

**GLOBALIZATION AND ITS (DIS)CONTENTS IN VIRGIL DUDA'S UN CETATEAN AL LUMII (A CITIZEN OF THE WORLD)**

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*Abstract: This article focuses on Virgil Duda's most recent novel, Un cetatean al lumii (A Citizen of the World). It investigates Anton Maurer's musings over the global success of Radu Siropol, a former childhood friend, who was born a Jew and converted to Christianity. In Duda's novel, Siropol's global success is looked at through moral lenses, and the investigation into the discontents of Siropol's success as an author becomes Maurer's self-investigation into the contents of his own personality as a writer, as a Jew, and as a citizen of the world.*

**Keywords:** globalization, identity, stardom, writing, (post)modernity

### 1. Introduction

Virgil Duda's latest published work, *Un cetatean al lumii (A Citizen of the World)* (Iasi 2011) raises multiple questions about what it means to write a life story – one's own or someone else's, about the limits and constraints of the literary genres of autobiography and the novel, about identity and the social construction of stardom. The narrative itinerary dramatizes the author and narrator's quest for a form that carries in it the meanings and meanderings of a quest: the quest for the proper means of writing a life story, and the quest for the truth of one's own existence. The intertwining of a novel within a novel, of a diary within a novel, and of the fragment of a one-act play, arguably by Raul Siropol, lend Duda's novel a certain "in-betweenness," which matches his de-territorialized characters and narrator.

### 2. Narrative threads

In a nutshell, *Un cetatean al lumii (A Citizen of the World)* is the story of a three childhood friends originally from Bucharest who, by their old age, come to be citizens of the world: Toma Ungureanu, a successful architect in Boston, Radu Siropol, a successful playwright of world renown and Anton Maurer, the narrator, a retired journalist in Tel Aviv, starting his career as a novelist. Recently divorced, Maurer takes a trip to Cyprus where he runs into Toma and his young wife. Presumably, hearing Greek made Maurer dream of Siropol, the childhood friend born of a Jewish mother in a concentration camp during WWII and the step son of a rich Greek antique shop owner. His conversations with Toma revolve around Siropol and his sisters, both Anton and Toma having kept track of Siropol's international success and public declarations. What outrages Maurer is Siropol's personal trajectory, from a Jewish child, into a Communist, Trotskyist, Christian, and ultimately, an anti-Semite, and his moral abuse of the persons around him.

In their childhood, the three had founded a neighbourhood newspaper to which Siropol was contributing articles and Toma was contributing drawings. Later, they started a theatre and sports competitions for boys and girls. The effusion of artistic and sports projects was cut short by the rise to power of communists and by old Siropol's imprisonment and exile to Greece. Raul joined his father in Greece and returned to Romania in his youth, to study theatre.

From that early stage in his career, he was determined to resort to all means in order to gain fame. For this purpose, he made efforts to have connections among critics and journalists, so as to have his plays staged and written about. Both his sisters and successive

fiancées, lovers or wives were offered, or offered themselves to various persons who could support Raul's rise to celebrity. His own public statements or statements made by others showed his ability to surf the media apparatus in such a way as to remain in the public attention – irrespective of the truth of his declarations or of the degree of consistency of his own image that such declarations would project.

Raul Siropol had two children with a minor actress from Bucharest, who managed to persuade old Siropol to buy a flat for her and the babies. After old Siropol died, Raul's sisters dissuaded him from paying alimony as money was considered to be better invested in Raul's international career than in a woman and two children who had remained behind, in Romania. Mirela's lawyer, however, obtained a court sentence that forced Siropol to comply with his minimal duties as a father, at a time when he was beginning to enjoy his international fame: one play had been turned into a Hollywood film and another one was being staged in Montevideo. In Maurer's opinion, the fact that Mirela's lawyer was a Jew could account for Raul's anti-semitic stance.

At the end of the novel, after a brief meeting in Israel when Siropol and Lina came to pull strings so that the playwright would be awarded the Prize of the Five Continents for a theatre project involving Palestinians and Jews, Anton is reunited with Siropol on the cruise boat on which the playwright celebrates forty years since he started his career in theatre. The celebration includes a one-man show, in which Siropol stages a life story that could well be his own, reinvented and re-written for a selected audience.

### 3. Identity, modernity and its post's

At the core of the novel that Maurer plans to write lies the question: Who is Raul Siropol? A similar question of knowledge and identity dominates Maurer's diary: the urge from the oracle in Delphi, to know oneself. As both the novel within the novel and the diary within the novel progress, Maurer comes to realize that piecing together information so as to reconstruct and understand Siropol's social and artistic itinerary becomes, unavoidably, an effort at understanding himself. He thus becomes aware that the self is never a monad, but exists in relation, and knowing another that is or was a significant other is a way towards knowing one's own self: "The social tissue in which we are caught as in a spider's net, envisaged concomitantly or retrospectively, is the most important source of information about everything that was important in our existence" (Duda 2011: 118)<sup>1</sup>.

Identity, the main concern in the novel, is a central preoccupation of modernism. As Zygmund Bauman noted, "one thinks of identity whenever one is not sure where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people around would accept this placement as right and proper" (Bauman 2006: 19). Maurer – recently divorced and retired, ponders over his own life, loves and human relations. Both in relation to himself and in relation to Raul, he asks fundamental epistemological and ethical questions: Why is it that good people do bad things? How could one who was born a Jew in a concentration camp in Bessarabia turn into an anti-Semite? And consequently, how could a childhood friend thus turn into a non-friend? How to begin to write one's memories? What are the limits of self-knowledge?

The projected autobiographical novel tracing the rise and fall of Raul Siropol is based on the idea that one can better know another than one's own self: "An exile, a nomad, a migrant – in the acceptance that these terms gained later - ... forerunner, willingly or unwillingly, of a socio-political event of such a scope [globalization] [...].. in order to

<sup>1</sup> All translations from Virgil Duda's novel are done by the author of this article.

(especially?) mute my own existential failure, I had to reinvent my path in life, in the hope of getting to know this false alter ego and thus know myself (Duda 2011: 23- 25).

Raul, with his conflicting nature – his connections with the extreme left (which had been compromised in the eyes of the public by revelations concerning its involvement in terrorist acts), his conversion to Greek Orthodoxy, his anti-Semitic comments, abuse of drinks and drugs, conflicting stories of origins, invented grandparents and scandalous declarations meant to keep him in the public eye – is the perfect prototype for a complex character that would ensure the success of debut novel.

In Toma's collection of photocopies of articles by Siropol, "each text was subject to a different state of spirit, to an enchantment or a indisposition, and the whole revealed a double psychic personality, or rather multiple, or maybe non-structured, some would say de-structured. A modern character, which, unfortunately, was not featured in his plays or prose" (Duda 2011: 38).

Yet this double-facedness does not apply solely to Raul. Steve, Anton's colleague at the radio is also multi-faced, in a way that makes him non-contradictory in his contradictoriness, equally bound on becoming successful, irrespective of the means that would take him to the desired end. In a conversation with Dora, his wife, Anton surprises himself contradicting his own attitude and position when Siropol – whom he had been criticising to his wife – calls to arrange a meeting between them. By calling Siropol his "alter-ego" (Duda 2011: 25), Anton admits his own professionalism in handling human relations and his desire for success. After all, he has been employed in the very apparatus that Siropol resorted to in order to build his claim to fame: the media.

Raul seems to agree to Boorstin's definition that "*The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness*" (Boorstin 2006: 79). In his opinion, "an artist must be as much known as possible, praised and contested all the while. Otherwise he collects masterpieces in his drawers!" (Duda 2011: 170). From this point of view, Raul's anti-semitism could be just one strategy in his search for celebrity. Judged from the perspective of the construction of identity, however, Raul appears as a post-modern self, flexible in his allegiances and ready to reinvent himself. He inhabits what Zygmund Bauman has termed "liquid modernity" – a post-modernity in flux, which defies fixedness and rules (Bauman 2006).

Anton's frustration over Siropol's identity games and reinvented origins comes from his own positioning in a stable modernity, one that struggles to construct, assert and preserve identity, rather than change and refashion it at will. Consequently, as the two had been positioned since childhood as relational selves, Raul's reinvented origins lead Anton to question his own memories, and memory itself seems to become useless: "everything that I knew about his, or rather our childhood and youth, was contradicted, overturned. All my memories were questioned, and memory itself, as part of being, as a basic component of the functions of the brain, had become useless magma" (Duda 2011: 45).

The more he writes and the more he ponders over the limits of writing, the more Anton becomes aware of the impossibility of self-knowledge, of the mastery of the grammar of motives that leads one to shift stories and identities. The novel which was meant to be about Siropol becomes increasingly more about himself, and the interludes about writing in general become metanarrative comments on Anton's own practice and struggle as a writer of fiction and non-fiction.

Some of the savviest pages in the novel are precisely ones in which the narrator ponders over writing; they include Anton's own ideas and experience of it, his comments on what he had written about Raul and how he could construct a character or understand himself

in a diary form, as well as the ideas and experience of classical and modern writers such as Goethe, Kafka or Conrad. The ultimate product – the published novel which comprises the novel arguably written by Maurer, as well as his diary and thoughts on writing, in interludes, seems to answer, ironically, the questions left unanswered by the narrator. The lack of polyphony in a third person narrative is solved by interweaving fragments in the first person, in the third person, dialogues and monologues (Siropol's one-man play). The frustration over the impossibility of remembering everything is compensated by the understanding that remembering always implies misremembering and imagining, not only in fiction, but in life as well. Re-reading how he remember Raul, Anton realized that he had, in fact, reinvented him by imaginatively using some of his own features to draw Raul's portrait (Duda 2011: 205-206).

Trying to learn how he had turned from Raul's best friend into someone who suspected him and distanced himself from him to the point of rejection, Anton reaches a peaceful acceptance of the impossibility of knowing it all. This impossibility is dramatized by the very end of the novel, which closes with open questions, and with an image that has the rhetorical power of a metaphor: an improvised bridge over a desiccated valley in Central America, with the narrator wondering if he and unknown fellow passengers/tourists would be able to return to the luxury cruise boat that would take them to a safe haven.

Life, in its complexity, seems to be epitomized by this state of suspension which several characters experience in the novel: Anton, Raul, Julie (Raul's former mistress, now Anton's partner), Steve – Anton's British colleague and his wife, Sylvia... The difference is that some characters perceive it as a form of exile and bereavement, a perpetual state of being an orphan (Julie) or a predicament of being a Jew, while others, such as Siropol and his sisters, make the most of it, by entertaining connections and a wide social network that would make them feel at home anywhere in the world.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

Feeling an exile or feeling at home anywhere in the world are two sides of the human effects of globalization. As Nobel-prize winner Stiglitz noted, "Globalization itself is neither good nor bad" (Stiglitz 2002: 20), but its human effects can neither be fully anticipated, nor grasped. Stiglitz wrote mainly about globalization in economic terms. The novel offers an image of globalization at human level, of a globalization that was not necessarily dictated by economics but by ethnic and religious origin, by the vicissitudes of history, and by personal ambition – though many of Raul's declarations denied his consistent efforts at constructing his image as an international star.

The concept of star emerged in theatre in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; as Schumway noted, the invention of a star's public image is a collaborative project (1997: 87). In his own project to become a literary star, Raul used his friends, sisters, lovers, secretaries, and presented his self – both on stage and in real life – in a theatrical way. What defines him, apart from this theatricality of existence, is greed: the greed to know more people, to be more visible in the media, to gain more prizes. His rapacity, however, is not a typical feature of an artist bent on gaining increasingly more social and cultural capital, but of his entire age. Camus, quoted in Bauman's *Liquid Modernity*, argued that people of our times "suffer from not being able to possess the world completely enough: except for vivid moments of fulfillment, all reality for them is incomplete. Their actions escape them in the form of other actions, return, in unexpected guises, to judge them and disappear like the water Tantalus longed to drink, into some still undiscovered orifice (Bauman 2006: 82).

For citizens of the world, at the time of heightened globalization – as are the post-Holocaust, post-communist, postmodern days at the end of the novel – the world remains a tantalizing spectacle, the carefully staged spectacle on transatlantic luxury boats, or the spectacle of exoticism staged as a show for global tourists and consumers. The more they have of it, the more the world escapes them, and the more they wish to indulge in it. Global citizens consume not just global products and global experiences, but global stories as well, and global identities, forever on display in glamorous media. Virgil Duda's is one such story, experimental in form and open in its meanings.

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