3rd World Conference on Learning, Teaching and Educational Leadership (WCLTA-2012)

The exile literature of memoirs – debates, dilemmas, representative texts and their formative-educative effects

Simona Antofi *

Dr., Professor, Dunărea de Jos University of Galati, Romania

Abstract

Our analysis is focused on the theoretical-applicative approach on Romanian writings of the exile viewed from a formative-educative perspective applied to the senior high-school pupils. Within the contemporary literature and taking into account the ever increasing interest of the East-European theoreticians in the analysis of cultural spaces, the literary phenomenon regarding diasporas mirrors both the theoretical discourse regarding the narrative construction techniques, as well as the applicative studies concerning the representative memoir texts. In the case of Romanian literature, the cultural surviving alternatives displayed by the exiled Romanian authors ‘writings project specific behavioral and moral-aesthetic patterns relevant to the formation of the young pupils.

1. Introduction

Our research is supported by a multiple theoretical basis, which aims to accommodate the current perspectives on the issue of cultural identity with the motivational, cultural and linguistic specificity of the Romanian exile, and with characteristics of structure and content of autofiction in some of its hypostases, particularly those of the personal journal. The element which is common to all these theoretical fields is, we believe, the creation of an identity profiles which is the result of an ideological objective, of an intention of retrieval or of a strategy of fictionalization specific to autobiographic narrative. In our view, the educational impact of those type of writings definitely relates to the basic objectives of intercultural education by which one can understand “the teleological and creative change of human nature”, “the personal process of transformation of human essence rooted in the intellectual adherence to culture (the humanising phenomenon) and the social process of man’s change during the close approach to the cultural values (the socialisation phenomenon).” (our translation) (Panturu, 1995, p. 8)

2. The construction of the scriptural identity

Autobiographic writings have been for some time now in the foreground of the cultural and literary life, and they are a specific brand of the poststructuralist period and also of the repeated attempts to reveal the
mechanisms that enable the different systems of ideas, the individual or collective social and cultural representations, the literary texts carrying certain perspectives on mankind and certain cultural or behavioural patterns to build illusions of reality which are reinforced by complex persuasive means. Since they are some of the most subtle and refined forms of manipulation, the literary writings are mainly the object of de-constructive procedures, rejection of inauthenticity, of literary fictionality/fictionalisation, while being complemented by the growing interest in the biographic genres, les écrits personnels - personal writings or les littératures intimes – literatures of intimacy – syntagms that include and synthesize different types of first person writings, of the confession type, which give priority to authenticity, honesty and the direct contact with the reality of the facts, the latter being guaranteed by the self who narrates himself in his personal circumstances and in relation to history. This category of texts brings forth once again a dichotomy that was once eliminated as irrelevant to the study of literature – the one between true and false. Since the witness to the events is also the voice that tells the story, the truth of narrated facts – which is highly subjective, often taking sides and duplicated by a permanent re-configuration of the world from the perspective of the one who narrates himself – should be beyond any doubt.

Regarding things from a different angle, one can easily prove the fact that the attempt to escape from the illusions that were literarily built fails into another illusion – that of the possibility of rendering authentic life in writing, every day life in precise, exact facts, and in the absence of any attempt to shape, transfigure or re-semanticize facts and actors. The fictionalization of the experienced fact starts with its turning into writing. Apparently neutral, the act of writing implies a first step of accommodating the real with the still virtual project of a text about to be written and which already leads the whole writing, unknowingly. Regardless of whether they are retrospective or prospective, the autobiographic writings follow the inherent rule of writing – literary and not only – which introduces a third person – spectral, phantasmal, perceived only by intuition, and yet certain – from the moment when the person who starts his confession projects himself in the object of his confessional discourse and he starts talking about himself to himself and to others as if he were an other.

All biographic genres carry the mark of this duplication of the enunciating self, which is functional regardless of whether they are memoirs, an actual autobiography, an autofictional novel or a journal. Theoreticians and practitioners of the critical and hermeneutical undertaking applied to the literature of this kind, highlighted either the signs of auctorial honesty, relying on their authentic value, or the self-delusive games regarding the scriptural (re)construction of the auctorial identity and the world the empirical self went or is going through. To attribute a value of truth to certain autobiographic statements is equal to losing sight of the mimetic effect of the autobiographical writing itself which, as the overtly fictional writing, i.e. a literary, places between brackets an intention of real sincerity – at least at the starting point (if it actually exists there, in the first place). As for the journal – whose particularities are of special interest to us, due to the premise of our endeavour – one can ascertain that the authenticity effect is stronger here than it is for memoirs and autobiography – types of writing with retroactive character and restoring purpose – because the writing itself implies a (relative) simultaneity of the living and the writing, a record on the spot of facts and states of mind, placing the accent on the present of the on-going life. Despite all these, the journal – which, theoretically relies especially on the genuineness of the living fact, recorded as such, and on the implicit rejection of any artifice, proves to be, after a careful analysis, another hypostasis of autofiction: “relying on an ambiguous poetics of spontaneity, avoiding any kind of fiction, the intimate journal, when it is well written and substantial, turns into a special type of fiction. An autofiction, a fiction of non-fiction.” (our translation) (Simion, 2001, p. 225)

3. Gabriela Melinescu – Jurnal suedez / The Swedish Diary or the adventure of the search for the self

Known in the world of Romanian letters as a sensitive poet, with a refined pen, Gabriela Melinescu emigrates to Sweden in 1995, where she continues to write, publishing five volumes of poetry and nine prose volumes, and she translates into Romanian classical and contemporary Swedish writers. At the same time, she translates into Swedish texts by contemporary Romanian writers, thus, collecting, among others, together with Agneta Pleijel and Dan Shafran, an anthology of Ileana Malanciou’s poems.
Gabriela Melinescu’s tumultuous existence and her great love stories brought her close, for a while, to the Romanian poet Nichita Stanescu, then to the Swedish editor René Coeckelberg, both having an early death. A very beautiful woman, of Romanian rural and Jewish ethnic descent, the poet had a hard time under the totalitarian ideology, living almost daily under terror, while, later, she adjusted with great difficulty to the Swedish cultural and mentality space, learning the language and practising pluri-linguistic abilities in her many trips through Europe. The Swedish Diary [4], in five volumes (I, 1976-1983, București, 2000; II, 1984-1989, București, 2002; III, 1990-1996, București, 2004; IV, 1997-2002, București, 2008; V, 2003-2008, București, 2010) relates the uprooting experience and the steps of the forced accommodation to a new Nordic world, one particularly reluctant to foreigners, especially to the ones coming from the East, her great love for René, his illness and sudden death, the pain of surviving her second great love, writing and its vital function, the world of books, drawings and music, the others – René’s family, her Swedish writer friends, the world of great or small Belgian, Italian, French, Swedish editors, the Romanian residents in Sweden and the ones who remained in the country, as well as the imaginary home country, associated to feminine patterns of behaviour, as well as to her father’s suicide. Reflecting all these, are the supreme spiritual models, Spinoza and Epictetus – steady reference points in a chaotic world, in an insecure balance at the border between the illusions of the spirit and the most intense pragmatism.

Naturally, Gabriela Melinescu’s option for the journal type, for the autodiegetic narrative is not a coincidence. If “un choix narratif serait donc toujours en quelque manière idéologique” (Hubier, 2003, p. 11), there is no doubt that the fragmented narrative of the journal, the multiplied self caught in different moments (often of crisis) of his existence reflects the internal dissolution and obsessive quest for a (relatively) new self image, which is, on the one hand, pursuant to the reference points of the adoptive country and, on the other hand, to a balancing solution of the old identitary narrative, strong and alive, despite being pushed to the background. The recurrent returns to the feminine models – especially the mother’s sister, the nun Filofteia –, as mediating representations of the abandoned country, are associated to a tumultuous existence, with many trips because of brave René’s permanent need for money, who has to earn a living with a small publishing house, and who insists on publishing the most important Romanian writers of the moment and fundamental books of the Swedish culture. Thus, strong internal tensions appear, increased by the drama of René’s death, his place being imaginarily taken by a character who resembles him, yet who is only an illusory reflective surface for the pain that is barely endured and for the feminine self in searching for herself, in order to find herself (again) as the wife of the beloved. René’s letters, the tribute to friendship – and the Swedish artist friends – creation, naturally, takes the emotional and spiritual place remained open, after the dear one’s death and after love’s certainty and the support were transferred from a hostile world to the imaginary.

Arriving in Sweden after countless failed attempts and with great difficulties, the diarist begins to experiment many simultaneous competitive linguistic identities – Romanian language, which she wilfully wants to keep alive, as it is one of the identitary-foundational marks; French, the language of love and communication with René; and Swedish. Each linguistic regime she embarks upon resizes and rewrites her, yet illusively, at the level of appearances. This is the reason why the writer searches, from the beginning, the original, Adamic language, the one that preserves the spirit of words and the connection with the sacred. The illusive, superficially-significant cover of the linguistic signs is useful only for daily communication, not for the vital transfer from soul to soul, or much less, for creation. During this quest for this internal, profound language, the diarist identifies temporarily and partially with hypostases of the self obtained through the (self)mirroring function of the writing, since the quest for logos is equivalent, for a writer structured on romantic coordinates, to the quest for the self. In parallel with Romanian language, which is deeply rooted in the immanence of her soul, the diarist has at hand the linguistic play that is equally illusive, although sublime in its innocent-artistic way, of Pierre Zekeli, a refined aristocrat with mixed ethnic origins, the son of a Swedish ambassador to Romania, who speaks a Romanian with an interwar flavour, “the Romanian language of a poet who has learnt foreign languages only through poetry.” (our translation) (Melinescu, 2000, p. 9)

The problem of the language is, after all, the fundamental problem of a writer, which becomes keener because of exile. Yet, reality is built as and addition – a juxtaposition - contamination of fragments (this is also the structure of the diaristic writing) where nothing is stable. Refusing to accept the truth of an illusion means not confusing illusion with reality – and all reality is an illusion - with the only genuine state of facts, the one
that is hidden behind the usual functioning and the notional cover of words. Accordingly, there is a search for the secret source of languages – the virtual, universal, undifferentiated linguistic model where the word becomes and is altogether reality and experience – and the male prototypes, Spinoza and Epictetus, masters of avoiding the illusive game with appearances. Far from random, this language of (all) origins is associated to representations of motherhood, perceived as forms of symbolic coagulation of the original linguistic resources. The collection of Bibles written in all languages, that the diarist puts together with great perseverance, reflects, as well as the constant preoccupation with symbolism and the fragments of dramatic living which are sublimated both in the body and essence of words, from David's Psalms, or for poetry as vital activity, not so much a surface knowledge of multiple languages, as the same concern for the archaic content, universally valid, of all languages of the world, called to name the fundamental truths of being.

The diurnal faces of the self draw back so as to make way for the deep hypostases of the being connected, in Gabriela Melinescu’s case, to her native language. Regarded as the access way to the root of the world and the self, beyond the diversity of linguistic manifestations, which can, sometimes, endanger the inner coherence of the creative spirit, Romanian language either certifies, by its presence, the diarist’s power of creation and vital engagement, or it creates anxiety when the writer drifts away form the vivid words flow. Accordingly, dwelling in many languages becomes possible – the act of translation is a case in point. Altogether with her native language, the diarist carries within herself her own identitary narration – the past being profoundly affected by the history of a whole collective who lived under a dictatorship, where the rebel amazonism of the female part of the family is balanced by the father’s suicidal option and the lost myth of childhood. Not surprisingly, the exile changes all these tragic avatars of the self in sources of vitality, necessary in a foreign land. This way, the scriptural profile of the self appears progressively, carrying multiple facets, placed at the confluence between past history recalled for its role of necessary acknowledgment of the individual to herself - confronted now with foreigners, the Nordic people, and a second identitary narration, which is always subjected to negotiations, in progress, result of the attempt to accommodate to the new world.

Situated in a symbolic register, Sweden belongs to a cultural geography of which the diarist is completely unaware. Beyond its real borders, the symbolic ones – much stronger in the imaginary war between the Swedes and all foreigners – reveal the real image of local people who are not too willing to democratically accept mixed families and foreign residents to Sweden. The different treatment of non-Swedes destroys a strong social and cultural illusion related to tolerance and the democratic life regime in the Nordic country. Several levels of differences exist – between the Swedes and other Nordic people, between the Swedes and the rest of Europe – René comes from a mixed family, with a Swedish mother and a Jewish Flemish father, a family torn by tension and hate, between the Swedes and the Eastern European as well.

As for the diarist - whose intellectual vocation is openly European, on the background of the archaic feeling of communion with everything that implies the creation of the sacred, which was inherited on a maternal line, and of the tendency to rebuild the imaginary homeland in almost any place in Europe – she has a hard time enduring the Swedish xenophobia and the extremist neo-fascist manifestations. Although the Swedes are elitists, their country brings together, in the Swedish language classes, people of different nations and cultural identities: the American Johanna, the French Sophie or the Japanese Eiko, who is married to a Swede. Yet, the discriminating and hypocritical attitude of the greatest majority of Swedes makes the communication between cultures difficult and it differs from the kindness of the Belgians (René is a Belgian citizen) and the good will of the Italians, while being similar to the Swiss intolerance to Germans. In other words, the land of the adoptive country proves to be the one of discrepancies and of the ethnic, linguistic and mentality differences that often prove irreconcilable when they appear.

4. The didactical approach to the memoir writings. Teaching diary patterns to the high school students and its educational impact

If intercultural communication displays two major aspects – the individual communication directly conditioned by the cognitive, affective and operational competences – the linguistic interpersonal communication enhancing different types of social interaction, the multicultural education, obviously related to the second communicational level, solves the inner, social and ethnocentric dilemmas of the individual, over-
passing the social stereotyped prejudices, promoting different types of intercultural dialogue (Rey, 1991, p. 135 – 151).

Often used within the multicultural education process, especially in the high school classes where the ideas confrontations are often and provocative, the debate functions as the best suited method in analysing the intimate narratives of a multiethnic writer, born in Romania and exiled to Sweden. The debate can be viewed as “the method optimising the educational process, making pupils to express and argue their opinions.” (Gorcea, 2007, p. 16)

As far as the advantages and the immediate effects displayed by our debate within the development and the diversification of the high school pupils’ communicational skills are concerned, these are deeply rooted in the contemporary multicultural view on the educational act turning into the key-element of forging the Romanian educational system. Motivated by the ever ongoing adjusting process to the imperatives of the intercultural dialogue and to the newly occurred plural identities phenomenon, the didactical usage of debate in discussing Gabriela Melinescu’s diary becomes an adequately-applied method useful in the development of pupil’s communicational competences and his debating skills, helping him to make up a valid, well-motivated point of view, to adhere to a specific theoretical / practical frame from which he can build up his own personalized perspective. By relating them to Melinescu’s Swedish diary, these specific advantages become relevant for the objective of the educational act, working efficiently in text decoding process. After the necessary individual reading of the five volumes (or only of the first one – for a start -, following that, after the end of the didactical teaching sequence, each student will discuss the ideas emerging from the debate on the other four volumes in a personalized complex essay) as well as after reading the critical approaches to Melinescu’s Swedish diary and the minimal bibliographical corpus referring to the particularities of diary as writing formula / of Romanian exile, the pupils are given a theme for debate. For instance the question of Gabriela Melinescu’s literary contextualization - if she should be looked upon as a Romanian writer from the point of view of her internal formation or, on the contrary, she should be perceived as a writer of the exile using two linguistic frames – the French and the Swedish ones – both enhancing identity features within her memoir narratives. One must not forget the following facts to be taking into consideration here: she published her books at Swedish Publishing Houses, won different prizes for her Swedish writings and has been very appreciated by the Swedish intellectual friends whose writings she has translated into Romanian. As far as the Romanian language is concerned, it portrays the writer’s original identity narrative focusing both spiritual and social values. Pupils are eventually provided with a reading pattern elaborated by the teacher, including the theoretical and operational premises of the approach inserted within the analysis algorithm. Before the activity starts, the pupils are given the basic rules to follow, the method is appointed – for instance the one defined as the “values line” which is to guide the reading steps applied to the mentioned diary. After the double question is asked – the argumentative answers are required -, the pupils are to individually evaluate the found solutions, to assume one of them and write it down. The pupils arguing for two opposing approaches are selected and placed in different corners of the classroom. The other pupils are to draw an imaginary line relating the first two and provoked to debate on Gabriela Melinescu’s relation to either the Romanian culture or the Swedish one. Then, they discuss their approach with the neighboring colleagues so as to elaborate an argumentative discourse voiced by the leader of the group. The frontal confrontation takes place next, during which the groups will present and motivate their perspectives on Gabriela Melinescu’s diary and the ways in which it displays identity cultural patterns mediated through the linguistic vehicle. The presentation is gradually oriented from the exterior parts of the group to its interior parts, thus many pupils will experience the shift of ideas along the line made up by their colleagues. In case these changes of opinion do occur, it will be projected a permanent debate section within which the entire groups will comment on the reasons of shifting ideas. Finally, each student will be assigned to write a personal essay, starting from the key-question, the preliminary information and the approaches on the Swedish diary; eventually, some of these essays will be debated on during future applied discussions.

5. Conclusions

The educational effects carried out by the flexible method of debate – best suited for high school teaching process – are obviously enhanced when coping with memoir narrative of a multilingual writer.
References


