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Educational strategies in approaching post-totalitarian Romanian literature: interactive views on re-reading the literary canon

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Abstract

The Eastern-European cultural space registers an acute and deliberate separation from the communist political system, which leads to a conscious quest for a self lead by the literatures that are reborn after the mechanism of ideological oppression disappeared. The result is a permanent re-definition of the national cultural positions with reference to the European centre, joined by a revision of educational system that allow post-totalitarian cultural “voices” to interact on the Western scene. The stated aim is for “marginal literature” and their educational curricula to actively participate to the European circulation of cultural production, which entails the necessity of invoking inter-active strategies focused on European interferences, as well as comparative analyses of the status of other marginal post-communist educational programmes, which found a solution for their identity problem by supporting a national cultural voice already heard in a European context. The underlying development of the pluriethnic multiplicity is conditioned, from a globalizing perspective, by the promotion of the undergoing re-discussion and re-evaluation of the national canon in regard to the European one, which gives way, on the Romanian stage, to different validation / invalidation strategies for the concept of identity through literature, within the larger educational background.

Keywords: Identity discourse; value profile; post-December criticism; European integration

1. Introduction. Theoretical Aspects on Cultural Identity. The issue of cultural identity and its forms of representation mirroring the relation between a specific national space and its essential cultural patterns should be placed in the contemporary multicultural dynamics, which has stirred different debates on coping with the identity through culture phenomenon. Under the sign of post(post) modernism and post-colonial experiences, Europe has witnessed the cultural revival of Otherness due to the national ‘voices’ which have begun to claim their right to cultural difference as landmark freed from the marginal / peripheral stigma. It is the case of the South-eastern cultures which have undergone a major re-recognition process of re-validating their national values after the fall of the dominating totalitarian regimes which exercised both socio-political and cultural repression by means of over-ruling Marxist-Leninist paradigm. Confined to an insular-type periphery, self-sufficient and ever self-imposed on the cultural discourse through the ‘ideology of the Proletcult’, the South-eastern cultures have broken with the past ordinating imperatives of the oppressive Centre in their post-totalitarian quest for expressing their newly born identity. According to Homi Bhabha, a mediating ‘third space’, eluding polarity and cultural binarism has become

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functional as ‘producing a culture which both articulates difference and lives with it could only be established on the basis of a non-sovereign notion of self.’ (Rutherford, 1990: 212) Identity is no longer ideologically pre-defined and conformist, instead it legitimises the diachronic re-evaluation of its cultural heritage searching for the internal models relevant to the European cultural exchange. The overt post-totalitarian space turns relational, symptomatic to the cultural shift which has changed the perspective on the identity construct: ‘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 has 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 Cf. Rutherford, 1990: 220). Within the Romanian milieu, identity re-construction and the quest for the representative national paradigm point to the process of negotiating the canon image in relation to the images constructed of critics and to the mirror representation the critics have of the national culture. This double-bind phenomenology overtly eludes both the ‘manipulated’ as well as the ‘obligatory / imposed’ memory - Ricœur’s concepts enhance a special memory-history dyad, suggestive for the Romanian totalitarian trauma: ‘La mémoire manipulée, pour sa part, découle du croisement entre la problématique de la mémoire et celle de l’identité tant collective que personnelle. Elle est façonnée et déformée par les idéologies, par les commémorations, par les remémorations forcées. Quant à la mémoire obligée – ou imposée –, c’est une mémoire instrumentalisée, dans laquelle obligation est faite de se souvenir de ceci et pas de cela.’ (Cf. Bédarida, 2001: 735) As in the case of Romanian post-totalitarian culture, the literatures emerging from the South-eastern spaces, carrying out their intricate communist ‘past life’ as cultural replica against all types of imposed hegemony as well as a form of rebellion against the dictatorship of meaning and representation, are voicing now their identity through difference discourse embedded in the more general European drive for defining the collective specificity of the Other. The identification scenario is anchored in the historical variables mirroring the socio-cultural change, taking place after the fall of communism and following the conceptual mixture of differentiation and generalization. In Claude Dubar’s terms, ‘la première est celle qui vise à définir la différence, ce qui fait la singularité de quelque chose ou de quelque’un par rapport à quelque un ou quelque chose d’autre : l’identité c’est la différence. La seconde est celle qui cherche à définir le point commun à une classe d’éléments tous différents d’une même autre : l’identité c’est l’appartenance commune. Ces deux opérations sont à l’origine du paradoxe de l’identité : ce qu’il y a d’unique est ce qui est partagé. Ce paradoxe ne peut être levé tant qu’on ne prend pas en compte l’élément commun aux deux opérations : l’identification de et par l’autre. Il n’y a pas, dans cette perspective, d’identité sans altérité. Les identités, comme les altérités, varient historiquement et dépendent de leur contexte de définition.’ (Dubar, 2000: 3) This bi-polar process is dialogic in nature, extremely tolerant to the ex-soviet countries, which are facing a large space of inter-action when considering the European cultural inter-change. From this point of view, in its post-totalitarian ‘age’, the Romanian culture mirrors the intimate need to pass over the ‘ideological void’ resulting in reviving its valid literary narratives irrespective of the political contexts in which they were written. The cultural projects reflecting the ‘re-thinking’ of literary canon based now on the aesthetic criteria only, like the ones undertaken by the Romanian ‘autonomist’ critics, become the key-elements of the integrationist movement: the creative ego and the recognition cultural praxis become essential in re-framing the canonical patterns freed from doctrinaire oppression. A special type of dialogism is at work here, mirroring Charles Taylor’s anthropological view on the genesis of cultural identities: ‘Cette notion est utilisée pour montrer comment l’identité d’une individu se constitue dans le contact avec autrui et à travers l’échange continu qui permet au moi – le self - de se structurer et de se définir par comparaison et par différence. En rappelant le rôle clé joué par l’intersubjectivité dans la constitution de moi, Taylor situe la fondation du sujet dans l’interaction avec autrui. Ceci permet de conceptualiser le paradoxe apparent entre développement de l’individualisme et recherche ou renforcement de l’affiliation.’ (Semprini, 1997: 73) Caught between the isolationist phantasm of communist ideology echoing the marginal / insular complex as reminiscent memory (the enclave) and the drive of cultural plurality and European inter-dialogue (the exclave), the Romanian culture re-defines its national icons looked upon as Europeanization
landmarks. Its obvious clivage to the ‘dominant interpretative discourse’ (DID – in Touraine’s terms), the rejection of all types of holistic ideologies, be they contemporary or echoing the past totalitarianisms, are counter-balanced by the shift in assuming conceptual perspectives: the cultural limit means no longer a symbolical closure, secluding the creative ego to its limiting redundant self, the creative authorial profile is no longer subjected to an oppressive Centre formally staging its works, as the writes becomes independent, freed from all kinds of ideological or thematic repression.

2. Methodological Strategies in Approaching Literary Canon. Within the Romanian educational system, interculturality plays an important role as the national curriculum selects representative writers to be exploited from an identity point of view. The didactical strategies involved are mainly the case study and the debate, as they are best suited for the interpretative approach on the literary works – the experiment proposed to the high-school pupils (organized both as group and as individual work) was indented to reveal the understanding of the national cultural icon concept and its relevance to the European identity dynamics. Based on discussing the selection of works and authors proposed by the high-school textbooks (according to the contemporary critical canon and Eugen Simion’s aesthetic approach) and guided by the use of double-effect questions (such as ‘why is the concept of national icon still symptomatic for the contemporary society?’; ‘what do you think of identity representation through culture? How can it be defined within the nowadays drive for consumerism and subculture?’; ‘is the literary canon still representative for a culture?; ‘who are the four main authors you find emblematic for Romanianness?’ etc.), the experiment has emphasized that cultural iconicity functions as a landmark for voicing national identity in a pro-European society pleading for multicultural pluralism. Nevertheless, the didactical experiment has a second objective: to stimulate the intercultural approach through education by making the high-school students aware of their national heritage and identity. By debating such issues important to self-defining as part of the collective cultural paradigm, the experiment has both formative and informative purposes – furthermore, ‘in the long run, educational institutions and educators, functioning as models of intercultural openness, create the basis of a society gradually developing towards pluralism and interculturalism. They can help prepare individuals to live and work effectively in new cultural settings, develop and maintain interpersonal relationships in other cultures, communicate more effectively in different cultural situations, assist others in managing cultural diversity, deal with inevitable cultural stress and, most importantly, reduce racism, sexism, homophobia, culture-related group conflicts.’ (Azcárate, 2011:18).

3. Post-totalitarian Views of Re-reading Romanian Literary Canon. The aim at creating a coherent identity image of the cultural Romaniannes rooted in the iconic paradigm mirroring the specificity of the ‘re-born’ post-totalitarian literature, in other words the collective drive for setting up a valid identity offer functional at the level of inter-national European dynamics, has displayed different debates on the use of critical strategies and criteria appropriate for this type of endeavour. By carrying out ideographic traits mirrored in the post-December critical discourse, voicing the analytic tendency of eluding the still resistant communist recollection, the contemporary critique points to a more fluid and aesthetically based revision of the literary canon. Beyond the obvious ‘political / geographical’ integration of the Romanian space, Ion Simut pleads for the ‘re-construction’ of a competitive Romanian cultural pattern, as ‘in the context of increased global competence, different social needs are en-acted, which culture itself can manage by means of self-reflexive approach of its own constitutive values. Literature will mirror the impact exercised by social changes on a less visible factor: the inner world. (…) The Romanian culture and contemporary literature in particular can project the elitist basic coordinates for defining the Romanian status within the European Union.’ (Simut, 2007: 8-9). Even so, the criteria mixture, the vacillation between the ethical/moral revise of ‘collaborationist literature’ and the aesthetic re-consideration of the works belonging to the communist age, between the breaking away with the ‘founding mythologies’ legitimizing the literary adherence to the political doctrine and the recovery of the valid narratives reflecting the fictional representation of World – all these bi-polar analytical views focus the debated issue of canon and its post-totalitarian metamorphosis. The ‘never-ending transition’ of the analytic processes reflects the conflictive nature of post-communist Romanian criticism. In Eugen Simion’s terms, it embeds a recurrent phase, symptomatic for the social anxiety witnessing this ‘depressive, loud and ever lasting transition’ replacing the aesthetic criterion with a more treacherous one, the aggressive
‘inquisitorial’ revise of the author-text relation – it points out the virulent post-traumatic syndrome affecting Romanian post-totalitarian critique, namely the avid search for ‘defendants and traitors’ hounded during the revisionist chase: ‘We are revising ourselves, revising ourselves till the end of History…’ (Simion, 2010: 2) Similarly, Andrei Grigor demystifies Virgil Podaoba’s subversive approach on post-war Romanian ‘surviving works’ by revealing his ‘ethical’ axiology applied to judging the ‘ideological dump’ resulting in a preferential non-aesthetic revision of the ‘literary culprits’. (Grigor, 2008) The inter-changeable identities, the displacement of the aesthetic relation humanness – History turning the torturer into the tortured are the main key-points of the ‘east-ethic’ distortion in which the political interplay de-forms the aesthetic function of the reading act, actually more interested in finding the ‘guilt’ than in analyzing valid fictional constructs now downplayed by the ‘moralizing’ praxis. In the context of the ‘identity reconstruction’ drive, the ‘post-traumatic memory’ displays double significance: it marks dichotomously either the anachronistic overbidding of the ‘culprit writer’ myth or the selection of the ‘aesthetically resistant’ works facing the ‘inquisitorial’ assault. The conflict placing the ‘canon’ and the ‘anti-canonical’ on divergent analytical position within the contemporary Romanian critique, as Simona Antofa argues (Antofa, 2008: 12-15), calls for a ‘normalizing’ type of approach. In this context, Eugen Simion pleads for stirring up to tolerance’, a personal formula appropriate to the post-totalitarian critique. By defining himself as a ‘non-partisan’ theoretician making use of aesthetic strategies in coping with the so-called ‘collaborationist literature’, the Romanian critic favours the non-ethical revisions of the works ‘allowed by the Party’, equally restoring the ‘comprehensive and brave’ critique of the 60s which has legitimized the ‘authentic values’ selected through the contemporary ‘aesthetically correct’ analysis. (Simion, 1992: 8-9) Unlike the ‘revisionists’ (Gh.Grigurcu, Al.George, Virgil Podaoba, Sami Damian, Monica Lovinescu etc) who virulently claim the inconsistency of all the nationalist-communist critique – due to its overwhelming ideological thesis –, Eugen Simion uses, in his analytical studies, critical strategies overtly detached from the old ‘ideological terror’ nowadays converted into east-ethical schemata. The need for objectively, non-ideologically re-reading literature of 1944-1990, becomes his main critical project, thus eluding the revisionist phenomenon baffling the post-totalitarian stage which gives irreversible verdicts resulting from the ‘literary partisans’ trial. The collective guilt-searching psychosis, hidden under the ‘demystification’ public mask, defines the ‘east-ethic’ practices claiming that ‘during the communist age, there was a spiritual desert; the literary critics has forgotten its own mission. The true critic has never abandoned the fight; on the contrary, he has used his vocation and moral strength to lift Romanian literature up from its own tomb.’ (Simion, 1992: 8-9). The differentiating approach on ‘guilt’ and the de-construction of the ‘ideological blame’ carried out by the ‘mystified works’ have allowed the ‘aesthetic rehabilitation’ of the novels written in the 60’s through their implicit use of pro-European narrative formulas. Virulently rejecting the critical assertions according to which writers such as Marin Preda, G.Calinescu, C.Noica, Nichita Stanescu, Marin Sorescu, Petru Dumitriu or Vintila Horia (and the list of ‘culprits’ may be extended) are nothing but ‘closed door’ for the Romanian creative and integrationist drive, Eugen Simion points out that this type of ‘negative ideography’ is founded on an acute interstitial obsession of totalitarian extraction, dressed in a programmatic ‘demolishing rhetoric’. In this view, the ‘logic of demystification’ overtly reveals its non-sense: ‘Marin Preda is accused of not loving Nietzsche. This would be the mark of his spiritual closure. Can this be, I ask you, a fundamental intellectual argument? It is nothing but absurd.’ (Simion, 1992: 8-9) Following the footsteps of Lovinescu, - his declared critical model – the Romanian critic rejects Monica Lovinescu’s ‘east-ethics’ overstatements according to which the thesis of the aesthetic autonomy enhances cowardice and you contemporary acts and public behaviour /thinking are more important than those during Dej’s and Ceausescu’s regimes. It is a paradoxical situation that confuses me. On one hand, we reproach Argheni, Sadoveanu, Calinescu, Camil Petrescu, Vianu, Preda for having chosen Academy instead of Prison; on the other, there is the manifestation of Christian mercy, the tolerance drive – your intensive active participation at mystifying the Romanian spirit and your thousands of encyclopaedic articles praising the communist torturers does not matter any longer; instead your polemic force is at stake now, if you properly combat the political opponents than you might be prized.’ (Simion, 1992: 8-9) By eluding the dominant interpretative discourse (be it totalitarian or the post-December ‘east-ethic’ simulacrum), the ‘autonomist’ praxis embeds the quest for the aesthetic critical formula relevant to the integrationist pact. Thus, the Romanian culture can re-define its canon, which has been marked by the communist or neo-communist tendencies for a long time, but searching now for its valid identity representation of the national. Within the Europe-centred movement, this aesthetically-rooted phenomenon is similar to the conversion from the national to pos-national scenario Francesco Fistetti speaks about:
in his view, the ‘great absence’ of the unique over-ruling structures is counter-balanced by the occurrence of multiple identities in the cultural melting pot of Otherness (Fistetti, 2009), enhancing cultural difference and multicultural education. The ‘speechless cultures’ subjected in the past to the imperialist or totalitarian regimes, now voice their right to representation, over passing their marginal / peripheral syndrome. The cultural metissage and the hybridization mechanisms re-define the collective self through the revival of identity canonical literatures freed from any kind of ideological /political dominance. In Stuart Hall’s terms, the cultural mixture occurring within the European space displays two major shifts in contemporary thinking: the cultural ‘de-territorialization’ of Periphery and its ‘re-territorialization’ under the sign of cultural tolerance. It is a complex process of ‘cultural recognition’ within which the de-construction of the ‘Ego homogène, équilibré, stable et complet’ is followed by the programmatic revival of ‘Soi, fragmenté, incomplet, composé de soi multiple set d’identités contextuelles, bref comme quelque chose qui a une histoire, quelque chose de construit, toujours en train de se faire.’ (Cf. Fistetti, 2009)

4. Conclusions. In an attempt to re-define its identity profile, the contemporary alternative of cultural reconstruction on aesthetic-based criteria that would mediate the pro-European dialogue gives legitimacy not only to the Europeanizing project of the Romanian space suggested by Eugen Simion; it also brings forth the hypostasis of the creator situated at the meeting point of critical forces. These forces are usually antagonistic and they demand, at this point, a search for an internal equilibrium: the Centre and the periphery, in their polymorphous dynamics, generically converted to reference systems for Romanian contemporary culture and its identity-related texts. The constant search for a Europe that is open to inter-cultural dialogue and to the differentiating identification of the cultural markers of South-eastern European spaces free of their totalitarian spectres is the central issue in the ‘autonomist’ trail of thought and for its role as the Romanian critical option which eludes the tyrannical memory of dictatorship so as to advance, in exchange, a post-December project of ‘returning to Europe.’

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