

## NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE EFFECT OF GLOBALIZATION. THE CASE OF PETRU POPESCU, JEFFREY EUGENIDES AND IAN MCEWAN

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*Abstract: The new Europe's unionist spirit, as well as the large perception of the phenomenon of globalization, are a fact in our day and age. The importance and the role of individual communication, group – or even social communication is growing by the day in a world of profound changes, which ensue and arise from one another at such fast pace that cannot be totally captioned, unless maybe by the media. Thus, the importance of literature, literary research and multi-national, bilingual authors is crucial to the understanding and reception of such issues as national identity and globalization. In our paper we will try to point out the relevance of national identity for three authors who are defined and characterized by this phenomenon, namely Petru Popescu, Jeffrey Eugenides and Ian McEwan. What is more, we will underline the way in which their writings contributed to what we call "globalization" today.*

*Keywords:* globalization, identity, nationality, literature, multiculturalism

In order to comprehend the mechanisms behind such concepts as "national identity" and "globalization", as well as their effect upon creators of literature, we would like to focus on a few theoretical aspects, in the first part of our paper. There is a fine line between the terms identity/ individuality and nationality. In fact, nationality and national identity are, in their turn, slightly different. The former focuses, at least from our perspective, more on the relationship between the individual and the state, in other words on the homo politicus, while the latter is based on the relationship between the individual and the culture, the civilization, the society of a nation, that is the homo economicus. In other words, as far as the individual is concerned, nationality expresses the relation between a human being and the state as a political, official organization and national identity, on the other hand, corresponds to the linkage between the individual and the culture that he belongs to. National identity might be a little bit more permissive in matters of personality and uniqueness, of the cultural expression that a human being, most often, chooses to pertain to.

Be that as it may, identity is a very flexible notion, at least in what semantics or social sciences are concerned. The large number of theoreticians who have dwelled upon the significance and the multiple definitions of the term "identity" stand testimony to this: R. Jenkins, 1996; S. Hall and P. Du Gay 1996; R. Williams, 2000; and the list of names can continue. The use of the term "identity" has become extremely diverse in time. In their scientific paper entitled *Beyond "identity"* (2000), F. Cooper and R. Brubaker argue that sciences and humanities have altered the "strong" sense of the term, which refers to individuality, with a "weak" sense, which refers to contextualized, sensible, susceptible forms of individuality. More recent approaches have pointed out that identity is no longer an attribute of the human being, something that an individual is, but rather an action of an entity.

The same two authors point out that individuality can be approached in terms of identification with the others, which involves classifying the self or the others, and that both identification and classification are steps towards discovering and identifying the self. Coming back to nationality, identity and national identity, many have discussed whether

identifying oneself with one's nation, rejoicing over the identification of the self with one's nation, necessarily means identifying with a certain group and thus creating a negative, unhealthy relation between the self and the other(s), creating extreme nationalistic behaviour. These assumptions or theories might be true in some cases, but for the majority of the instances, we believe that it is a natural characteristic of the homo politicus to identify itself with a group and thus to create a feeling of belonging. This does not necessarily imply that the individual rejects otherness. Even though we have associated the term "nationality" to the political, state-related sphere of existence, there are other theories and nuances which seem equally valid to us.

David McCrone and Richard Kiely, for instance, focus on the distinction between nationality and citizenship: "nationality and citizenship actually belong to different spheres of meaning and activity. The former is in essence a cultural concept which binds people on the basis of shared identity – in Benedict Anderson's apt phrase as an 'imagined community' – while citizenship is a political concept deriving from people's relationship to the state. In other words, nation-ness and state-ness need not be, and increasingly are not, aligned". (McCrone, Kierly, 2000) It is true nevertheless, that the terms "national identity" and "citizenship-identity" are highly similar, due to historical, social or political approaches, and they most often overlap in popular knowledge. All of these different points of view prove that both the collective and the individual identity are of utmost importance, especially in our day and age.

Such concepts as "nationality", "identity" and, implicitly "globalization", are re-defined and enriched, underlined and altered by literature. The following quote from Jonathan Culler's book entitled *The Literary in Theory*, shows that literary works have a deep impact on present-day social and individual matters: "This structure of exemplarity has been important to the relationship of literature to the problem of identity, which has been so central to the recent history. Is the self something given or something made, and should it be conceived in individual or social terms? Literature has always been concerned with such questions, and literary works offer a range of implicit models of how identity is formed." (Culler, 2006)

In what follows, we would like to focus our attention on the issue of national identity in the case of three, apparently, very different authors but who find common ground due to the similarities concerning national identity and globalization. We are referring, of course, to Petru Popescu, Jeffrey Eugenides and Ian McEwan. Before moving on to the authors themselves and the way in which globalization has influenced their national/trans-national identities, let us dwell upon the primary result of their work, namely literature. In his book *Literary Theory. A Very Short Introduction*, Jonathan Culler emphasizes the almost incongruous position of literature in the great field of theory; he states that literary theory nowadays focuses on anything ranging from philosophy, to sociology, to psychology, gender studies and many, many more, but literature itself. Throughout the book the author consistently asks himself what literature is and he finds numerous explanations. One question in particular is relevant to our topic of national identity and globalization, namely: "What is involved in treating things as literature in our culture?" (Culler, 22) And the answer comes just as straight forward: "(If) Literature is language decontextualized, cut off from other functions and purposes, it is also itself a context, which promotes or elicits special kinds of

attention. For instance, readers attend to potential complexities and look for implicit meanings, without assuming, say, that the utterance is telling them to do something. To describe ‘literature’ would be to analyse a set of assumptions and interpretive operations readers may bring to bear on such texts.” (Culler, 25)

That is to say, literature is a significant pillar in culture and it is affected by alterations according to the readers’ expectations, assumptions and interpretations. In this respect, globalization can play a vital role, because the current communicational possibilities have changed literary reception completely and have enabled both writers and readers to a very rich, vast reading experience. What is more, literature has been influenced by globalization but at the same time, literature has played a dynamic role in the development of this geopolitical, economic and cultural occurrence called “Globalization”. Speaking of globalization, there are some writers whose literary outcome or even identities have been majorly influenced by this ongoing process. One of them is Petru Popescu, the Romanian born American best-selling author, who has left Romania during the communist regime, despite the fact that he had reached the height of appreciation as a writer, and moved to the United States. What is particularly interesting in his case is that his work, whether written in Romanian or in English, has been widely appreciated all over the world. Petru Popescu has become a powerful promoter of Romanian values and realities in the United States and of the American culture in Romania. National identity in his case is essential to his development as a complete, complex author.

Petru Popescu has met the expectations of his readership in the East and the West alike, not only due to the autobiographical character of his novels, but especially due to the sincerity and authenticity which characterizes his style. Although the subject matter of his novels, History, Ideology, Politics, Philosophy, is not always digestible to larger audiences, he has managed to write about them in an accessible, straight-forward manner. He has been very well received in two essentially different geographical, cultural and historical areas like the East and the West, because Petru Popescu wrote about the human nature, his writings thus appealing to several different generations. Petru Popescu moved to the United States and thus shifted from the national, local audience to a international, diverse readership. The effects of globalization and mass communication of the present days have enabled a writer like Petru Popescu to express his talent and to become an author who has surpassed the limits of a national readership and has become a writer delivering literature to mankind. Clearly the evolution of inter-cultural transmission of information, which came along with the ample process of globalization, has had great influence on a writer like Petru Popescu.

In *The Novelization of Identity*, Magda Danciu brings forth some valuable and pertinent hypotheses about Petru Popescu’s national identity, encompassing general truths about national distinctiveness as well. Petru Popescu has not redefined himself as a writer, as his literary talent was inborn and undeniable, but as an author and as an individual, he has reinvented himself; he has combined the need of national belonging with a bold inner self: “History, in general, may contribute to the enhancing of a sense of community and belonging and to the crystallisation of one’s identity, in moulding one’s future as a member of a certain group. National Identity is seen to be a highly resonating inner self that turns into a dominant self whenever it is exposed to conditions of deracination against one’s own volition; when the subject reflected upon is an artist/writer who most often perceives this detachment with a

greater sense of difference, national identity can become a signifier of a particularly emotional loss and nostalgia, as from this vantage point a boundless nation is no fantasy. The concept of national affiliation, so deeply imprinted in oneself, generates the strength, stamina and belief of any individual who happens to be living outside his/her own country to be in the need of biographical re-invention and identity self-definition.” (Danciu, 2010) That is to say, Petru Popescu too had to traverse both past and present in order to identify his (trans)national self.

Jeffrey Eugenides is a famous American author of Greek origin, who has been living for very many years in Germany. It is understandable that he has been confronted with multiculturalism, interculturalism and the interactivity proper to Modernism and Postmodernism. “*Middlesex*” and “*The Virgin Suicides*”, two of his best known novels, prove that the relativism of literature stands in close relation to History and cultural identity. Eugenides is by his nature a transnational human being. He has travelled and lived in various geographical regions, never forgetting his Greek origins – the thematic of the majority of his novels stand testimony. He often makes use of the collective, popular Greek memory, based on various cultural and literary references. A quotation from his novel *Middlesex* is notable and relates perfectly to the theme of globalization and national identity, in the case of Jeffrey Eugenides: “You used to be able to tell a person’s nationality by the face. Immigration ended that. Next you discerned nationality via the footwear. Globalization ended that.” (Eugenides, 2002)

Building and finding new and old identities is actually a crucial subject in Eugenides’ *Middlesex*; beginning with Calliope’s exploration for sexual identity and moving on to the Greek family’s search for historical and cultural identities. As Yanoula Athanassakis points out in her article entitled “The American girl I had once been: Psychosomatic trauma and history in Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex*”, “The project of identity-making and historical recovery in *Middlesex* is explored physically and corporeally. *Middlesex* moves through tumultuous historical moments and identifies what might be thought of as convulsions in the seemingly serene and relaxed musculature of the historical body.” (Athanassakis, 2000) Exploring globalization and national identity both psychologically and physically, as Eugenides’ main character does, is maybe one of the most intricate, many-sided and complete approaches possible.

Eugenides’ choice of setting the novel in America was not fortuitous at all. It suggests that the United States are the epitome, the embodiment, the symbol for globalization and cross-national identity – an identity that the author himself has been many a time confronted with. Thus, History is of utmost importance for Jeffrey Eugenides. In *Middlesex* it creates identities and structures the path to the future: “In this life we go backwards. Living sends a person not into the future but back into the past, to childhood and before birth, finally to commune with the dead. You get older, you puff on the stairs, you enter the body of your father. From there it’s only a quick jump to your grandparents, and then before you know it you’re time-travelling.” (Eugenides, 2002)

The final author whom we have found illustrative for the topic of our paper is Ian McEwan, maybe the most appreciated contemporary British author, who is Scottish. McEwan lives in London and stems from the family of a British officer, who has been detached for many years to the western part of Germany. Thus the author has spent a great part of his

childhood and adolescence in a foreign country. The distinctiveness of McEwan lies in the endless spring of his literary creativeness, as well as in finding new ways of literary eloquence. In an interview on climate change, Ian McEwan had the following to state: “To address climate change and the political challenges it raises, we must harness imagination to understanding, good science to enlightened globalisation.” (McEwan, 2005) We need to underline the perspicuity of the expression “enlightened globalisation” – that is to say, a literate, open-minded, refined growth to a worldwide magnitude. Due to the nature of his family affairs and personal development, Ian McEwan has drawn global knowledge together. The majority of his bestselling novels deal with contemporary, realistic, updated state of affairs. The novel *Solar*, for instance, addresses the issue of solar energy and climate change, one of the most stringent issues today.

On the other hand, *Black Dogs* encompasses such aspects as identity, history and culture as well. In fact, some reoccurring themes in the novel lead to the conclusion that the individual and society are profoundly influenced by history. In the article “Bringing the Past to Heel: History, Identity and Violence in Ian McEwan’s *Black Dogs*”, Anja Müller-Wood and Carter Wood underline the following: “In the book, identities are established in reference to social ideologies; world-historical events invade and shape personal life, in ways both terrible and laughable.” (A. Wood, C. Wood, 2007) That is to say, McEwan’s work is, in part, focused on the issue of defining the self and creating a national/ historical identity. The authors then go on to state that “History is not only shown to be relevant but indeed crucial to an individual’s self-understanding; Jeremy has rightly been called a ‘postmodern orphan’, set adrift amongst the competing discourses of his time.” (A. Wood, C. Wood, 2007)

It appears that the peculiarities of nationality, national identity and globalisation are numberless and can be exploited and debated from numerous vantage points. Indubitably the three obviously dissimilar authors, Petru Popescu, Jeffrey Eugenides and Ian McEwan, are, perhaps to an unexpected extent, alike. They have all been influenced, on a personal and on a professional basis, by multiculturalism and interculturalism and thus they have structured national and transnational identities, both for themselves, as well as for their characters. Beyond doubt, their literary contribution opened ways to new interpretations and conceptualizations regarding national identity and globalization.

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