MIGRANT WRITERS ON NATIONAL IDENTITY. HOME AND ITS STEREOTYPES IN SOME RECENT ROMANIAN INTELLECTUAL DISCOURSES

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Abstract: This paper aims to look into the rhetoric devices used by some Romanian migrant writers in the process of (re)imagining Home, in our era of intensified cultural interchange. Cristian Bădiliță, Mirel Bănică, and Codruț Constantinescu share a common intellectual background: they all had a significant experience in the Western academic environments, be it in Europe or North America. In the meantime, two of them confess having to take up a series of odd jobs in order to earn their living, which allowed them to delve into the lives of the low class, and to share their resentment toward rejection and exclusion. Thus, their experience with the West is double-sided: as highly educated students / scholars, who have to face some of the hardships specific to the migrant condition. Accordingly, some of their non-fiction books shape an ambiguous image of the self, dipped into mixed feelings of love-hate, longing-contempt for their "motherland". The texts that will be scrutinized, combining fragments of diary, correspondence, and essay, rely on some leitmotifs of the interwar discourses on the national identity, that the authors try to readjust to the age of globalization. The rhetoric of "exasperation" is aimed at demonizing Home, which is retrospectively imagined through stereotypes related to Communism and Balkanism.

Keywords: migrant, identity, Balkanism, Communism, stereotype

The basic plot underpinning the non-fiction, semi-autobiographic discourses that will be discussed here[1] may be sketched in few lines: an East European young student or scholar obtains a grant and studies in the West for some time; thus, the new academic and non-academic environment, the bitter-sweet migrant experience, the trips back and forth, home and abroad, shape a new representation of his personal and national identity. Disregarding the differences, the intellectual trajectories of the three authors considered passed once through the same turning point. Cristian Bădiliță, now a theologian, essayist and translator established in Paris, studied in Madrid; Mirel Bănică, a religion sociologist, was a master, doctoral and post-doctoral student in Geneva and Quebec City; Codruț Constantinescu studied in Denmark and Switzerland, before becoming a counsellor for EU Affairs. While the first elliptically notes the "semi-monastic" regime of the Seminario Conciliar de Madrid (Bădiliță 2005: 31), the second and the third enlarge on their manifold experiences with underpaid temporary jobs, meant to supplement their low income (such as gardener, caretaker, waiter, dishwasher, cook apprentice, private teacher, receptionist, bookshop assistant, guardian, carpet seller, pottery assistant). Beside publishing their books, in the meantime, the three of them have consistently contributed articles to prestigious cultural magazines in Romania, building their reputation as members of the intellectual elite.

Their look back in anger to the "motherland" is anything but an innovation in the history of East European travel writing. From the early stages of modernity, the accounts of the wealthy and educated Easterners having seen the West resulted not only in (re)confirming

[1] Codruț Constantinescu, 2004, *Hai-hui prin Occident*, Premier, Ploiești; Cristian Bădiliță, 2005, *Nodul Gordian*, București, Curtea Veche; Cristian Bădiliță, 2007, *Singurătatea păsării migratoare*, București, Curtea Veche; Mirel Bănică, Codruț Constantinescu, 2007, *Enervări sau despre bucuria de a trăi în România*, cu ilustrații de Dan Perjovschi,, postfață de Christian Crăciun, Iași, Polirom; Mirel Bănică, 2011, *Fals jurnal de căpşunar*, Iași, Institutul European.

the irradiating civilizational "centre", but also in (re)mapping the "provinces", or "peripheries", that the authors felt to be unwittingly part of. The contemplation of the relatively developed societies of the West enables, thus, a backward connection, i.e. a mechanism by which the traveller re-imagines home, generally by way of contrast. The "expressions of shame" (Bracewell 2009: xvi) voiced by the boyar Dinicu Golescu in his *Account of My Travel* (1826) inaugurated a common pattern for a whole range of travel writings of the Romanian *literati*. After the fall of the Communist block, the discourse of the country's belatedness took on fresh overtones, adding a new geo-political theme to the old lament.

Among the three writers, Mirel Bănică resents the most acutely the duality of the migrant condition, probably due to the fact that he feels compelled to go for jobs that he considers degrading. The oxymoronic self-designation that he plays on ("academic strawberry picker" – Bănică 2011: 41) points at a status ambiguity: as a highly recognized intellectual forced into social marginality (hence, the comparison with the East European workers toiling on the plantations of the West). In the middle of the Swiss "paradise" (161), more than once he feels "humiliation" (179). The exaggeration is proportional to the intensity of the nostalgic reaction (manifesting itself through such repetitive actions as searching for Romanian books, radio stations or on-line dailies, diving into teenage memories from home etc.) Homesickness appears also in the discourses of Cristian Bădiliță or Codruț Constantinescu, when brooding over the Moldavian village of Nichiteni (Bădiliță 2007: 164-165), or over the native town of Câmpina (Constantinescu 2004: 122), respectively.

Having indulged in a state of hypersensitivity, the writers construct stark representations of the Romanian identity, drawing on a clear divide between the *elite* and the *mob*. The pattern, radically neo-conservative, reminisces of a whole range of 1900-1940s philosophical essays, notably of Ortega y Gasset's *Invertebrate Spain* (1921) or *The Revolt of the Masses* (1930). Bădiliță, Bănică and Constantinescu overtly or covertly revere the "group of Păltiniș"[2], rooted in the local tradition of the interwar intellectuality. The references to them and to some other "boyars of the mind" (Matei 2004) – such as Gabriel Liiceanu, Andrei Pleșu, Horia Roman Patapievici, or Alexandru Paleologu – are always enthusiastic. The three authors feel either overwhelmed by what they interpret as the omniscience of the group, or feel to be their natural followers, in what concerns the cult-like respect for high culture[3]. The legitimation of "masters" through "disciples" and vice-versa is considered by Matei a "paramodern" practice of generating public prestige by claiming "a privileged access to intellectual resources, aura, and 'illumination'" (idem: 7). Hence, the concept of a society split in two: the narrow circle of the "illuminati", and the rest of the population, whether intellectual or not. As will become self-evident, this overview emerges from the discourses observed here as well.

1. Firstly, the three authors aim to construct the *elite* based on the mythicized image of the interwar "young generation" coagulated around the controversial figure of Nae Ionescu, a

[2] Former disciples and admirers of Constantin Noica (1909-1987), a philosopher retired in the small town of Păltiniș between 1975 and 1987, where he informally directed a "school of thinking" influenced by phenomenology and Heidegger's philosophy.

[3] Bădiliță, a fierce polemist, recently reconsidered his attitude toward Liiceanu, Pleșu, or Patapievici, contesting their capacity to embody high culture (see Bădiliță 2009: 10, 11-12 and Bădiliță 2014).

then influential professor of philosophy and journalist. Eventually, the project of the "generation" (which was, in fact, only a limited elite group) was partially compromised, due to some of its members' affiliation or attraction to the local far-right movement. However, the writers stress on the symbolic connections between themselves and the most visible of its representatives. As Bădiliță puts it,

> "[t]o better understand the situation and profile of today's intellectual, we must start from the interwar period. In the interwar years, the Romanian society reached a peak hard to climb. From all points of view, but especially from the cultural and the spiritual ones. The two paradigms merged, at a certain moment, into the concrete form of a generation (Eliade, Cioran, Vulcănescu, Noica etc.)." (Bădiliță 2005: 159)

Therefore, the author argues, it's high time we tied up with the interwar times, to secure "our salvation from total failure" (idem: 161). Bănică, in his turn, invokes with admiration "the crazy, Cioranean generation of the '90s" (i.e. a generation nurtured with the pessimistic literature of Emil Cioran, massively republished immediately after 1989 – Bănică 2011: 176). Constantinescu resorts more than once to comparisons between the "generations" of '27 and '90, referring to the definition of the concept by the sociologist Mircea Vulcănescu around 1930 (Constantinescu 2004: 70, 71, 72, 73, 77), so that the book could be recommended, in its preface, as a new generational manifesto (idem: 7). Striving to invent a group of forerunners, the authors tend to single out, from the collective portrait, the renowned trio Mircea Eliade – Eugen Ionescu / Eugène Ionesco – Emil Cioran. The choice of the three émigrés ("the three great Romanians", as they are sometimes referred to by the nostalgics of the interwar culture, especially with reference to the photos of their last encounter, famously taken in Place Furstenberg, Paris, in 1986) is less than innocent, as the three young authors style themselves as new "exiles", walking in the footsteps of the yesterday's elite out of their country. Their pretended closeness to the model can be read as a strategy of self-promotion, intended to give efficient results both home and abroad. The references to the cases of Cioran, Ionesco, or Eliade, but also of Vintilă Horia, Theodor Cazaban, Virgil Ierunca, Monica Lovinescu, or even James Joyce abound in their texts as status markers, while their existential situations are dramatized by such self-designations as "a clandestine émigré in the daylight" (Bădiliță 2007: 226), "exiles" craving for the traditional dishes of home (Bănică 2011: 167-168), or cherishing the mother tongue as "the only valuable good that has been left to us" (Constantinescu 2004: 54).

However, technically, the status of a migrant student / scholar on mobility in a Western university of the "globalized Europe", whatever the living conditions, can be hardly described as exile. The difference between an "exile" and an "expat" has been pointed out by Neubauer: while the former runs away from a regime of unbearable "political suppression", that makes him or her "existentially endangered", the latter gets engaged in an "unforced departure", having the possibility to return at any time he or she wants to (Neubauer, Török 2009: 9-10). However, the intention of the authors isn't, in the first place, to document realistically a social phenomenon, but to reinvent their identities as exiles, reimagining, in the process, their native country as a degenerated mother figure who, unmotherly, throws away her best sons, while cuddling at her bosom the worst, instead. Thus, the most valuable of our culture in the last 50 years is the creation of the émigrés:

> "Apart from the great exiles, an across-the board, absolute zero. [...] The Romanian culture of the last 50 years is 'soy salami'4." (Bădiliță 2005: 89)

2. Secondly, the *elite* being associated with the migrant writers of the interwar "young generation", Romania *of the mob* is represented as a place incompatible with their presumed refined lifestyle and high expectations. Here, the three writers draw on a set of persistent stereotypes of the intellectual discourse, revolving around the popular themes of *Communism* and *Balkanism*, with their malignant heritage in all Eastern Europe. Thus, the root of all evil is shown to be twofold.

a). On the one hand, the totalitarian Communist regimes collapsed in 1989 left indelible marks on the mentalities widely spread in Eastern Europe, and particularly in Romania. Poverty, the deprivation of the fundamental rights and human dignity fostered a society complacent in the social-political ambiguities of the transition period, unable to break up with the still recent past and embrace the values of high culture and spirituality. Not surprisingly for a neo-conservative outlook, today's ideologists who advocate for the core ideas of globalization (political correctness, multiculturalism, minority rights, religious and sexual diversity, feminism etc.) are considered akin to the old, Soviet-style, Communism. The Western left-wing thinkers of the latest decades are pictured simplistically as naive theorists, having hatched from the (neo-)marxist doctrines, not having directly experienced the atrocities of Stalinism, and unable, therefore, to grasp the reality behind the deceitful words.

Bădiliță pretends there is a genetic link between Communism, aestheticism, structuralism, and today's democratic thinking:

> "The generations entering the stage of history after the '50s completely lost their bearings, and limited themselves either to a cheap aestheticism of Proletkult colour, to a structuralism whose agony isn't over yet, or to a doubtful and resentful rationalism. Out of the Communist shell appeared, in December '89, another shell, maybe even more ridiculous – the chronic 'smoke and mirrors' approach [fumism]. The new generations, educated by the old generations of left-wing democrats, mix up and confuse almost everything: democracy with spirit, and freedom with idle talk, culture with the American stupidity and spirituality with Descartes' philosophy, philosophy with general linguistics etc. etc." (Bădiliță 2005: 161)

Out of "the Communist shell" also came out the "intellectual barbarian", who is paradigmatically the engineer, but who has lately entered the field of humanities as well, after the spread of the neopositivist ideology, defined as the outcome of the Left-wing democratic thinking "deprived of any spiritual appetite" (idem: 161). The source indicated in the text is Michel Henry's *Barbarism* (1987), but the tradition of the notion can be traced back to Jacques Maritain's essay *Antimoderne* (Maritain 1922: 19), and includes at least another recent Romanian reference, the writer Octavian Paler, who considered "neobarbarism" as a core feature of the technologically advanced societies:

[4] During the economic shortage of the last years of Ceauşescu's regime, the soy salami, famously bland and unhealthy, was one of the few groceries on the market, thus becoming a symbol of (poverty in) Communist Romania.

> "Neobarbarism is the outcome of civilization, not its opposite, and attacks from within the city. The neobarbarian gets usually dressed at the best tailor, travels by limousine, and not on horseback, like his ancestor the barbarian used to, has got a mobile phone, surfs the internet, is a TV star. But he wouldn't hear about culture. Why? Nietzsche said it. Civilization wants something else than culture." (Paler 2003: 17)

The derogatory phrase "intellectual barbarian" draws on the opposition culture vs civilization, spirituality vs materialism, with a rich descent in the 20th c. history of ideas and in the Romanian interwar culture. The anti-Communist, antimodern thinking of Bădiliță relies on the critique of the post-Enlightenment inadherence to the Christian faith, that used to represent the mainstream European culture before the 17th c. (Bădiliță 2005: 164). This vision is enlarged on in his 2007 volume: modern sciences are the works of "the Great Polytechnician", i.e. the Devil (Bădiliță 2007: 13); today's France, founded on the tenets of the "Bovaric utopians", is nothing but "the Fifth Sovietoid Republic" (idem: 36); the Romanian critics who denounced the 2005 case of Tanacu exorcism[5] are qualified as "intellectualist-ignorant-atheist", and blamed for their alleged remanent "Stalinist logic" (idem: 154-155). The local "barbarians" are the inhabitants, cultural journalists, and political leaders of "pseudo-Romania", a country of a diminished ontological status, due to its foundation on a Left-wing, antireligious ideology (Bădiliță 2005: 147, 167, 170, Bădiliță 2009: 40).

A good portion of Euroscepticism is served by Constantinescu, who ironically undersigns one of his letters, where he exemplifies what he calls the Western decay, "(the incorrect) Codruț" (Bănică, Constantinescu 2007: 46). He also deplores the intellectuals "stuck in the old Mitterandist socialist project, which poisoned France so much" (idem: 95-96), and satirizes the resemblances between the idiom of the EU institutions and the wooden language of the Communist propaganda (idem: 36). Bănică mocks at the Left-wing Swiss discourses (Bănică, Constantinescu 2007: 112), and can hardly come to terms with the postmodern and postfeminist studies present in the curriculum of the Laval University of Quebec (Bănică 2011: 230-231). In a nutshell, for the three authors, the old Communist discourse resulted in a malignant inversion of values, that the new dominant Euro-American paradigm of political correctness, *eiusdem farinae*, is incapable to reverse back.

b). On the other hand, the belatedness of the Romanian society is expressed through the clichées of Balkanism, of a long tradition in the local intellectual discourse. The main features famously described by Todorova are richly illustrated in their texts: the internalization of the Western hegemonic discourse, the overemphasis on the centre vs periphery distinction, the proliferation of the metaphors of underdevelopment, the stigma as a basis for self-perception (Todorova 2009: 38-62).

The category of space itself seems contaminated with self-depreciation, as in the recurring images of the ill-smelling national soil: "the Balkanic sauces" (*zemurile Balcanilor*) (Bănică 2011: 56), the "clay" (*glod*) from the "bucket of the province" (*hârdăul provinciei*), that the author has to dive in every now and again (Bădiliță 2005: 97), or "the slightly smelly mud of motherland" (*mâlul uşor mirositor al ţării mamă*) (Bănică, Constantinescu 2007: 22)

[5] A case, intensely covered by the Romanian media, that took place in a Moldavian monastery, consisting in a mentally ill young woman being killed during an act of exorcism.

are all reminiscences of the century old "muck" (*lip*), a metaphor by which the sociologist and essayist Ştefan Zeletin bitterly represented the national identity of "Donkeyland" (*Ţara Măgarilor*, i.e. Romania – Zeletin 2006: 48-49).

The psychological attributes most often referred to are anticulture, grossness (*mitocănie*), brazenness (*obrăznicie*), sloth (*delăsare*), the last one taking "various guises, from the aristocratic disgust and the Oblomovian idleness to the Mioritic[6] fatalism" (Bădiliță 2007: 115). The geo-strategic circumstances are sometimes invoked in these poignant self-representations, as in one of Constantinescu's letters:

> "Briefly: we've always been some provincial, failed Europeans, exiled at the borders of the Empire, maybe destined to defend the West – a mission, though, in which we failed so many times (last time, in 1944)." (Bănică, Constantinescu 2007: 96-97)

The perception of the present Romania is even gloomier, aggravated by what Bănică calls "the landing syndrome" (i.e. a depressive mood experienced by the traveller coming back home from the West):

> "The country seems to have fallen prey to a sort of savage liberalism, of Balkanic taste. Everybody dreams to get rich fast, beyond measure and with no ethical restraints. The self-hatred of the Romanians, always dissatisfied with something or somebody. The society, as a whole, is soiled in a thick layer of indolence and indifference, fatalism and grossness. Boorishness as a state of mind." (Bănică 2011: 280).

This degraded psycho-geographic environment couldn't have been deprived of references to I. L. Caragiale, the creator of Mitică – the comic, idle, unreliable character of the sketch stories published in 1901, largely recognized as the most popular embodiment of Romanian identity. Predictably, the authors' attitudes towards him are ambivalent. Bădiliță is amused and saddened by the formalism of his religious sentiments, and mockingly fantasizes about his canonization by the Orthodox Church, as "Saint Mitică" (Bădiliță 2007: 87). In their correspondence, Bănică and Constantinescu sometimes mimic Caragiale's style and catchphrases, to give a humorous turn to their, otherwise, sombre paragraphs (Bănică, Constantinescu 2007: 19, 21). However, there is another literary character who can better serve as a prototype of the Romanian *mob*, as pictured by the three authors: it is Bai Ganyo Balkanski, the hero of the Bulgarian writer Aleko Konstantinov, a contemporary of Caragiale. As compared to Mitică, Bai Ganyo's portrait is darker and etched-in-acid: not only is he the ill-mannered do-nothing, characterized by boorishness, uncouthness and the like, but he is also the parvenu, the nouveau riche, or the corrupted politician slick enough to swim in the troubled waters of a society in seemingly endless transition from the Ottoman to the European, from the agrarian to the modern civilization. He is the archetypal *Homo Balkanicus*, or the "man-mob" (Todorova 2009: 39), whose in-betweenness is hilariously symbolized by his hybrid attire:

[6] Allusion to the old Romanian pastoral ballad *Miorița*, considered by the (post-)Romantic criticism to render the essence of the "national spirit", i.e. the philosophical resignation before death.

"a Bulgarian brimless, peaked fur cap (*kalpak*), boots, and a peasant's sash and collarless shirt underneath an urban West European vest and frock coat." (Friedman, in Konstantinov 2010: 4)

Caragiale himself represented the Balkanic identity in connection with the Bulgarian ethnic group, appealing, in one of his letters, to the disparaging stereotype of racial miscegenation. In accordance with another long-lasting local stereotype, Romania is symbolically split in two, Transylvania and the rest (including the capital Bucureşti, notoriously nicknamed "Little Paris"), the former being distantly connected to Europe, while the latter irredeemably stuck in the Orient:

> "In Transylvania reach the shoed feet of the European body; in Bucureşti, Ploieşti etc., it's laden with parasites, scratched to blood, but wearing a haircut à la Parisienne, as the head of the Bulgarian-Gypsy body, the dirtiest and most disgusting part of this bastardized and ignoble Oriental type." (Caragiale 2000: 685).

The image of Bucureşti as the Oriental "head" or hub of the country was reinforced by Mateiu I. Caragiale's 1929 decadent novel *Craii de Curtea-Veche* ("The Old Court Libertines"), opened with a motto borrowed from Raymond Poincaré ("Que voulez-vous, nous sommes ici aux portes de l'Orient, où tout est pris à la légère..."), soon to be turned into an informal self-deprecatory nation-branding slogan.

Thus, Bădiliță, Bănică, and Constantinescu's texts reactivate, more or less originally, an old, pan-East-European self-representation. Their meditations over Bucharest's lack of civilization are also just updated variations on the old theme. One of the characteristics that the three discourses share consists in the particularly high pitch that the authors use to voice their dissatisfactions. The dramatic effects of their accounts are directly proportional with their perception of the discrepancies within the Romanian society: the deeper the cleavage between the *elite* and the *mob*, the darker the prospect. Having returned home from Paris, Bădiliță feels "the sensation of an ET landed straight in the Paleolithic Age" (Bădiliță 2007: 91). Constantinescu imagines that "in this country, there are two peoples: the Western and the Oriental Romanians" (Bănică, Constantinescu 2007: 54). In another letter to Bănică, he draws a thick line between the debased and the noble citizens:

> "We are a people of nosy, loud-mouthed, quarrelsome, voluble, know-it-all, bootlicking, voyeurist women. The persons who escape this general tendency are straightforwardly noble. A nobleman writes to another nobleman. Even if we are impoverished." (idem: 21)

In a burst of temper, Bădiliță, who fancies himself a "Right-wing anarchist", indulges in the reverie of a violent punishment for those who dare to contest the ethical uprightness of the established *elite*:

> "Luckily, I left [the country] before becoming an elite sniper – the only solution against this apocalyptic brazenness." (Bădiliță 2005: 52)

As it seems, the authors resort not to extreme gestures, but to a *rhetoric of exasperation*, which builds up with every new dysfunction observed in the society. Bănică

and Constantinescu use the rare plural "annoyances" (*enervări*) as the title of their book (moulded on the French countable "énervement"), in order to point at the multiple causality of their mindset (Bănică, Constantinescu 2007: 13). Consistent annoyance derives naturally from being an exile, says Bănică:

> "The prolonged exile, as was our case, predisposes one to get annoyed. Any normal being can't refrain from noticing that, coming back to your nation, certain things that seemed natural abroad become reasons of endless torments here, at home. The list is too long to reproduce right away, but a part of it may be found in the following pages." (idem).

Indeed, long as it is, the catalogue of "annoyances" will be delivered fully to the reader, as the book gradually turns into an endless hate list: dirty sidewalks, crowded streets, ATVs roaring among beach-goers, ski-jets slaloming between sea swimmers observing no regulations, sweat smelling buses, expensive SUVs barring the sidewalks, Dan Brown's vogue, people spitting on the street, stupidly melodramatic TV shows, car alarms going off any second, bureaucracy, corruption, poor health services etc. Maybe the epitome of our Balkanic backwardness is the music of *manele*[7] (idem: 25). The agent behind all these socio-cultural bits and pieces may be pictured as the great-grandson of the old regional stock-character Bai Ganyo, caught in the 21st c. "transition" (from Balkano-Communism to the E.U.). His less than European motherland is called Barbaria (idem: 23), Absurdistan (27), Klaxonia (81), Bazaconia (app. "oddity", Bădiliță 2009: 5), while Bucharest is nicknamed "The Sick City" (Bădiliță 2007: 121). The pen pals Bănică and Constantinescu steam each other up to produce more and more lists, so that their ramblings can remind of Orwell's stimulated "two minutes hate". The text is written in the same vein as Emil Cioran's 1937 essay *Schimbarea la față a României* ("Romania's Transfiguration"), denoting a similar intensity and pomposity. The map of Bucharest overlaps with a map of hate, with its highs and lows:

> "I hate Bucharest from the minute I step in it. Starting with Otopeni, this bizarre village-town hybrid, crammed with new buildings covered in huge advertisements. I hate the high-class neighbourhood of Kiseleff. I hate Victoriei Square, with its hellish traffic and with the Bank tower, where dozens, hundreds of yuppies bustle up and down daily to attend to their companies' shares, wearing designer's clothes and expensive attaché-cases, worth at least 2 million lei apiece. I hate less Piața Romană and I even start to accept Piața Universității, that I'm fond of because of my stupid nostalgic reactions. [...] The most sinister part of the center of Romania's center is Unirii Square, buried under huge advertising sheets, which turn the Communist blocks of flats into accurate samples of this new Wallachian regime, which is post-Communist consumerism. [...] Destroyed green areas, ordinary and obscene graffiti, delicious donuts with sour-cherry marmalade." (idem: 128-129)

Balkanism, Communism, and post-Communism are interweaved under each line of this cityscape, composed of dirt, grey architecture, and sun-bleached ads. With Bucureşti as its "head", Romania is scrutinized with a merciless gaze. The perception of national identity oscillates between an "essentialist" and a "constructionist" approach: the core features of the Romanian character are imagined either as innate, racial, and metaphysical, or as acquired,

[7] A mixture of ethno-pop with Oriental and Gypsy elements, widely spread, in various forms and under various names, in the Balkan area, and commonly looked upon as the music of the working class.

geo-politically and socio-culturally circumstantial. Either way, very seldom are the authors willing to take on the practical responsibilities of the civilizing hero committed to help forward his backward country, because the traits of the national character seem to them immovable or, at least, hardly movable, within a human lifetime. Instead, their writing is meant primarily as a survival strategy, to save them out of the Romanian mire. Bănică sententiously paraphrases Descartes ("I get annoyed therefore I am" – idem: 218), while Constantinescu enlarges on the idea:

> "Our experiences are banal, but it is remarkable that, after one, two, or three years of surviving in Romania, we haven't lost our strength to criticize, to notice the dysfunctions of our society. We are still not completely stuck in the Wallachian swamp [...]. We are still alive and kickin'. [...] THE ANNOYANCE will always be a way of getting free." (idem: 220-221)

However, it is doubtful that one could equate "annoyance" and freedom, given that, as we have noticed, exasperation resorts to a set of regional stereotypes, so that, instead of cutting the way to free thinking, it draws back to old patterns of prejudice. Moreover, in spite of the health vocabulary which implies its benefits as a therapy, the "annoyance" has rather perverse effects. Not before long, it proves to be addictive, raising the appetite for new stimulants, through a mechanism which could be described as a "*Fight Club* routine": at a certain point, when they feel the fury level has gone low, the writers start looking for new energizers, to boost it up. The episode when Bănică asks a friend to provide him with DVDs of kitsch *nouveau riche* weddings is characteristic: it's not that the authors daily bump into scenes of bad taste and grossness, at every corner; they sometimes make efforts to procure them. Here is how Bănică renders the moment:

> "My brother's current girlfriend films weddings, from time to time, to make some extra-budgetary money. A while ago, I asked her for a film about țopi and țoape8. As she is a very witty girl, she quickly understood the dimension à la Kusturica of my request. At first, it was funny, but then, I got annoyed, as usual." (idem: 189)

The double-sidedness of Balkanism, as a strategy for constructing the national identity, is transparent here: on the one hand, it is perceived as a form of entertainment similar to the circus (the reference to Kusturica's filmmaking is telling), while, on the other, it activates reserves of frustration. The switch between the former and the latter, between laughter and anger, depends on the position that the migrant writer assumes: that of a passive observer, or that of a more or less involved participant in the role play of social life. In other words, what makes the difference is whether he considers himself rather excluded from, or included in the imagined community.

As we have seen in the case of Bădiliță, Bănică, or Constantinescu, the migrant writers' discontent with their native country's society (expressed through such stereotypes as Communism or Balkanism) is not necessarily a spontaneous reaction. It can also be an (un)consciously elaborated pattern of self-assertion and self-promotion, against the backdrop of the construed national identity.

[8] Derogatory terms for a boorish, though apparently well-off, man or woman.

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