

## The Writer in Exile – between the Identity Crisis and the Literary Crisis

Iuliana Barna  
“Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați  
Romania

### Abstract

The political censorship in Romania during the communist period set off the so-called exile. Romanian writers, who did not submit to the political regime, leaning towards a realistic, aesthetic, transparent and open literature, waiving the opacity of words and the hiding of truth in their approach, were forced to endure the route to exile.

**Keywords:** *exile; crisis; communist regime; autobiography; cultural identity; literature.*

### 1. Introduction

For an objective understanding of the exile phenomenon, we consider it necessary to analyze the historical context that generated this phenomenon, but also to interpret the social mindset that led to the identity crisis, the uprooting, the alienation, the otherness and the impossibility of reintegration into the identity area and, in the end, to the choice of permanent exile.

As Nancy E. Berg states: “An exile is a person compelled to leave or remain outside his country of origin on account of well-founded fear of persecution or for reasons of race, religion, nationality or political opinion (...)” (Berg 1996:4-9).

Accordingly, from a social perspective, a first interpretation of the term exile could include the concepts of religion, nationality and

political choices. Among those who fall into this category, we can mention Mircea Eliade and Emil Cioran. Regarding the category of nationality, studies show that the only ones who fled Romania to exile, due to nationality, are those from the group of Germans (Swabians) from Transylvania – and this is the case of Herta Müller.

From a historical point of view, Alexandru Boldor states that exile is probably a phenomenon as old as humanity itself, and also one of the oldest subjects in universal literature (Boldor 2005). Thus, accrediting this idea, we could claim that the first exile of mankind, perhaps, historically speaking, is the poet Ovid. Most likely, the odyssey began with him, but in the opposite direction, from his own land, his own country, to a foreign place, he is not familiar with, and where he would live until the end of his life. This would be the short version of the term's definition. Nevertheless, the term itself raises a number of conceptual and, why not, linguistic issues, as it is often mistaken for the notions of emigrant, expatriate, member of diaspora.

On the emigrant, one can tersely state that he has the possibility of returning to origins. The expatriate, although also a kind of exile, conjecturally forced (for instance, on grounds of political regime, totalitarian ideology, racial, religious discrimination, etc.), leaves the country of origin to settle (and, finally, to acculturate) in his new country. One of these writers is Emil Cioran, who, despite sympathizing with the Legionnaires, did not risk being stigmatized too much by the communist regime for his sympathies. However, he felt a kind of anxiety or failure in Romania, so he took, like many others, the path to exile, renouncing his language and homeland.

Understanding the exile, the rather coerced *journey* to other lands, of certain educated people, is closely related to the cause determining their escape from the identity area. This is due to the lack of freedom of expression in writing, in other words: the literary crisis imposed by the communist regime politics. For any writer, overcoming the crisis meant alienation, exile or self-exile.

Eva Behring chooses the decade as a criterion for periodization and distinguishes three exile “waves” (Behring 2001:23):

- the 40s-50s: Mircea Eliade, C. V. Gheorghiu, V. Horia, Aron Cotrus, Pamfil Seicaru, Emil Cioran, Horia Stamatu, Stefan Baci, Alexandru and George Cioranescu, Virgil Ierunca and Monica Lovinescu;

- the 60s-70s: Dumitru Tepeneag, Paul Goma, Petru Popescu, Matei Calinescu, Virgil Nemoianu, I. Negoitescu, Virgil Tănase, I. P. Culianu, S. Damian, Gelu Ionescu, Gabriela Melinescu;

- the 80s: Norman Manea, Ion Caraion, Dorin Tudoran, Matei Visniec, Bujor Nedelcovici, Nicolae Balota, Mircea Iorgulescu etc.

### 2. Word, culture, crisis ....

The word was deliberately used as a ‘weapon’ by two of the powerful mass influencers in the anti-communist Romanian exile. We refer, of course, to Monica Lovinescu and Virgil Ierunca, the most active, determined and even fearless ‘voices’ and ‘quills’ at a time when, back in the country, the word had been strangled or imprisoned in the wooden language stereotypy (Albu 2010: 282-289). When we speak about these two cultural personalities, we think not only of two voices we used to listen to before 1989 on Radio Free Europe to learn the truth in uncensored form, or refer to two authors of books not published in Romania until after 1990. They are, above everything else, two icons of the anti-communist resistance who used the Word as a weapon. Along with Mircea Eliade, Busuioceanu, Al. Ciorănescu, the two fully took on their duty to live in exile with the awareness of being responsible to the culture from where they had emerged.

A frequently encountered testimony (either expressed directly or indirectly) of living actively in all ways in the service of the country under the Soviet occupation, can be found among the notes of Virgil Ierunca in his diary: “February 16<sup>th</sup> – Evening at Mircea Eliade, at Hotel de Suède (Albu 2011: 2). It is the first meeting of intellectuals that the author of the *Marriage in Heaven* organizes after our long talks with

Lucian Bădescu. I always feel the stupid need of doing something, of us doing something for this Romania that I discover after I lost it. (...) We have to do something big, absurd, disinterested, to exist and to experience at high voltage the moment of our breaking from the country. (...) I'm afraid of getting hardened, of the routine and arrangements." (Ierunca 2000: 20-21), "March 29 (1949) – Another day spent in the printing house. I have the childish and clandestine illusion that I am doing something real for the situation in exile, face towards the country" (Ibidem: 40), "April 27 – At Corona. I am meeting my brethren again (...) No progress in communicating, doing something, establishing a style, a language in the exile." (Ibidem: 47), "May 13 - Evening, invited to Mihai Niculescu's. A poor room in a modest hotel on Boulard Street. Over a cup of coffee and a good-times cognac, we are talking about what we could do here, on our own and by means of literature" (Ibidem: 52). And, let's not forget, for these writers, for these personalities of culture, acting meant especially speaking constantly the word that brought the truth! (Albu 2010: 282-289).

I had no power but the microphone. Such a power! Monica Lovinescu recalled (in the documentary *Cold Waves*) the years when her voice and that of Virgil Ierunca – voices that spoke the truth and cut through lies and imposture with the power of a scalpel – had become the moral landmarks of a people under communist occupation. (Albu 2016: 3)

In 1990, in an article entitled *An Exercise of Hope*, Ion Simuț stated that "decades of critical activity known through Free Europe broadcasts have identified Monica Lovinescu's name with that of a moral tribunal, so necessary in a tainted and confused climate, even if it exercises its mission from the distance". (Simuț 1996: 4-5) The author represented through the Word the voice of the conscience of those in the country.

### 3. Another kind of exile or emerging from the crisis

The description – *writer in exile* – irritates Țepeneag, a point that lies in the confession made during his interviews<sup>1</sup>, where he speaks about exile as a biographical accident. From the moment he starts writing again in Romanian, Dumitru Țepeneag seeks to redefine his identity, in order to re-enter the Romanian literary canon, considering that the only criterion to describe a writer's cultural belonging to a space is language.<sup>2</sup>

This criterion is the reason why he will resume writing in his mother tongue, because he does not believe in the possibility of the long-term existence of an intermediate space, between two languages and two cultures: “the Romanian exile cannot avoid the fate reserved for any exile – to become part of the diaspora. To dilute little by little and eventually disappear from the consciousness of the country. The exile cannot be maintained either as a literary entity or as a political one.” (Țepeneag 2000: 97, our translation). The writer confesses about his writing in French: “Writing in French was an interesting experience, even an exciting one. But also an excruciating one...” (Ibidem: 129).

Țepeneag's return to the Romanian language is related to the influence that the judgment the critic Ion Negoițescu made about him. When the writer sends his French novels to the critic, he is struck by his

---

<sup>1</sup> “I do not claim that the exile has not influenced the literature I have written all these years. Just like, of course, French, with its daily use in speech and writing, has left marks in my type of writing. But the exile is a biographical accident, not a «stylistic mould» (Blaga).” (in Dumitru Țepeneag, *The war of literature is not over yet*, edited by Nicolae Bârna, Bucharest: Allfa Publishing House, 2000, p. 21).

<sup>2</sup> “The return to the Romanian language coincided with my physical return (be it temporary) to the Romanian land, which had been forbidden to me for almost thirty years” – Țepeneag, *op. cit.*, p. 218; or “Paraphrasing Herder, I used to like to say: «My homeland is not a country, my homeland is the Romanian language».” – Țepeneag, *op.cit.*, p. 130.

refusal to take them into account because, for the critic, "language is the only criterion for determining a literature."

At the same time, it is worth emphasizing the fact that Dumitru Țepeneag treats his double Franco-Romanian cultural identity with self-mockery, humour, but also with a kind of tender understanding. After all, even the oscillation between two languages, between two cultures, between two categories of identity fantasies, becomes a well-thought-out strategy to get out of the literary and the social crisis. After the fall of the communist regime, Dumitru Țepeneag resumed writing in Romanian, publishing his novels simultaneously in Romania and in Paris.

Along with Țepeneag, Virgil Tănase is also among the Romanian writers well integrated in the spirit of exile, which firmly survives the trials of life through a typically Romanian attitude, transparency, lucidity and meticulousness. Leaving the horizon of social conflicts, leaving the oppressive space, Tănase conquers the French literary world through an epic formula and his own existential path. He does not want a career as a dissident, but a career as a writer and director, this being the most appropriate formula for overcoming the crisis and preserving his cultural identity.

E. Simion states the following about Virgil Tănase in *Fragmente critice V.*:

an oneiric, part of the 'old guard', like Sorin Titel. [...], and his novels ... show a cultivated prose writer, a fine observer of the morals of today's world, a master of postmodern epic techniques. From the new novel and from our onirism, he took some processes which he inspiredly combines in an essentially analytical, speculative prose, dominated by the fantasies of the man living in the knowledge society and, we should add, in the society of terrorism and uncertainty ... (Simion 2007)

As a literary temperament, Tănase is a “oneiric” who dreams naturally, so that the sober experiment produced by his brethren [Dumitru Țepeneag] quickly transforms, under Tănase's quill, into the graceful spiderweb of a dream. (Neicu 2017: 738) Virgil Tănase is the man who lives by his art, and thus, he survives any crisis.

#### **4. Overcoming the crisis in exile – a triple identity: Romanian-Jewish-American**

A controversial writer due to his style characterized by uncertainty and honesty, Norman Manea is concerned with his own destiny, with the constraints experienced in different eras and social or political contexts. His books are inspired by his childhood in a Jewish community in Romania, by his youth lived under communism, as well as by his literary beginnings.

Norman Manea is placed by critics on the border between modernism and postmodernism, being part of the generation of writers who did not invent new narrative formulas but remained consistent with the classical formula, approached before their exile. Norman Manea's novels are oriented towards self-reflexivity and autobiography (Simuț 2006), thus highlighting the *identity crisis* through narrative discourse.

Creation, the act of writing, becomes a way to awareness, to recovering identity and rehabilitating the self through writing (Stan 2009). In an interview given by Norman Manea to Ciprian Iancu, the prose writer defines his artistic creed:

It is not easy for anyone to get uprooted, to break away from a culture, a family, memories and the past. It is even more difficult for a writer. He learns his language from the moment he becomes a reader as a child and until he makes his own voice heard, in his own language... It is a disaster to lose everything at once. Cioran once said that for a writer, changing the language is a greater misfortune than any historical disaster in the world.

It happens, paradoxically, the moment you break free – because the exile also means freedom, getting out of a kind of closed society, a penitentiary colony, and reaching another shore. My language was taken away when I had the most to say. Linguistic exile is schizophrenic. I postponed as long as I could the difficult decision to leave. I didn't want to leave Romania, not because I was happy there, I was immature enough to delude myself that I didn't live in a country, but in a language, I didn't want to part with my language, my true homeland. (Iancu 2006: 36)

### **Instead of conclusions**

The issue of Romanian literary exile remains open to all kinds of interpretations. However, it is worth establishing “to what extent the position of the exile reverberated”<sup>3</sup> in prose, poetry or journal entries and, especially, the way it determined in one form or another the exit from the crisis, be it literary, identity or social. We may conclude that, regardless of the genres approached (epic, lyrical, dramatic), the only way in which writers accept the uprooting and separation from the home space, overcoming the crisis, is through the confessional act of creation.

### **Bibliography**

- Albu, M. (2010): “Politică și cultură sau despre puterea cuvântului în exil”, in *La Francopolyphonie*, No. 5, online version available at [https://ibn.idsi.md/sites/default/files/imag\\_file/Politic%C4%83%20%C5%9Fi%20cultur%C4%83%20sau%20despre%20puterea%20cuv%C3%A2ntului%20%C3%AEen%20exil.pdf](https://ibn.idsi.md/sites/default/files/imag_file/Politic%C4%83%20%C5%9Fi%20cultur%C4%83%20sau%20despre%20puterea%20cuv%C3%A2ntului%20%C3%AEen%20exil.pdf)
- Albu, M. (2011): “Presa românească din alte spații geografice”, in *Opinia națională*, No. 554, 21.11, online version available at <http://opinionationala.ro/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/554.pdf>
- Albu, M. (2016): “O existență în slujba cuvântului Virgil Ierunca”, in *Revista Mozaicul*, year XIX, No. 9 (215).

---

<sup>3</sup>[http://atlas.usv.ro/www/codru\\_net/CC11/oglinzi.pdf](http://atlas.usv.ro/www/codru_net/CC11/oglinzi.pdf)



- Behring, E. (2001): *Scriitori români din exil 1945-1989. O perspectivă istorico-literară*, București: Editura Fundației Culturale Române.
- Berg, N. E. (1996): "Exile, Literature and Jewish Writers", in *Exile from Exile: Israeli Writers from Iraq*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Boldor, A. (2005): "Exile as Severance", Louisiana State University, online version available at [http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-07122005-112749/unrestricted/Boldor\\_dis.pdf](http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-07122005-112749/unrestricted/Boldor_dis.pdf).
- Iancu, C. (2006): "Acolo și aici", in vol. Norman Manea, *Textul nomad (Casa melcului II)*, București: Hasefer Publishing House.
- Ierunca, V. (2000): *Trecut-au anii*, București: Ed. Humanitas.
- Neicu, O. (2017): "Reality and Dream in the Works of Virgil Tănase", in *Discourse and the Power of Multicultural Dialogue*, Tîrgu Mureș: Arhipelag XXI Press, online version available at <https://old.upm.ro/ldmd/LDMD-05/Lit/Lit%2005%20A2.pdf>.
- Simion, E. (2007): *Fragments critice V*, București: Fundația Națională pentru Literatură și Artă Publishing House.
- Simuț, I. (2006): "Postmodernismul la lucru", in *România literară*, No. 42/20, October, online version available at <http://www.romaniaculturala.ro/articol.php?cod=6457>.
- Simuț, I. (1990): "Un exercițiu al speranței" [Monica Lovinescu - Unde scurte], "An Exercise of Hope", in *Familia*, 26, No. 12/1990, pp. 4-5.
- Stan, A. (2009): *Exilul ca traumă. Trauma ca exil în opera lui Norman Manea*, Iași: Editura Lumen.
- Țepeneag, D. (2000): *The War of Literature Is Not Over Yet*, (ed.) Nicolae Bârna, București: Allfa Publishing House.
- \*\*\* *Dicționarul Literaturii Române* (2012), vol. II, București: Univers Enciclopedic Gold Publishing House.
- [http://atlas.usv.ro/www/codru\\_net/CC11/oglinzi.pdf](http://atlas.usv.ro/www/codru_net/CC11/oglinzi.pdf), accessed June 10, 2021.

### Iuliana Barna

**affiliation:** "Dunarea de Jos" University of Galati

**position:** Associate Professor

**email:** iuliana.barna@ugal.ro

**research interests:** postmodern Romanian Literature, the literature of the Romanian exile, didactics

**Selected publications:**

- (2020): *Playing Tag with the Death. The Portrait of a Romanian Provincial* (Iuliana Barna), LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.
- (2019): "Insights into the Condition of the Writer from a False Exile. Conversations with Virgil Tănase – Far Away from the Danube" (Iuliana Barna), in *Romanian Review of Eurasian Studies*, Constanța: Ovidius University Publishing House, year XV, No.1-2, 2019, pp. 265-269.
- (2019): "Language and Communication Disorders of Autistic Children. An Interdisciplinary Approach" (Iuliana Barna), Volume LXVII, pp. 1638-1645, in *The European Proceedings of Social & Behavioural Sciences EpSBS*.