Oneness and Otherness in Florin Manolescu’s Romanian-German Diary – *Cu ochii pe mine / Watching myself*

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Abstract

Florin Manolescu's diary published in 2010, *Cu ochii pe mine / Watching myself*, is representative for the post-totalitarian Eastern traveler to the West as it can be defined as a memoir writing coping with the great totalitarian History and its autobiographical fictionalization instrumented by the uprooted authorial mask. The conflictive relationship between oneness and otherness lies at the core of the diarist narrative, focusing now on identity re-negotiation as the Romanian writer experiences the Western adventure during his stay in Germany.

After the fall of the totalitarian regimes, the ‘peripheral’ literature from Eastern Europe experiences a re-identification process by use of the mediating confessing discourses which, under the diarist formula, convey a special type of lived History now re-written by the authors who have confronted the West in the post-totalitarian age. It is the case of the Romanian writers who have left the communist enclave after December 1989 and ‘lived the European dream’ embedded into a self-reflexive narrative. Through the autobiographical writing, they relate to the totalitarian epoch carried out by their own personal memory as well as by the memory of the Text itself, thus making up the interiorized facet of the Great history now re-lived within the writing act. These types of texts are symptomatic for the need of overpassing the complex of the dominated / tortured marking the literary productions emerging from the ex-communist cultures. The concept of cultural frontier, as Monica Spiridon points out, defines an ‘elementary spatial structure, serving as geopolitical discontinuity and as marker, landmark, operating in three registers: real, symbolic and imaginary’ (our translation) (Spiridon, 2006). The diarist writing functions as an interface of inter-mingling cultural frontiers, the writer finding himself caught between two different fictionalised projections - the native culture displaying traces of Memory empowerment (the ghost of the omnipotent ideological Centre) and the newly-experienced Western culture which generates identity-focused re-definition. Thus, the

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Romanian post-totalitarian diary displays the characteristic features of hybridization and cultural de-spacing (as it is convergent to the contemporary transcultural search of otherness as cultural difference), of ‘cultural decentralization and identity palimpsest’ mediated by ‘hybridizing migrational practices’ (see Jésus Martin-Barbero, 2009). Thus, the approach on identity reconstruction mediated by memoir writings in which the ego seen as multiple identity (see Neumann, 2001) lies at the core of self-legitimizing fictions represents the most suitable reading grid applied to the Romanian post-totalitarian diaries speaking about the inherent mechanisms of reflecting identity multiplicity anchored in experiencing foreignness as alterity, about the space of self-recognition in relation to the Other. Carrying out ego-graphic traits within the identity discourses which invalidate the Eurocentric impact of personal experience facing the cultural adherence to ‘the other world’ in favour of the transnational opening to cultural otherness, the memoir writing of the post-totalitarian Romanian literature re-shapes the status of the (post)exiled who plays the most important role in the egocentric narrative which uses scriptural mechanisms of autofictionalization and self-delusion. Within these specific types of discourse, the issue of identity is called to provide solutions for the present complex situations that appeared as a direct consequence of the disequilibrium occurred within the traditional relation between the Centre and Margin, the periphery rightfully claiming an equal status, on almost all levels, with the one of the previous nucleus of power. Counterbalancing the identity-cultural illusions (as the ones defined by Jean-François Bayart in his book, The Illusion of Cultural Identity), the Romanian Victor Neumann (in his study Perspective comparative asupra filozofiei multiculturale / Comparative Perspectives on Multicultural Philosophy, published in 2001) proposes, the concept of multiple identity, perceived as ‘a flexible concept regarding the identity of the person and of the groups’, suitable to capture the identity disarticulations experienced by those who have two or more cultural roots or by the persons who ‘being born while passing from one culture to another are confronted with all kinds of uncertainties, thus, risking to live in a state of psychological discomfort created by the supposedly cultural identities.’ (our translation) (Neumann, 2001) This concept can be re-shaped when approaching the Romanian memoir writing published after December 1989, as it represents the basic status of the Eastern traveller caught between two worlds (the East and the West) and grasps the inner polymorphous changes of the self as the ex-totalitarian captive begins his identity quest within the larger transcultural frame (see Mary Louise Pratt, 1993, Alina Crihana, 2013 and Simona Antofi, 2013). If identity emerges from the process of negotiating the image of self in relation to both the constructed images of others and the mirror-type representation the others have of the individual who defines itself, the diarist autobiographical narrative represents an identity option which reflects both the matters of trans-culturality and restitutive memory (because the reading of the present presupposes an hermeneutical operation whose purpose is to render meaning to History and to make it accessible).

These theoretical premises lie at the basis of our analysis focusing Florin Manolescu's diary, Cu ochii pe mine / Watching myself, published in 2010 and conveying the experience of the uprooted and its inner des / re-identification forms during 1995 in Germany. His teaching activity of 15 years at Ruhr University represents the starting point of the identity adventure in which East and West are intermingling counter-parts guiding the internal quest for identity, Florin Manolescu's case being representative for the Romanian writers who migrated after 1989 and converted their stored creative energy and dissatisfactions gathered in their native country in compensating narrative representations of the self. From this standpoint, Ricoeur's narrative identity may be brought into discussion, as it successfully reunites the identitary transformations suffered by a certain person's self image, and the frame narrative structure which allows a character, between an initial and a final situation, to follow a path of successive (re)construction or (re)constructions. In this way, the life story of the 'migrant'—considering a character to be a narrative category which performs actions – overlaps the narrative of the self who makes a confession and, by doing so, he constantly brings into discussion his self image. In other words, the narrative identity produced by a confessional writing is born in the interval between the idem pole and the ulterior becoming of the ipse pole. (Paul Ricoeur, 1990). The meta-history (the fictionalisation of History) and the historisation of fiction ('the reality effect') or, in other words, the permanent vasccination between the great and small personal history become narrative strategies of fictional resistance against the totalitarian memory of the communist past. These 'narrative configurations' (Ricoeur) are the covert stages involving identity game, as 'un individu éprouve, de temps à autre, le besoin de récapituler son existence, de raconter sa vie, de lui donner une cohérence: jeu entre la distentio et l’intentio de l’esprit partagé entre mémoire, attention et attente, pour reprendre les termes augustiniens commentés par Ricoeur, ou, plus simplement, entre la discordance des temps singuliers et la concordance attendue de leur réconciliation dans des récits à plusieurs voix.' (Augé, 1998: 60) The Romanian migrant to Germany writes down his identity-focused fiction, legitimating his quest / inner terrors as 'toute image de soi que propose le sujet est
Florin Manolescu’s rhetorical question (2010, 9) marks the debut of the diary and his confessing story ever unfolds under the sign of identity recuperation. In Abou’s words, ‘l’individu s’y révèle comme un être déchiré entre un attachement viscéral à son identité ethnique et une aspiration secrète à la différence culturelle; la société comme une collectivité écartelée entre une inclination jalouse à défendre son unité nationale et un besoin vital d’ouverture à la diversité culturelle; l’histoire enfin, qui brasse les ethnies et les cultures, comme le mouvement même de l’humanité, tiraille entre le désir de stabilité et le goût du changement, la tendance à l’enracinement et la tentation du déracinement.’ (Abou, 1981: 199) The ‘cultural dispersion’ pattern is at use here (see Dufoix, 2011, 356-390), as Florin Manolescu’s recollecting memory uses ‘une poétique de la Relation, selon laquelle toute identité s’étend dans l’espace déracinement.’ (Glissant, apud Dufoix, 2011: 355). Within this mnemonic narrative strategy, the two masks Bhabha speaks about - Lucretius and Ovid- are conveying the bipolar nature of the self confessing its experience recollected from living among the two poles (Romania and Germany): ‘le problème consiste à savoir si le passage des frontières culturelles permet la liberté à partir de l’essence de soi (Lucrèce) ou si, comme la cire, la migration ne change que la surface de l’âme, préservant l’identité sous ses formes protéiformes (Ovide)” (Bhabha, 2007 : 340). On the last cover of the book, Florin Manolescu admits that identity quest is the basic creative pattern of his diary, a story in itself acted by an individual who tries to exorcise his past ideological trauma through writing: ‘As long as a diary stays locked in a shelf, it keeps the secrets of its writer. After it has been published, the same diary may be transformed not only into a source of information or a life experience revealed, but a story also. And, in its turn, the story can be seen as literature as well. All this is happening only if the author has something to tell about.’ (Manolescu, 2010) In Ricoeur’s terms, Manolescu’s diary legitimises the testimony [which] constitutes the fundamental transitional structure between memory and history’ (Ricoeur, 2004: 21) by avoiding binaries and hierarchical subordination of the East to the West. Starting from Derrida’s logocentric model, Rutherford argues that the Centre-Periphery relation can be re-defined: ‘One term, in its discursive and material operation, represents the centre; the excluded term is the margin. By assembling the heterogeneous possibilities of meaning within language into fixed dichotomies, binarism reduces the potential of difference into polar opposites. [...] Binarism operates in the same way as splitting and projection: the centre expels its anxieties, contradictions and irrationalities onto the subordinate term, filling it with the antithesis of its own identity; the Other, in its very alienness, simply mirrors and represents what is deeply familiar to the centre, but projected outside of itself. It is in these processes and representations of marginality that the violence, antagonisms and aversions which are at the core of the dominant discourses and identities become manifest - racism, homophobia, misogyny and class contempt are the products of this frontier. But it is in its nature as a supplement to the centre that the margin is also a place of resistance. The assertion of its existence threatens to deconstruct those forms of knowledge that constitute the subjectivities, discourses and institutions of the dominant, hegemonic formations. It is here, where power relations and historical forces have organised meaning into polar opposites that language becomes a site of struggle. Even as difference is pathologised and refused legitimacy, new terms and new identities are produced on the margins.’ (Rutherford, 1990: 21-22) The ‘cultural politics of difference’ validates Manolescu’s diary as transcultural experience caught between ‘the decline of old political identifications and the new identities that are in the process of becoming or yet to be born’ (Rutherford, 1990: 23) From this perspective, the memoir writing functions as narrative interface East-West pointing to Bhabha’s ‘third space’: ‘I mean, for instance, if you just begin to see what’s happening in the Eastern Europe today: that’s a very good example: people are having to redefine not only elements of socialist policy, but also wider questions about the whole nature of this society which is in a process of transition from a communist-state, second-world, iron-curtain frame of being. Socialism in both the East and the West is having to come to terms with the fact that people cannot now be addressed as colossal, undifferentiated collectivities of class, race, gender or nation. The concept of a people is not ‘given’, as an essential, class-determined, unitary, homogeneous part of society prior to a politics; ‘the people’ are there as a process of political articulation and political negotiation across a whole range of contradictory social sites. ‘The people’ always exist as a multiple form of identification, waiting to be created and constructed.’ (Bhabha, 1990: 220) Actually, Marcel Cornis-Pope notices that the identity quest is embedded in the text-experience belonging to the post-totalitarian Eastern cultures as ‘the end of the Cold War challenged the grids used by writers to make sense of an ideologically polarized world. New emerging identities and narratives (most of them hybrid) have made their way into the vacuum created by the collapse of a bi-polar world. A post-national space has been created.
as nation-states have been weakened by transnationalisms, identities have been hybridized, and language has been deterritorialized in cyberspace. East-Central writers, including those who have experienced exile at one time or another in their careers, have responded to this change of paradigm with an awareness of the opportunities but also of the drama involved in detaching local communities from their traditional moorings and moving them into global space.” (Cornis-Pope, 2010: 629) The tormented attempts of grasping identity make Manolescu's diary to be approached as an 'expérience de dépossession. Entre ceux qui ont dû quitter leur pays et ceux qui en fantasmant un autre, la différence tient de la contrainte physique et du malaise psychique. Il est néanmoins possible de tenter une phénoménologie des expériences exiliques qui s'inscrira parmi les avatars de l’identité contemporaine.' (Nouss, 2003: 25) The demystification strategies applied on the utopian communist history portrays, within Manolescu's memoir writing, the specificity of l'homme dépayssé (Tzvetan Todorov) whose memory 's’est trouvée auréolée d’un tel prestige aux yeux de tous les ennemis du totalitarisme, pourquoi toute acte de réminiscence [...] a pu être assimilé à la résistance antitotalitaire (… la reconstitution du passé était déjà perçue comme un acte d’opposition au pouvoir).” (Todorov, 2010: 656) Certified through the particular use of 'traces mnésiques', Florin Manolescu's diary functions as a therapeutic writing by means of which the Romanian post-totalitarian migrant re-narrates the story of his life / becoming during passing among the three specific levels of self-recognition defined by Todorov: '1-établissement des faits – les individus comme les groupes ont le droit de savoir par eux-mêmes (autonomie du jugement), donc aussi de connaître et de faire connaître leur propre histoire [...]'. Quand les événements vécus par l’individu ou par le groupe sont de nature exceptionnelle ou tragiques, ce droit devient un devoir : celui de se reconnaître et interprêter, le passé sera maintenant utilisé – stage of the narrative testimony in which l’individu [...] convoque ses souvenirs pour donner une forme, donc un sens, à sa vie et se constituer ainsi une identité.’ (Todorov, 2010: 660, 665, 666, 667).

Works cited


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