

## ROMANIAN WRITERS ON THE RUN FROM THEIR NATIONAL IDENTITY

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*Abstract: Eugen Ionescu, Emil Cioran, Mircea Eliade all have something in common: they wrote in a foreign language and became famous not by writing in Romanian, their mother tongue, but by running from their national identity, country and culture and by submerging themselves into a foreign one, trying to make it their own. But can such a transition be successful, and can such a transformation be made on all levels, be it professional or personal? This paper will try to offer an answer to these questions, by analyzing the life of Eugen Ionescu through the eyes of Sanda Stolojan and Ecaterina Cleynen-Serghiev.*

*Keywords: national identity, national culture, Romanian writers, Eugen Ionescu, Sanda Stolojan*

According to an ancient English proverb, "Names are debts" (The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs, 306), a name is a responsibility, symbolizing the fact that every person owes something to their country. However, it seems that this proverb does not apply to the Romanian writers of the Communist period: many of the Romanian intellectuals of that time, all of them born in Romania, chose to leave their home country in order to seek shelter in other European countries, most notably in France. These writers started their career at home, but continued it and became famous in France, mostly by writing in French. Amongst them, we can count Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Panaït Istrati, George Enescu, Stefan Lupasco, Eugen Ionescu, and the list can continue.

What is the outcome of writing in a foreign language or of living in a foreign country? Did the Romanian writers who moved to France hold on to their national Romanian culture and identity or did they borrow the French one?

To find an answer to this question, I will analyze a journal written by Sanda Stolojan: "Au balcon de l'exil roumain à Paris" (From the balcony of the Romanian exile in Paris) and a book written by Ecaterina Cleynen-Serghiev: "La jeunesse littéraire d'Eugène Ionesco" (The literary youth of Eugène Ionesco).

Sanda Stolojan was a Romanian residing in France, which reported about the daily events in the life of her Romanian friends settled in Paris. The main characters of the journal are the author herself, Emil Cioran, Eugen Ionescu and Mircea Eliade.

But where does a national culture start? Which is the link between national culture and national identity?

Culture is defined as "the ideas, customs, and social behavior of a particular people or society", whereby identity encompasses "the characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is", according to <http://oxforddictionaries.com/>. As a result, we can establish that national identity is being part of the national culture.

What were Cioran's feelings regarding his national identity, given the fact that he had spent his childhood in Romania, before moving to Paris, where he then spent his entire life? In an interview with Helga Perz, he stated that he saw his childhood as something situated very far away, as something belonging to a former life. He also mentioned that he felt a great contradiction between his childhood and everything that happened next, which tore him up inside (Entretiens, 33). Childhood is the most important period in one's life: it is the time when a person creates their own identity, beliefs, hopes and dreams. The contradiction between Cioran's childhood and the later events in his life are surely contradictory, given the fact that he moved to another country, started writing in another language and never returned to Romania.

Sanda Stolojan writes in her journal that Cioran once confessed that he wanted to return to Romania in order to pay a visit to his brother, whose health was deteriorating, but that he abandoned this idea, because "he was afraid he might not be able to cope with the shock he would have felt by returning" (my translation: Stolojan, 93).

Another interesting writer is Eugen Ionescu, better known in France under the name of Eugène Ionesco. As far as Ionescu is concerned, his complex cultural interests are noticeable in his early works, such as "Nu!" (No!). Here, he states that: "I was permanently driven by an automatic distrust in Romanian works, writers and culture. This mistrust was later reinforced and proved to be justified" (my translation: Nu, 208-209). Further on he also states that it is not even necessary for him to increase his knowledge too much in order to become famous in Romanian culture.

Ionescu distances himself from the country he was born in and most importantly, from his culture. He refuses to be part of an average culture; he is not at all attached to his maternal language. Still, his early works are written in Romanian and not in French. The fact that he also wrote in Romanian makes him part of a culture he later refuted. Even though he only became famous in France, the works he wrote in his early days are here to stay and are proof of his identity. Even after moving to France, he kept writing in both languages and participated with articles in Romanian magazines.

On the other hand, he also translated the works of writers such as Lucian Blaga or Pavel Dan. We can conclude that there is a contradiction between what he said and what he did: on the one hand, he stated that he lived by a rule that distrusted Romanian writers and their culture and on the other hand, he wrote in Romanian and he translated Romanian works into French.

In his work "Nu! (No!)", he also stated that he "is the best Romanian critic of the time and that whenever he took a Romanian book in his hands, he could not imagine that the writer could be better than him" (Nu, 208-212). He proved himself to be a Romanian, because he placed himself amongst the other Romanian writers, amongst the generation of Romanian writers he belonged to and was sure to be the best. This should not have been hard for him, if we take into consideration the fact that, according to Ionescu, Romanian literature should be distrusted and that becoming the best was not even a challenge for him.

Later in his life, he suggested that Romania should take France as a model, and start living and thinking in the present. Romanians should start introducing themselves to modern matters of the time, such as Western culture, literature, philosophy. He made these recommendations because, according to him, the Romanians lacked a solid cultural and literary foundation, which would allow them to be original.

How can one run away from a culture that one promotes? Why did he try to run from his national identity when, on the other hand, he made it known? Why did he translate Lucian Blaga's poems if he thought that all writers of his nationality were average?

I think that deep inside, Ionescu was proud to be Romanian and proud of his culture. But he took the French culture as an example, as it was already better developed, the French writers and people were much more open-minded, the society was flourishing in all directions, and everybody was eager for knowledge, for literature.

After moving to Paris, he set up a sort of “Romanian society of the exiled” there and even participated in various cenacles organized by Romanians. According to Sanda Stolojan’s journal, an important question was posed at one of these cenacles, held in 1975: “Should the Romanian writers living in exile write in Romanian or French?” (my translation: Stolojan, 17)

The question was very much debated: Virgil Ierunca, Romanian critic, journalist and writer living in Paris, expressed his conviction that all writers writing in another language than their mother tongue should be convicted. Obviously, not many writers agreed with him. Another writer living in Paris argued that one should write Romanian literature in Romania, not elsewhere. The cenacle ended with Leonid Mamaliga reading some pages of his new novel, written in French.

Language is the primary link to a nation, the most important connection between a person and their cultural and national identity. Refusing to write in Romanian, while being in France, is the first sign of denial of their national identity and culture of the writers living in exile. Writing in another language does not only mean a denial of your national identity, but also an acceptance of another identity. Can a person have two identities? Can one reach perfection by having two national identities or is he/she doomed to live in mediocrity because of this?

National identity and national culture are two very complex phenomena that have been analyzed for centuries and which are not fully understood to this day. One person cannot achieve their maximum level of performance, maximum creativity, if confronted with two different languages and cultures, simply because one lifetime is not enough to fully understand all the facets of a single language, culture, nationality, let alone two.

There is also a possibility that one cannot identify himself with his own culture, but with another one, that their character is closer to another language, their words are better understood if written in a foreign language. This could be the case of Eugen Ionescu, who started by writing in Romanian, but did not manage to get any recognition while doing that. He later moved to France, started writing in French, and gained fame and recognition for his French writings.

According to Cleynen-Serghiev, Ionescu was “a person with vast general knowledge, who had read a lot throughout his life. [...] He was generally interested in European literature and especially in French and Romanian literature” (my translation: page 100). Ionescu was interested in establishing links between the Romanian and French literatures and writers. He stated, throughout his life, that Romanian writers borrowed French techniques and themes, and he gave many examples of Romanian writers and critics which borrowed the style and ideas of French writers and critics. In “Nu!”, Ionescu stated: “Ion Barbu’s technique is clearly based on the techniques used by Mallarmé-Valéry” (my translation: Nu, 62). Maybe Ionescu just acknowledged the fact that the Romanian literature of the time was highly influenced by the French one and ran from his national identity because he felt that the French identity was stronger and more inspiring.

But once in France, Ionescu did not manage to fully integrate into the French society. His best friends were not the French writers of the time, but the Romanian ones. According to Sanda Stolojan, the Romanian writers formed a special society in France, they had regular meetings, celebrated all Romanian holidays together, went to an Orthodox church, and held a Romanian literary cenacle. In her journal, she talks about her and Ionescu’s visit to Cioran’s place, on the first of April 1980: “his

[Cioran's] interest in his origins is back, because he cannot stop talking about Romania. He is obsessed with it, as are we all" (my translation: Stolojan, 94).

As we can see, all important Romanian writers (Ionescu, Cioran, Eliade) who were on the run from their national identity and culture and took refuge in France managed to become famous in their adoptive country, by writing in a foreign language. This means that, as writers, their transition was successful. But as private persons, they did not manage, throughout their life in Paris, to shed their Romanian habits, given that they set up a small Romanian society guided by its own Romanian rules. The fact that they were obsessed with Romania is indicative of their concern for their national identity and culture, because these are two aspects that nobody can escape. Maybe in today's modern society, it is not names that are debts anymore, but national cultures and national identities, because nowadays, we are defined by them more than by our names.

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