

The Rhetoric of Displacement

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What is in a name like “postmodernism” when applied to the Romanian literature of the last three decades? Enough to fill Noah’s ark to the brim and have it boil over... Ideological and linguistic subversion, playfulness, contempt of authority, *tel-quel-ism*, demystification, ontological shifts between reality and the text, dialogism... Not all good literature published within this interval goes into the postmodern paradigm; not all postmodern writing is good literature. A distinctive mark is the presence of characteristic signifying practices in the early sixties, immediately after the “thaw” (maybe even prompted by the demolishment of the dogmatic idols).

The traditional author, writing with Aristotle’s *Poetics* in his hands, is a demiurge ordering unruly matter into a harmonious design, cosmos out of chaos. The modernist writer is faced with chaos in the very reality of a moribund civilization. Ruefully, he takes a backward glance. What he sees there, in the cultural past, are not models which have outlived their time, but a set of *forms* that he imposes upon the disorderly substance of personal experience. The postmodern writer is a parasite somehow, an out-growth of this orderly universe where chaos has been defeated once more by the modernist Orpheuses. Yet he is rebellious, an ungrateful apprentice, who will waste the toil of his forerunners. He displaces not only his predecessors from the centre, but the very idea of a centre or origin. The centre blows up and the wrecks float about, periodically landing onto continents with provisional and unstable outlines. Displeased with the “glorious summer” of the modernist “idea of order”, the postmodern writer turns it again into a “winter of discontent” (even if some critics prefer to emphasize the bridge rather than the gap): rhetoric at odds with meaning, meaning with reference, standard with popular culture etc.

The original sin that triggered the programme of deconstruction was committed by the philosopher Lucian Blaga (1895-1961) who, like Nietzsche before him, denied philosophy all claims to truth, ascribing to it a figurative discourse. The clear-cut logical analysis and categorial thinking were held to be no longer tenable in the absence of any grounds for authenticating methods. A gnoseological crisis was caused by the presumed split within the object between its “phanic” (Cr. *phanein*: to appear) and its “cryptic” (Gr. *kryptein*: to hide) sides. A part of any object of thought will be accessible through a cognitive activity yielding concepts (the so-called “paradisiac” knowledge) while the other lies in hiding, checking any cognitive attempt on the beholder’s part. It is only accessible through “Luciferic” knowledge, that turns the subject into a passive seat of revelation; the “abysmal categories”, which are the plastic capabilities of the subconscious, will help the subject fashion simile-worlds – that is, worlds

similar to the ones we inhabit. The subconscious produces imaginative doublets of beings. Living within the horizon of existential mystery (God had been replaced by the Great Anonymous), man's transcendental destiny is that of a creator of metaphors. These abysmal categories resemble Lyotard's "matricial figure" that «engendre des formes et des images» (J.-Fr. Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, Ed. Klincksieck, 1974, p. 327). Man appropriates the world through fictions, metaphors, art. As a creator of simile-worlds, man replaces the Divine Father. As philosophy is denied a rationale or a self-contained system of axiomatic truths, it retreats into irrationalism. From an inflexible logic based on a meaningful activity of thought, it turns into a structure having a formal dimension.

In 1960, the Romanian expatriate Vintilă Horia got the Goncourt Award for his novel *God was Born in Exile*. It contains the apocryphal diary of Ovid, the Roman poet exiled by Emperor Augustus to Tomis, a former Greek colony at the Black Sea. The name is derived from the Gr. *tomy*, meaning "cutting, section, amputation", and the legend associated with this toponymy claims that Medea had taken refuge here, delaying her father's pursuit by strewing the sea with the limbs of her slaughtered brother. Ovid too is severed from all family ties, shut out from his matricial world and thrown into one of barbarians. Vintilă Horia's Ovid, however, is not the familiar figure who cast his sad thoughts into elegiac letters to Rome. In fact, this is a story about the world being disengaged from its orbiting around Rome as "urbs et orbis" and finding a new centre to turn around. The Roman Empire was no longer a centred world. "By the end of the first century B.C. – by the time of Ovid, in other words – no single cult could be said to dominate Roman religious traditions" (Stephen C. Ausband, *Myth and Meaning, Myth and Order*). The gods had become corrupted forms, down to idols. Each household had its protecting *genii*, there was no ontological foundation in the sacred. To mid-century Europeans, Horia's Rome resembled a totalitarian regime, with the void cult of the leader, swarming spies, universal cowardice and loss of human lives for the sake of artificially maintaining the Empire's frontiers. Ovid is now faced with a different humanity, by far less civilized, yet living in the cult of one god, with moral values and in contempt of death. Rome is deconstructed from its imperial aura, while another centre coalesces at the Scythian pole. To the exiled poet Tomis is gradually revealed as a new home and a spiritual centre – an idea which cannot be deemed from Ovid's heart-rending elegies, being the novelist's alone.

1963 sees the debut of a poet strikingly original in his very denial of originality. Marin Sorescu feels as if he had been thrown into an already existing Bibliopolis; he is *Singur printre poeți* ("Alone among poets"), at the same time himself and those who lived before him in the huge text of the world. The author is thereby displaced from his origin. The volume amounts to a collection of textual experiments which provide an apt illustration for G. Genette's *Palimpsestes*: parody, pastiche, imitation, metatexts, hypertexts, intertextuality, texts reading other texts etc. The next volume of *Poems* (1964), assumed to be thoroughly "original", are even more shocking to the reading habits of the public Marin Sorescu dislocates the being from its categorial articulations that blend together things of the real world and symbolic figures, physiological states and geometrical configurations, quotes and idiomatic phrases. Adding to the ontic confusion, various types of discourse coexist in the perfect democracy of his

heteroglossia; existential questions are cast in the consecrated speech of bequests, a patient's complaint to his doctor, pharmacy recipes, the politicians' «langue de bois». Readings of history are administered like pills, with a spoonful of water in the evening, before going to bed etc. In the following passage from his often anthologized *Shakespeare*, the world's most famous dramatist replaces God in the concentrated idiom of the Bible or of a bequest: "Shakespeare made the world. In seven days. In the first day lie made heaven, the mountains and the deep chasm of the soul./ On the second day he made the rivers, seas and oceans/ and other excitements/ which he breathed into Hamlet, Julius Caesar, Antony, Cleopatra, Ophelia, Othello and the lot,/ to be owned by them, and their rightful heirs/ in perpetuity." Rhetoric subversively defects from the semantic function of the discourse. Subject and object, centre and periphery, actant and recipient of the action, everything turns on the hinges of a revolving kaleidoscope, everything loses direction and intentionality. I quote from his poem entitled *Dante*: "Nine circles of sin, nine of waiting/ Nine of illusion,/ And all of them full to the brim/ And in the middle of them, there is Dante.// He keeps looking at the Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise/ When he gets weary, he just changes the labels./ The one reading Inferno, he places in Paradise/ And the other way round./ This happens again and again/ So that poor mortals/ hardly know where they are// Dante feels the swelling of his temples/ As he pushes the pyramid from inside./ The pyramid moves slowly on the ground/ now backwards, now forwards/An inch a year/ Unhurriedly." Meaning (the intelligible content) is often divorced from references (the object to which the words refer or apply). Here are the very unfamiliar semantic contents or the formulaic language for bequests in the mouth of a dying man: "I must put out with an eyelid all things which stayed alight,/ the slippers near the bed, the hallstand, the paintings,/ As for the rest of life's belongings, everything that can be seen, even beyond the stars,/ there's no point in taking those with me, they'll continue to burn. (...) And in my will I've requested/ that to honour/ my memory/ at least on the more solemn days of remembrance,/ the whole universe shall be distributed/ among the people, as alms." The Romanian phrase „a fi dat de pomana” is ambiguous: to be given as alms (a wide-spread practice at funeral rites) or to be given in vain, to no purpose at all. The world exists in vain if it is no longer present in the self's consciousness, if the self is no longer there to bestow meaning on it. In Sorescu's play *Jonah*, the prophet as a universal subject and foreseer of a providential sequence of events is replaced by a temporal subjectivity, self-constituted by appropriating the world through language. The very choice of this Biblical narrative is defining for the subversive technique of a play much acclaimed on West-European stages during the last two decades; as Hans Heinrich points out in his *Parmenides und jona* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966), the brief narrative, in contradiction with the rest of the Bible, shows the divorce between the divine word and the concrete situation, thereby denying the creation of the world through Logos. Jonah knows that Cod will not destroy Niniveh out of pity, so he refuses to carry there Cod's threat, for fear he might prove to be a false prophet He chooses to run away. In Sorescu's play, Jonah is a common fisherman of no time, imprisoned in the bellies of three concentric fish. He manages to cut them open in turn and dive out to light. Yet he feels that man's existence will always be a prison, that man lives within the horizon of the belly of a fish: trapped by the elements, the spirit feels alienated. He will escape from the Leviathan-world by allegorically cutting his own belly. The

progress outwards into the world is inwardly inverted into private memory and later into the memory of the race, materialized in language. Language is a way of being together with others in the world: “Some prophet you’ve been, Jonah! I could see how you predicted your future... Let me see you now predicting yourposr (...) Try to remember *everything*... What was the name of that kind old couple who used to call on us when you were a kid? What about the other two, the frowning man and the toiling woman you could see around in our home, who had not been so old from the beginning? What was the name of the building where I was taught? What was the name of that four-legged thing on which we would eat and drink, on which I even danced a couple of times? Every day we saw something round up in the sky, a red wheel that kept revolving in one and only direction (...) What was my name?...” As he asks these questions, the woes of the tribe are kindled in our memory: grandparents, parents, school, table, sun... Alienation has disappeared because the things have been transferred into meaning, *res* and the self are now one in the continuum of signifieds. Naming becomes Jonah: “I remember: I am Jonah”. But the individual, autonomous, mundane subject is no longer there; he has dissolved into intersubjectivity.

Displacement from the origin in history is the broadest figure on the canvas of Sorescu’s historical play *Răceala* (“The Cold”). Sultan Mohammed imprisons the last Byzantine emperor and his court in a cage and has them play the fall of the Empire every night. The great scene of the world is reduced to a stage, the unique act of being is corrupted into the vacuous repetitiveness of the performance.

The corruption of origins is the idea that triggers the action of *The Book of Metropolis* by Ștefan Bănulescu, a leading novelist of the sixties (the book was published in 1977 as part of the project of a tetralogy). Monica Spiridon devotes to it the first chapter of her book *Melancolia descendenței* (“The Melancholy of Descent”) that explores “figures and forms of generic memory in literature”. In other words, the Romanian writers’ awareness of the palimpsestic structure of culture (Derrida’s “white mythology”). Bănulescu imagines two Utopian cities, Metropolis and Dicomestia, situated on either side of a river, pointing to their rivalry as well as complementary relationship. Dicomestia is ruled by Constantin XI, the founder of a race. However, he is not the origin but a lack in origin: he lacks parentage, he is called “the foundling, the lost one”. The race is generated by a tailor and a topometrist; they extend spatially and increase in numbers, yet they lack any axiological grounding, any mythical foundation. Metropolis (*meta* – after, *ope* – opening, prolongation) symbolizes, on the contrary, departure from the origin. It is a seat of repetition, succession, degradation of the origin. Decaying Byzantium can be deemed in this worthless copy of its former glory. Metropolis sees itself imitated by a subterranean world of clowns with which it finally merges.

The obsession for the basic axioms and values was probably engendered among the writers of the sixties and seventies by the radical shift in the cherished idols of the dogmatic age. What had been thought to be revolutionary landmarks in the progress of the peoples towards communism was now crammed into the historical trash or the “etcetera” of history: “On Wednesday the war was over/ on Thursday collectivization and electrification began/ on Friday oil lamps raised doubts and questions/ on Saturday etc. etc./ on Sunday etc. etc. and so forth.”

This is Mircea Dinescu, the leading poet of the seventies and a professed subverter of the Orphic pose and of high culture.

The displacement occurring in the eighties meant the explosion of what was still left of the logocentric fiction into a maize of private worlds: amorphous, chaotic, purposeless Or, to quote poet Mircea Ortarescu, “a tangle of nothing, nowhere, nevermore”. The “reality of discussions” still surfaces the apocalyptic dissolution, yet in what a confusing blend! The dialogic discourse explores the frontiers of poetry; newly coined words, obsolete phrases, the language of chemistry or anatomy books boil in the mixing pot of a poetic texture that finally melts away into “the ocean’s gelly, the barbed soil of the earth” The title of his first book of poems is “Headlights, Windowshops, Photographs”, things which are not. They only light, point to, replace what actually exists in a *copia*. The poem looks in the mirror and sees the rhetorical scheme of Andrew Marvell’s *To His Coy Mistress*: “Oh, if we only had time and space, space and time/ then would your shyness be less to blame/ thru would I love thee down to the flood/ while you deny me down to the coming of the Jews/ and then would I love thee down to the Renaissance/ while you still shun me down to the belle epoque ...” The crisis of identity has reached a climactic point. Nothing stands in place anymore: author, poem, world, text. As no one can go any further, we may expect the exhaustion of what threatens to become mannerism. Paraphrasing Yeats, assuredly, some reconstruction is at hand ...