that experiences "the pilgrimage in search of an identity" in a European polymorphous and interchangeable society. It is also the case of Romanian culture, which, after overcoming its status of "communist enclave", is searching for a representative pro-European profile that would attenuate the stigma of the secondary, fragmentary and of the marginal. Moreover, this project of national representation is moulded on the postmodern epistemology of the "unity in diversity" triggered, in Ihab Hassan's view, by "an epistemological obsession with fragments or fractures, and corresponding commitment to minorities in politics, sex and language. To think well, to feel well, to act well, to read well, according to this epistheme, is to refuse the tyranny of wholes." (2)

In the broader context of globalization, the socio-cultural thought of the post-totalitarian "margins" is reconsidered from the perspective of the dialogue across-borders, according to the principle of "communicating vessels" (Eugen Simion) which no longer confines the individual to the conditionings of its universe (be they even politically-totalitarian). By the contrary, it stimulates economical synchronization and overcoming social differences, freeing Europe from the dichotomist division of the two economic and ideological systems: democratic and totalitarian. At this point, the European space encourages regional or global dialogue in order to convert a "third Europe" (3), a multicultural one. Retrieving this idea in his project of developing a comparative analysis of the history of East-European literatures, Marcel Corniş-Pop suggests an "alternative between globalism and localism, between the hegemonic ambitions of some states or groups of states and exclusivist ethnocentrisms. For the team of researchers involved in this project, Central and Eastern Europe is no a *fault line*, but a convergence region, a territory where the civilizations of Central and South-Eastern Europe interacted to generate, on the one hand, a multiple internal dialogue and, on the other hand, a wider European dialogue (Neumann)" (4) Literature becomes the starting point for intercultural dialogue, mediating alterity through cultural contact, since "literature, if I may be allowed to suggest, can play the role of this mediating conscience, filling the gap left by the collapse of the polarized world of the Cold War and reconstructing the medial areas of cultural coexistence. (…) The political unity of a nation is endured by complex textual undertakings, metaphorical substitutions, subtextual and figurative strategies that render consistency to a nation's self awareness (Bhabha)." (5)

Due to the transparency and the globalizing information flux, postmodern society promotes the technological system as an axiological criterion, the political one adopting, in the view of the Romanian essay-writer Ovidiu Hurduzeu, the example of the "rhizome capitalism" which aims to build a rhizomic network of consumers who no longer have the obsession of the Centre. The cultural effect of the rhizomic symbolism promoted by the essay writer consists in the primacy of devaluation. Furthermore, postmodernity operates with various concepts that underline that same irreversible inclination towards any type of demythization: "supermarket culture," "consumer society," standardization. However, it also operates with new myths which reflect the postmodern awareness of the immanent man: McDonald's, Coca-Cola. The minority tends to become a pseudo-form of authority, rebuilding the position of Centre in the name of difference. In this context, multiculturalism, as promoting the culture of the minority group (namely, the case of Eastern, peripheral national cultures, with reference to the great European models) seems to illustrate one of postmodernism's paradoxes: on the one hand, the elimination of ethnocentric tendencies, as noted by Adrian Dinu Rachieru: "The mediatic permeation, the on-growing interdependences eliminate economic isolation, cultural conservatism, religious dogmatism and they undermine (…) the feeling of belonging, the loyalty to a group, traditions and aspirations. A globalized, interconnected world, while encouraging migration, seems to drain ethnocentrism." (6); on the other hand, in spite of the technological era, the identity reaction is increasingly vehement, since it is well known that the local pre-centralizes cultural identity.

Some Romanian analysts of the postmodernist phenomenon and of its globalizing competences identify negative aspects of the supranational reconstruction, noting its covert ways of oppressing individual freedom. Caius Traian Dragomir maintains that "globalization's true name is focalization – of interests, activities, institutions. Hidden under the noise and the fury of advertising globalization, there is a concentration of ways of existence and, naturally, the latter's transformation into a scheme, into a rudimentary degeneration of life." (7) Moreover, the postmodern man is a "man of the horizontal" (Ovidiu Hurduzeu) who is deprived of the transcendental ideal, being grounded in an oppressive consumerism: "The flesh and bone person-individual, unique and unrepeatable – is replaced by an abstraction, the global man." (8) Psychological theories focused on the individual, that underlined the uniqueness of human personality in its complexity, are abandoned in favour of the sociological theories of the micro-groups which come to provide a conceptual basis for the "global village" and the multicultural society. It is a re-contextualization of the Marxist idea according to which the individual is a representative of a social group, his actions being restricted by the multiple determining factors which connect him to his social class and to the material conditions of a certain age in history. The postmodern technological universe, a "flat, finite and self-referential world" (Ovidiu Hurduzeu), no longer offers a valid value system for constructing a personal identity: "Man is reduced to the meagre presence of his body (physically and mentally) – a body caught in a frame of technical rationalization." (9) Multiculturalism itself hides the practice of uniformity because, as the quoted essay writer observed, "constructing your identity means no more, no less than adhering to an arbitrary essence – femininity, masculinity, homosexuality, Afro-Americanism. Similarly to the monist divinity, the idea of a group is the guarantee for personal identity. You cannot become whole as a result of a free relationship, based on dialogue, with a person outside the group." (10) From this perspective, multicultural diversity hides intrusive totalitarian patterns under the guise of an apparent plurality, techno-globalism constituting itself in a communication possibility between monadic groups. New human prototypes appear, according to Hurduzeu, as a consequence of postmodern society: "The professional victim or the multicultural activist – in

the field of cultural and political life, the manager – of trans-national corporations – in economy and finance, the Therapist, in the field of legally and medically normalized personal life. All three are Technicians." (11)

Following this trail of thought, the attitude of the anti-European sceptics can only be disbanded by consciously and differentially adopting identity discourses. It is the specific case of Romanian culture which, after escaping the wing of totalitarianism of any kind (political, social, cultural, psychological), it attempts, after the revolution of December 1989, a permanent structural re-construction of its own identity profile.

Re-evaluations of Romanian culture in the post-totalitarian years. The phenomenology of the identity discourse

The Romanian post-December period is the time of heated polemics on the matter of identity through culture, on the way in which a literature that is region-specific, peripheral, can overcome the isolating confines imposed on its own profile. Value selection, the combination of criteria for the identification of the internal models which are aesthetically sound in the Euro-centric space, the periphery and marginality complex – they are all points of interest in the contemporary cultural debate. The conflict of ideas and attitudes between the "conservatives," protectors of an identity which can be converted into literary models already established in the Romanian canon, and the "revisionists," supporters of "purging" literature from the great "collaborators" with the communist regime, leads to an ideological division in contemporary discourse on the matter of Romanian literature's pro-European integration. According to Paul Cernat, "perhaps the most regrettable aspect of the mentioned revisionism was to disparage some forced remainders of literary history and criticism (the disclosure and critical analysis of intellectual collaborationism, of annexation propaganda, of party-led canonizations, of false values and the writers' maculating compromises, with reference to biographies and works, the retrieval of certain taboo aspects or of certain values that were marginalized on political grounds, etc.) by stigmatizing in bulk valid creations, replacing uncompromising, but competent and nuanced re-evaluations with maximalist delegimizations in which dealing ex-officio moral justice replaces analysis." (12) Within such an endeavour, marked by the obsession of totalitarianism, which undifferentiatedly juxtaposes the ethic-political criterion with the aesthetic, the effects of sustained re-readings only transcribe the over-dominating complex of absolutist purging processes, in a paradoxical rebound from the initial critical intention.

In a typology advanced by Sorin Alexandrescu and analysed by Solomon Marcus, but born out of a re-discussion of the relation *ipséité - mêmeté* (Paul Ricœur), the Romanian identity pseudo-image, as it is projected in the distorting mirrors of insurgent revisionists operating with ethical criteria in their discussion of the literary phenomenon of the totalitarian period, does not castigate, it actually implicitly promotes the fourth type of identity – "always the same, while not also always its own self (a type of identity that Sorin Alexandrescu perceives as the result of a violent act, leading to a false image, typical for the communist totalitarian society)." (13) As a reply, the supporters of the Romanian identity model through culture, under the ideological authority of "identity as alterity," plead, in the major literary magazines and books taking a stance after December 1989, in favour of elaborating a representative eclectic construct with the purpose of giving an organized legitimacy on several motivational levels (among which we mention: the aesthetic relevance of the rural dimension and the selection of urban fictional texts engaged in the search for the European mirage; the assimilation of the identity provided by the great myths of the national writer and the silent castigation of the stigma of *Romanian*

subservience to the allogene model; the re-consideration of the literature born under the auspices of totalitarianism, also taking under discussion the criteria for aesthetic evaluation, as well as the revision of these texts through the filter of experimental, subversively allegorical codes and those of the parable – functional nuclei in the imaginary of the literary resistance – which open the path for an intercultural dialogue on Romanianness with the European space with the help of various literary formulae compatible with the Western creative spirit. Furthermore, the supporters of the legitimizing national culture at the level of a European dialogue view the diachronic dynamics of cultural values as the only source for establishing a valid identity profile, since, as a well known scholar in field noted: "identity is, to a great extent, inheritance and memory. It is based on values and symbols and founding myths. Whenever their evolution seems to be threatened or endangered, nations, just like individuals, search their past for arguments that can reassure them about their future." (14) Thus, the relationship with Western alterity presupposes an interior plunge into the national paradigmatic area so as to select the representative value items, as well as to put them into perspective in the European reflection space, that of cultural adherence. The phenomenon can be explained by Romania's socio-historical and geographic diachrony, since "the *Other* is an ubiquitous character in the imaginary of any community. Alterity games take shape in an archetypal structure. In this respect, Romanians are not and cannot be an exception. Two characteristic features of Romanian history contributed however to the placement of the other in a specific light: on the one hand, the reaction of a rural civilization somewhat isolated; on the other hand, the massive and uninterrupted impact of foreign models and leadership. The contradictory and complementary action of these factors led to a synthesis with distinct notes of originality." (15) The identity consciousness, assumed more and more acutely in the post-December Romanian context, while bringing the "zealous" and the "discrediting" face to face, it mediates diverse standings and polemics focused on the same recurrent idea – "to be and to remain a Romanian is the great fear of a culture which has always been forced to reflect on itself in the narrow terms of survival. This *myth of identity* was always a priority over any other cultural or ideological problem. The only desired place of integration is an impossible one: Western Romanianness." (16)

Similarly, the pro-European affinity of the Romanian cultural space entails a re-consideration of its own identity coordinates, since, "armed with the experience of a central European culture – which, in many ways, served as a model to us, both in its positive, but even more in its negative aspects – we can go back to our own garden. The fall of the totalitarian system – or however we would designate the events of the 80s and 90s: the implosion of communism, the disarticulation of the Party-State, the bankruptcy of national communism, etc. – provided the Romanian intellectuals, for the first time in half a century, with the chance of a complete recovery of the cultural memory. There were no visible pressure groups to fight for keeping the previous mystifications." (17) It is a time of regaining the "freedom of expression," the previous 22 years during which the European mirror generated successive self-reflections of the Romanian cultural space with a double reference – to its own cultural-social interiority and to the Euro-centric look. The Romanian Sorin Antohi suggests the mediating alternative of The Third Discourse, the middle term, the always excluded third party in the East-West dialogue (or, in more general terms, Centre-Periphery). This Third Discourse is extremely problematic, since its foundation is systematically eroded by the mutually excluding perspectives: it is neither an endemic negation of the West (and, in general, of the Other), nor an imitative assumption of the norms and reference discourses (as it is the case with most supporters of the West)." (18) His program is analysed by Adrian Marino, a supporter of integration by "bringing Europe home," who lists its main functional principles: "1. The widest possible active international opening. In any cultural

and informative field. No restrictions, no barriers, no censorship (…). 2. The meaning of this wide international cultural and formative opening is of the stimulating kind, not of the imitative type, since it is to be interpreted as emulation, inspiration, developing one's own creative possibilities (…). 3. Overcoming any inferiority or superiority complex (…). 4. The categorical rejection of any culture based on mere synchronization, compilation and mechanical imitation (…). 5. The selective and critical recovery of all precursors of both tendencies: Europeanizing, i.e. globalizing and endemic (…). 6. The synthesis formula of the third discourse has at its core the idea of original creation (…). 7. Thus, what results is once again a modernized formula (…): being a Romanian and European writer at the same time. Therefore having a double identity and a double dimension: local and international (…). 8. On the highest level of generalization, the notions of European and Romanian tend to overlap and merge within one principle and one fundamental conclusion: the superiority of the individual creative virtues over any type of collective ones." (19)

Accordingly, we believe in the necessity of a "Europeanization" of Romanian critical thought, or, if we may be allowed a comparison with the new theories of scientific knowledge, assuming a critical undertaking of a *morphologic* type (to use a concept defined by Ilya Prigogine). Such an approach to the pro-European dialogue of Romanian literature is re-read as "cooperating process" (Alain Boutot) with a *dissipative* orientation (Ilya Prigogine) and *holistic* vocation: the European space becomes an inter-relational complex of individual, local cultures, perfectly coherent by their own significance/ individuality/ consistency. The extremes, ethnocentrism or the cancellation of national values in favour of the absolute adherence to a Europe that imposes its specific criteria for cultural "admission", become non-operational. Moreover, so as to close on the same note, we quote Prigogine's pertinent observation: "No model can reclaim its legitimacy any more; none is still exclusivist. Everywhere we see a multi-way cognition, more or less speculative, ephemeral or successful (…). We will have to learn not to judge the array of types of knowledge, practices or cultures produced by society, but establish innovative relations between them, which would allow us to deal with the unprecedented demands of our times." (20)

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13. Solomon Marcus, *Sorin Alexandrescu în oglinda Occidentului*, in *Observatorul cultural*, nr.126/iulie 2002. The author of the article comments on the identity typology suggested by Sorin Alexandrescu: "Sorin suggests a typology of identity, made up of four possible ways of understanding it: a) always himself and always the same (the ideal identity, a positive, Romantic utopia); b) neither himself, neither the same (the complete loss of identity, a negative utopia, an anarchic and suicidal negation of any personal value); c) always himself, but not always the same (with general continuity traits on a superior level, but with discontinuities and breaks on an inferior level, which he calls a pluralist analysis, a tinted self image, lucidly affectionate); d) always the same, but not always himself (a type of identity that Sorin Alexandrescu sees as the result of a violent act, leading to a false image, typical for totalitarian communist society). It becomes clear, even from the description, that Sorin Alexandrescu is in favour of the third type, the only reasonable one."

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