

**LIMINALITY IN IOAN PETRU CULIANU'S SHORT STORIES. ON THE THRESHOLD
WITHIN COUNTRY AND IN EXILE**

Adriana Dana Listes Pop, PhD Student, "Babeş-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca

*Abstract: The concept of liminality¹ reflects a state of dissociation, indeterminacy and uncertainty that the liminal persona is going through in a process of transformation which finds its ideal expression in the short-story genre, considered "the liminal genre par excellence". In Ioan Petru Culianu's case, the liminal state is generated by the heterotopia of adolescence crisis materialized in a series of short stories and by the critical period of exile expressed in *The Last Stories*. The exiled finds himself in an ambiguous situation, being according to Victor Turner "betwixt and between" all the recognised fixed points in space-time of structural classification², sometimes perceived by the new community as almost structurally invisible. In Culianu's case, the exiled position was enhanced by that of dissidence as Julia Kristeva considers exile a form of dissidence involving an uncomfortable situation of uprooting and integrating into a new society, in her view the writing being not possible without a specific exile situation.*

Keywords: *liminal persona, heterotopia, on the threshold, betwixt and between*

The marginal and liminal state can be better expressed in the short story, "the liminal genre par excellence"³, characterized by architextual liminality through its overlapping with the essay, sketch, poem, novel, narrative or discourse⁴, the liminality of the short story being approached through the instruments of literary anthropology and cognitive psychology. The liminality in short story is conveyed through depicting a series of actions taken by the liminal characters passing through difficult periods of transitions from social, political, moral states to others. The liminal or the threshold situation expresses the state of intermediarity, the "in-betweenness" felt by the character, the "liminal persona"⁵, caught among conflicting spatial, chronological and social structures. In Ioan Petru Culianu's case, the liminal situation is determined on the one hand by the heterotopia of adolescence crisis and on the other hand by the marginal exile situation, conveyed to the reader in his last stories published abroad.

¹ "Liminality is a concept of both demarcation and mediation between different processual stage, spatial complexes, and inner states that is of obvious importance in an age of global mobility, digital networking, interethnicity, transnationality, ecological reconsiderations of species boundaries as well as technological redefinitions of the human", *Liminality and the Short Story. Boundary Crossings in American, Canadian, and British Writing*, edited by Jochen Achilles, Ina Bergmann, New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 3.

² "[...] they are neither one thing nor another; or maybe both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere (in terms of any recognised cultural topography), and are at the very least "betwixt and between" all the recognised fixed points in space-time of structural classification", Victor W. Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage", in *The Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society*, 1964, Symposium of New Approaches to the Study of Religion, pp. 4-20.

³*Liminality and the Short Story. Boundary Crossings in American, Canadian, and British Writing*, edited by Jochen Achilles, Ina Bergmann, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵ Victor W. Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage", *op. cit.*

In the process of writing his maturity short stories, Culianu was influenced by the exile situation as Julia Kristeva⁶ considers exile a form of dissidence involving a difficult circumstance of uprooting and integrating into a new society, in her opinion the writing being not possible without a certain exile condition. Among the three categories of dissident intellectuals shaping the culture of the end of the twentieth century, Kristeva names the rebel dissident in opposition with the political power, the psychoanalyst dissident and the writer dissident using the power of language to create texts encoding opposition within it.

According to Victor Turner, given the society as a structure of positions and relationships, the liminal beings, the foreigners in this case, are characterized by a structural invisibility, in an ambiguous situation, being perceived by the new community as being structurally "betwixt and between"⁷. Among short-stories, the most likely to express threshold or liminal situations⁸ are the childhood and adolescence creations which give account of the maturing process, the act of transition from the childhood and teenage condition to the full adulthood position, the stories that describe the aging process, science fiction writings and travel literature, all these short stories categories using temporary and transitory characters, settings and situations⁹.

The short story cycle, also called short story collection or short story sequence is a hybrid genre of stories connected through serialized publishing in magazines¹⁰, popular with the American public Culianu addressed himself to in *The Last Stories*. Even though the readers are somehow trapped within architextual limits, being "caught between genres"¹¹, situation which complicates their interpretative effort, its smaller dimensions compared to the novel and rolling the scenes in a cinematographic rhythm makes it efficient in communicating cognitive content to the audience. According to Edgar Allen Poe, "the brief prose tale"¹² offers the writer the possibility to better control the communication with the reader without the interruption necessary for the novel's length, breaking the unity of the reading and its effects.

This paper analyzes the short stories published by Ioan Petru Culianu in the literary magazines within country and abroad, investigating the liminal condition encoded within the texts. In his teenage writings, Culianu depicts the heterotopy of adolescence crisis, his maturing process whereas the teenage writer expresses his inner feelings, the liminal states felt after getting in contact with the harsh or boring reality, through onirical and Borgesian narrative techniques. The vices, the instincts, the human bestiality and death scare him, so that everything seems "grotesque, disgusting, delusional", he sees severed heads, amputated hands

⁶ Julia, Kristeva, *The Julia Kristeva Reader*, edited by Toril Moi, translated by Leon S. Roudiez by Columbia University Press and Sean Hand by Basil Blackwell Ltd., New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 295.

⁷ Victor W. Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage", *op. cit.*

⁸ "Some literary genres are constitutively close to processes of transition, threshold situations, and questions of liminality", *Liminality and the Short Story. Boundary Crossings in American, Canadian, and British Writing*, *op. cit.*, p.4.

⁹ "children's and adolescents' fiction and fiction about ageing, gothic fiction, fantastic and science fiction, as well as travel literature. All of these genres thematize forms of liminality, often by their transgressive plots, ambivalent characters, and transitional settings", *Ibid.* p. 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹² "In the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out his full reader without interruption. During de hour of perusal, the soul of the reader s is at the writer s control", Edgar Allen Poe, *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*, edited by G.R. Thompson, The Library of America, 1984, p. 586.

and feet, blood, rapes, dead bodies he runs away from in horror. In his first stories, the writer is aware of the fact that he has "the fiction to fly over time" at his disposal (*Evening, Against the Wall*) to create a better reality, instrument through which he builds alternative realities as a refuge from what he later calls "a disgusting political regime" (*The Language of Creation*). The investigation of the adolescence short stories presupposes the interrogation of the social and political reality the author lived in, the social context expressed by Jacques Derrida through the concept "real-history-of-the-world"¹³ which includes the history and the social reality¹⁴, found at Culianu in the expression "history crazed by the real" (*Traces*).

Through his stories published in *Lucafarul*¹⁵ / *Star* literary magazine, Culianu becomes part of the oneiric movement, founded by Dumitru Țepeneag and Leonid Dimov, a literary movement emerged as a "an undermining gesture against the official cultural policy and the pseudo-esthetical direction of the socialist realism"¹⁶. The onirism expressed inner feelings and dreams exploiting what Laura Pavel calls "the literary specific ambiguity"¹⁷. According to Nicolae Bârna¹⁸, the onirism is a form of literary dissidence which structures a fictional oneirical universe through its visuality, using painting techniques and by putting into practice an oneiric "legislative guide" called "dream legislation" by Marian Victor Buciu¹⁹. This dream is an alternative, daily, rational dream²⁰ which becomes an instrument for interpreting the reality perceived as complementary to or "analogous to dream"²¹. In Ioan Petru Culianu's case, the oneiric narrative discourse is dialogic through its oneirical trait since in Kristeva's view, the dream logic "transgresses rules of linguistic code and social morality"²².

The oneirical marks are visible in his adolescence short stories in reflecting a liquefied, dematerialized reality "the street ground turned into an ocean of peaceful waters" (*Imagine the Army in Golf*), in Țepeneag's stories the liquafiation being more complex, human beings swimming into a liquid which can become viscous again all of a sudden. Culianu's characters are immersed, sunken in a suffocating reality built from patchworks of people "dripping" on the streets and urban chunks that are "empty and cold" (*Instead of the Beginning: Always a Beginning*) developed on the Borgesian theme of the tenant from the upper floor visited by strangers "I live alone, in a fifth-floor apartment" (*The Book of Sand*) being the attic in Culianu's

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, translated by Samuel Weber, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1988, p. 136.

¹⁴ "the concept of text or of context which guides me embraces and does not exclude the world, reality, history", *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁵ *The Star / Lucafarul*. Weekly magazine edited by the Romanian Writer's Association published in Bucharest monthly initially, between 1958-1965 and then weekly (1965-1989) in the template of 42/60 cm. From the beginning, the magazine proposed to "encourage young talents and to contribute to the education of the readers", organizing debates, press investigations and The Star's Colloquia, I. Hangiu, *Dictionary of Romanian Literary Press. 1790-1990*, second edition, Bucharest, Romanian Cultural Foundation, 1996, p. 270.

¹⁶ Laura Pavel, *Dumitru Țepeneag and the Alternative Literature's Canon*, Cluj-Napoca, Science Book's House, 2007, p. 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17

¹⁸ Nicolae Bârna, *Țepeneag. Introduction into a Paper World*, Bucharest, Albatros, 1998, p. 32.

¹⁹ Marian Victor Buciu, *Țepeneag in-between Onirism, Textualism, Postmodernism*, Aius, Craiova, 1998.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 34.

²² "By adopting a dream logic, it transgresses rules of linguistic code and social morality as well", Julia Kristeva, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

prose (*Objects in Movements*). The matter is liquefied, it drains, decomposing, the matter's fluidization being a Borgesian theme, too ("A river of vehicles and people ran betweenus", *Delia Elena San Marco*).

The background is painted in gray tinge which absorbs everything, in Culianu's and Țepeneag's writings the streets and the pavements being grey, even the sky is turned upside down in *Light* and the man is thrown into the sky "projected highly and obscurely on the unidentified background" of the night, the same as in Țepeneag's *On the Curb of the Sidewalk* where "the sky is grey", sometimes turning upside down, too ("only the sky, other upside down lake, grey"). In Culianu's *Rabid Cat* there is a "grey sky through the dusty window of the caffè", Foucauldian transitional space of temporary halt²³ cumulated with the heterotopia of the window glass extending the sky into a virtual mirroring, the cats being grey and red striped with a grey head in the same story.

In the *Red Shirt* "the pavement is soft" and in *The Art of Fugue* "the sidewalk's crack" threatens to swallow the person inside causing him to unbalance while walking. On the sidewalks, especially on the curb of the sidewalks, people walk only with bowed heads "with bowed head out of fear or shame" having three occurrences at Țepeneag *On the Curb of the Sidewalk*, at Culianu the crowd of "bowed heads" being caught into a constant run (*Rabid Cat*). In both writer's stories, the glass and the light are greenish, the sky turning green sometimes, like made of "green glass", the light is "glassy green" in Țepeneag's *Failure*, it "flows slightly, pale and greenish" out of a small window at the end of the corridor in *Fragment*, while in Culianu's *Imagine the Army in Gulf* the light is filtered through the "greenish granular glass windows" and through a "green translucent sphere". Seldom, the monochromatic fades away, making it possible for the horizon to gradually colour in red "the sky will continue to colour itself: from incarnadine to red, in a more brighter and intense red, a purple red" in Culianu's *Traces*, where the "sunset red light" matches "the red sky" in Țepeneag's *Waiting*.

The motif of the white, dirty and bloody shirt is common to both writers, accompanied by the moldy walls and corridors, by the wooden plank, rags, gasps, cold cement, the chill and the bars. Culianu's *Red Shirt* is initially white, the character mirrors himself wearing it in a window glass flooded by aggressive sunlight, blackened, the shirt gradually turning yellow, orange, reaching a rusty red in the end. Țepeneag's *Accident* mentions "the dirty collar, that spot of blood on his shirt gaping chest" conditioned by the presence of the corridor leading to the "bloody halls" packed with chunks of flesh (*Corridor*).

The motif of the end of the corridor is connected in both cases to the concentration camps, in Culianu's *Traces* "his friend's father appears at the end of the corridor", while in Țepeneag's *Corridor* the character desperately tries to reach "the end of the corridor, from where the green light flows" through a "barred small window" from where one can see many other moldy walls, one after another. In Culianu's *Light*, near the "cold rubble of the wall", the character is knelt, smoking tobacco through the cell's bars", being described in *Traces* the narrow, "lumpy cement of the corridor", people being built alive there as in a "macabre charade". The teenager feels the presence of death among older relatives in a gloomy setting formed by heavy furniture which can be found in Țepeneag's *Corridor* as "wooden monsters, hideous, cruel", the seat backrests being barred, whilst Culianu's chairs have the seat backs decorated with heartshaped stones (*And I Laughed, Foolishly, without My Own Permission*).

²³ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias", *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, edited by Neil Leach, London, New York, Routledge, 1997, pp.329-357.

In this reality, the time is fractured, broken into a “new time” and a “common time” (*Evening, Against the Wall*).

The mirror theme is to be found in the story titled *The Art of Fugue* which is intertextually connected to Țepeneag’s *Useless is the Art of Fugue*, expressed in the reflective glass window mirroring the nothingness and the character “contracting himself onto his own emptiness” where the reader discovers Foucault’s heterotopic mirror and the Borgesian mirror doubling a spectral reality (*Covered Mirrors*). In the *Red Shirt*, F.G. is caught into a constant run reflecting himself into a glass case where from the sun pushes him violently away, blinding him. In the same story, the mirrors open “the negative void opened onto itself” and in Țepeneag’s *Through the Keyhole* one can see, in terror, the emptiness growing to the left and to the right.

The reader can find strange Borgesian beings, yellow striped tigers, lionesses and colourful monkeys (*Evening, Against the Wall*) encountered at Țepeneag, too, the striped tiger being a Borgesian motif (“ten or twelvemortal wounds furrowed his body, like the stripes on a tiger’s skin” *A Dialog Between Dead Men*), title borrowed by Culiănu in other text. Țepeneag sees *Through the Keyhole* social chaos, a tram accident, militia men shooting at the cattle, altogether with “lions and tigers escaped from a circus”. Young Culiănu depicts animalized human beings “the hairy snake head” (*Evening, Against the Wall*) found at Borges in the form of “beetling brows, yellowed teeth, the sparse beard of a mulatto ora Chinaman, and beastlike dewlaps” (*Ragnarok*). Culiănu’s fugues resemble Țepeneag’s, understood as chase, where the distance between the chaser and the chased remains equal, as in Culiănu’s *Rabid Cat* which keeps the same distance from the followed, a similar chase being found in Țepeneag’s *On the Curb of the Sidewalk*. The text ostentatiously titled “*This Volume Mimics*” clarifies that “often the Fugue pursues freedom but ends in a sumptuous cell, on whose walls is engraved the severe, absolute punishment of some names”²⁴. In his last creation phase, Culiănu’s fugue comes close to the Borgesian fugue which expresses life as “a kind of fugue” (*Borges and I*).

The cat motif developed in *Rabid Cat* reemerges in the maturity story titled *The Intervention of the Zorabs in Jormanania*, where the rabid cats following the character become killer cats. If in the adolescence story the cats meow and whimper behind the bushes while medical students’ high heels hit the asphalt rhythmically, the rabid cats’ victory against the followed person meaning the possibility of contamination, in the maturity story the cats are Zorabs considered a type of zoological weapons. The Baha Zorab cat is a killer cat, apparently a normal cat who managed to transform president’s Gologan body into a “bleeding wound” and cut his wife’s jugular, Mrs. Mortu.

The second category of serialized published short stories is written together with H.S. Wiesner, “in four hands”²⁵ as Culiănu admits, being written and published abroad, depicting the liminal situation of the exile. The stories are written together with his partner in a quite fun project²⁶, Culiănu explaining this collaboration through his faulty English²⁷, not good enough

²⁴ Ioan Petru Culiănu, *This Volume Mimics, The Art of Fugue. Stories*, with five author’s drawings, Preface by Dan C. Mihăilescu, Iași, Polirom, “Ioan Petru Culiănu’s Library”, 2002 (written between 1967 și 1972), p. 59.

²⁵ Gabriela Adameșteanu, *Talking to Ioan Petru Culiănu*, Ioan Petru Culiănu, *The Sin Against the Spirit. Political Writings*, second edition, translated by Corina Popescu, Claudia Dumitriu, Tereza Culiănu-Petrescu, Iași, Polirom, “Ioan Petru Culiănu’s Library”, 2005, p. 61.

²⁶ “It is all written together, it is not mere translation. It is more fun, actually. These have been well received by the public, some of them were published”, *Ibid.*, p. 62.

to write literature, needing help in this regard, even though it is not merely translation involved there. The stories outline Foucauldian heterotopias, heterochronism and transition spaces like customs houses, airports, labyrinthine streets, cemeteries, ships, restaurants, libraries, auctions, flea markets, warehouses. The liminal mental states are expressed by feeling dizzy and out of space (“Now I was somewhere, not knowing very well where”), constant rush, moving counter-time, the stress of modern life in an international community, timezone overlaps, sudden departures to airport, conspiracies, plots, expulsions, accidents, deaths.

The Invisible College's narrative structure includes four different heterotopic spaces, the ship, considered by Foucault the perfect heterotopia, the cemetery, the library and the mirrors of the Lighthouse of Alexandria, which, even if broken, potentiated the sea natural reflection the ship was floating on. The heterotopia of the mirror is doubling the space, in this case the sea reflection, while floating, in Foucault's view the mirror enabling “the depths of that virtual space which is on the other side of the mirror”²⁸. Life is presented here as an “intricate maze of travelings” Ibn Gubair noting that “wine and fate had carried him on some strange ways, so strange”, passing through cities already wandered up to the ending point of the cemetery hut, suggesting the imminence of death. The journey begins with the cart, continues by boat, passing through “the dark custom” described as a “jumble of people and luggage” where “bags are often lost without being ever found and people were each searched on all sides” and made “to swear they have not forgotten to declare anything”.

The character experiments the Borgesean doubling of personality “It's Borges, the other one that things happen to” (*Borges and I*) situation which in Culianu's case extends spatially on a larger scale (“Only after that I realized that I knew it, that I had spent a while now I find absolutely lost in that country, that I was even an official clerk there and somewhere in the north, in a place whose dialect was hard to understand, I still had a house and an ex-wife”), paragraph where the reader discovers the author's biographical hints as Culianu lived for a time in the Netherlands. The fictions approach the theme of successive trips to different countries in the same narrative frame sweeping through Paris, Cincinnati, for an international conference and Massachusetts for a flea market, another space of heterotopia collecting old and new stuff altogether passing from one person to another, communicating explicit intercultural tensions, “the shock of language recognition” (“I left Paris in the morning and I had not been aware of crossing any language barriers”, *The Language of Creation*). The same story amalgamates, as in a hallucinating film script, the wanderings of Mary Boole, Ramon Lull, Bochart, Descartes, Leibniz, John Crowley author of *Aegyptt*, Giordano Bruno, Waterloo, Casanova, Calcutta, Cincinnati, Massachusetts, Iraq's invasion, *Del Telegraaf*, 1247, the eighteenth century, the year 1600.

The temporal, spatial, literary and media levels are fused through a cinematographic editing technique similar to dreams, the scenes rapidly succeeding in a “painful alternation of accidental events” expressed through the metaphor of “the monstrous puzzle”. The narrator feels he can not control events “the idea that something strange is happening to me has been confirmed” and the movements in space, permuting himself suddenly from one place to another (“I forgot completely where I was and what I was looking for in that unknown place”) feeling almost teleported “in an unexpected and devoid of charm area of Europe”.

²⁷ “Yes, yes, we write together in English. English is not my native tongue. I write well my scientific works, but for literature there is need for something else and for the moment I do not write literature in English by myself”, *Ibid*.

²⁸ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”, *op. cit*.

The Language of Creation opens with a secret meeting of two conspirators following which a character is expatriated, continues with a number of convictions for conspiracy against the political regime, a death of a philosopher in a car accident, speculating further on the power of the language (“a prolific code is the language of creation”), of the Book of Creation, the power of the language being understood as an ability to intervene and change the perceptions of others through language. The characters chosen are sometimes real people as “my friend M., the most famous scholar in the endless world of the Kabbalah” the reader recognizing Moshe Idel (*The Late Repentance of Horemheb*) and other historical and literary characters. Moshe Idel takes “countless trips crossing the globe far and wide following unpredictable paths” who teaches the author proper time management necessary for organizing a very busy international agenda symbolized by the metaphor of the “mystery of time manipulation”.

The two of them meet in a restaurant, a heterotopic space reflecting cosmopolitanism and the appearance of the melting pot of the American metropolis, a kosher restaurant in Park Ridge, noisy and crowded with Hebrew French customers from Canada. The two discuss the book *Lo Strano Caso della Hanau 1609* by Umberto Eco in a narrative framework that connects multiple temporal and spatial levels: the sixteenth century BC, the early XX th century, 1963, 1965, 1963 again, Cairo, Buenos Aires, Chicago, framework within various real and historical characters are brought together - Napoleon, Einstein, Idel, Eco, Horemheb. The historical characters listed are considered “victims of history” instrumented in a “plot hatched by history itself”, prisoners of history and of time, the narrating instance being aware of the “breaking of my own gone history”. Sometimes, he manages to relax, to break away from the chaos of information and constant movement of life (“In fact, my mind was far away from that painful alternation of accidental events, unsatisfied desires, vain regrets and unfulfilled promises that most of us - whether successful or not - call it reality”).

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