

*Living On the Border: Ethnicity and Exile with Cioran and Gombrowicz*

Liminal spaces have become the province of deconstruction that acknowledged their ambiguous, subversive nature – if the very word ‘nature’ is appropriate in this case. Yet there is a whole history behind this subject that may prove to be interesting. Borders, margins, boundaries of all sorts have been treated quite differently by philosophy, art, literary history, sociology, etc. Traditionally, a limit is seen as separating, delimitating, defining, sometimes by opposing two entities. This discriminating and implicitly valuing role was associated by Jacques Derrida and his school with a veil of undesired connotations.

Let us follow the deconstructive suggestions in this matter. It is hardly possible to refer to a single text signed by Derrida that would inscribe the deconstructive meaning attached to the signifier ‘limit’. His whole thinking is imbued with this problem. What was later regarded as a manifesto of his philosophy, the 1966 Johns Hopkins paper on *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, or *Parergon*, or the writings on the condition of the university tackle with the limit as a recurrent theme of the deconstructive method. Summarizing and simplifying, the concept of a centered structure is considered to be nothing more than the expression of a desire for stability. The traditional discourse of Western metaphysics involves working with a set of oppositions in which one of the terms is privileged (essence/existence, subject/object, nature/culture, man/woman, center/margin, etc.), that puts an end to the free play of signifiers. The limit as such was questioned by Derrida and undermined by foregrounding the dual nature of each term of the pair.

The Romanian philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu’s definition of the limit (Liiceanu 1994) highlights the defining function it fulfils: “A thing exists through the *identity* that its borders assign to it”<sup>1</sup> (35). Typical of human identity is its mobility, since its borders are continuously pushed forward, successfully or not. Liiceanu classifies limits into immovable (i.e., genes, race, ethnicity, time limits) and movable (spatial, linguistic, social, religious beliefs), at the same time pointing out the frailty of this classification, which is due to the tendency of the two categories to overlap, so that any limit can be subjectively felt as benefic, fulfilling, defining for an identity, or on the contrary mutilating, and frustrating. Ethnic belonging is a good example of this ambiguity in perceiving a limit.

A similar point of view had been expressed and illustrated by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, in his *Poétique de l’espace* (1957) [The Poetics of Space]: a limit, any limit is actually a subjective, interior one. Analyzing the dialectic of *inside* – *outside*, he shows that, theoretically, *inside* stands for protection (by home, family, country), whereas *outside* means exposure and danger (the case of the exile or the immigrant). Nevertheless, in totalitarian societies, “the outside” is equivalent to escaping an unacceptable historical destiny (that would be the case of Emile Cioran, with some

contextual peculiarities). One's country can thus easily change its significance from that of a "home"/ "protective mother", to the Hamletian one, that of prison. As Edward W. Said puts it, "in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience" (Henderson 1995, 4).

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Geographical (and other) borders, as Thomas Pavel remarks in his *Fictional Worlds* (Pavel 1989), are of three types: crossable both ways (the case of US and Canada), selective or asymmetrical (Austria and Czechoslovakia before the fall of the Iron Curtain), and impenetrable (Israel and Syria). Exile represents a combination of the last two, at different times (depending also on choice or imposition). Once one's country is left for good, it is difficult if not impossible to come back.

Exile is thus a limit – a spatial and a personal one. Distance in space sometimes turns into an emotional detachment, into a break with one's former identity. At other times distance results only in increasing the obsession of home, of returning to an idealized Ithaca. Looking at the history of the literary representation of exile, we come across this theme with the Latin poet Ovid. He inaugurates an existential as well as literary paradigm. Exiled at Tomis by the emperor Octavian, he lives this situation as a tragedy, an excessive punishment. The poet undergoes a radical change of climate and mood, easily recognizable in his work (from *Amores*, to *Tristia* and *The Black Sea Letters*). His biography made him a fictional character (see *God was born in exile*, 1960, by Vintilă Horia; the same story inspired more recently the Austrian writer Christoph Ransmayr in his novel *The Last World*, 1988).

A long line of writers, artists, intellectuals underwent this experience, even in the odd form of an exile in one's own country (see the menace of the Siberian exile during the Soviet regime).

There is another, positive value attached to the theme of exile that reads it as the temptation of a fresh start. It seems to be more frequent when social or economic, rather than cultural, exile is concerned. The latter implies, especially for the writers, the necessity of a perfect linguistic assimilation which can be a painful process triggering a loss or diminution of one's self.

In his inventory of 'modern travelers', Tzvetan Todorov (Todorov 1999) described the exile as the person who "interprets his/her life abroad as an experience of non-belonging to his/her own environment, and loves it for this very reason. The exile is interested in his/her life, and their people's life; but realized that in order to favor this interest, it was better to live abroad, where you don't 'belong' to anybody; the exile is a stranger for always, not for a limited time", as in the case of the tourist or the expatriate (470). Todorov offers a series of examples of writers who chose to live in exile in order to create their works: J. Joyce, S. Beckett, R.M. Rilke, even G.G. Márquez and Günter Grass, who wrote in Paris such 'national' novels as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or *The Tin Drum*. The theorist, himself a Bulgarian living in France, values this experience as a happy one; which is not always the case.

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Let us consider now two particular instances of an exile perception of homeland: that of the French/Romanian philosopher Emile Cioran (1911-1995) and of the Polish/Argentinean writer Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1969). I have not chosen these two writers only because they are almost contemporaries (Gombrowicz, born in 1904, is 7 years Cioran's senior), or because both are originally Eastern European; the main reason was the similarity between their attitudes toward ethnicity, toward belonging to something and being thus limited in one's freedom.

Let us start chronologically, with Cioran's case and two of his books: *The Transfiguration of Romania* (his last book written in Romanian, published in 1939, but written in 1935-36), and *Mon Pays* [My Country], a confession dating from the beginning of the 1950s, published posthumously in 1996.

*The Transfiguration...*, written in his home country, shows an intellectual revolted against his people's roots and present condition, already in exile from a spiritual point of view. Here we witness an angry, deceived love for everything the national tradition stands for. "It is not easy at all for someone to be born in a second-rate country", Cioran wrote. (Later on, he was to comment ironically on a concept forged by his compatriot, philosopher C. Noica, of a – sort of – "Romanian Dasein").

The writer undertakes a radical critique of Romanian culture and civilization understood as minor ones. As opposed to the "great/major cultures" (for instance, Egyptian, Greek, French, German, Russian, at different moments in their history) that offer an all-encompassing solution for the problems of the human spirit, the small/minor cultures' is a tragic condition, with no part to play in the universal history and no influence on other peoples. In a broad sense, a major culture is individualized at all levels (political, artistic, etc.) It has a stable generating center, a historic instinct, and, more important, a spiritual sense of development. Establishing an organic and traditional society could only lead to cultural stasis, a general feature of a whole area under the Byzantine influence. In spite of all these, a certain Romantic attitude is to be perceived in his critique, for instance in the use of the "historic offensive" criterion, in the exalted tone and sweeping generalizations. Also, the Nietzschean spirit is pervasive here (see the idea of the pride and force that a great culture instills into the individuals belonging to it), as well as the right-wing ideology that Cioran had sympathized with for several years.

In a note for the 1990 edition, the author takes his distance from such youthful ideas: "From all that I published in Romanian and French, this text is probably the most passionate and at the same time the most foreign to me". His French books are 'purified' of this marked ethnic interest. They reveal a writer-philosopher with a wider, universal perspective, a modern moralist, as he was called. This change was anticipated by a phrase written in 1932: "Could it be that existence is for us an exile and nothingness a homeland?" Life is thus seen here as an expression of humanity's metaphysical exile.

In 1945 Cioran settled in France for the rest of his life. At first the exile meant for him a dramatic linguistic break, even though his French had always been remarkable. In 1949 he made his debut at Gallimard with *Précis de décomposition* and a new identity began to emerge, that of a master of French literary thought and style. Yet he refused to assimilate completely in the new environment and lived in a sort of cultural Purgatory: he accepted no honor, no prize or position except for the Rivarol prize in 1950. Throughout

his French years – most of his life – he did not speak or write in Romanian any more. Only on rare occasions, when close friends from home came over, he switched to his mother tongue as a precious gift for them.

The other book I mentioned (only 11 pages in manuscript, actually), *Mon Pays* [My Country], owes a lot to Cioran's lifetime friend, Simone Boué, who found the manuscript after his death. It was written after his debut, in a moment when he had already engaged, as Mrs. Boué notes, on an irreversible path. This text marks a symbolic break with the young (Romanian) Cioran. He reiterates here the tensed relationship with 'Romania' in his early 20s, when he had experienced such a great discontent toward the past and the present, and so little hope for the future. "I have then come to realize, confesses Cioran, that my country could not raise to the level of my pride" (Cioran 1996, 14).

The exaltation, the radical view expressed in *The Transfiguration of Romania* are now denied with a lot of self-irony. "Probably no one had ever before attacked his own country with such a violence, he acknowledges. It was the delirium of a madman" (21). In a letter from that period, he also wrote to his parents: "I think that I will never again embrace an ideology of any kind" (17.04.1947).

How is this shift to be explained? Leaving Romania was also leaving himself behind: "and when I look back, it [his own past] seems to remind me of another man's years. It is another man whom I deny, everything that used to mean 'me' is now far away" (20). He biographically replaced a Romantic state of mind with an impersonal Modern one, in the line of Rimbaud's famous phrase '*Je est un autre*'. His former angry love looks now immature, paradoxically defined as "the theory (...) of a patriot without a country" (21).

In time, hatred for his ancestors had taken a more general form, that of misanthropy. Finally, the last step in the path to creating his work was self-denial by means of the theme of destruction/suicide: "I had hated my country, hated everybody and the whole world: all that was left was to hate myself: and that I did, on the winding road of despair" (24).

Cioran abandoned the traditional point of view on ethnicity, developed by the Romantic ideology that in the XIXth century had discovered with great enthusiasm national history, folklore, and traditions. He regarded the persistence within this ideology as preposterous. This is partly the reason for choosing to live somewhere else, to become part of a "great culture" that favors individuality. Yet the status of an exile is no less thorny for that: faithful to pessimism, he invented a new *topos* of lament: "A quoi bon quitter... (Coasta Boacii)"/ "What's the use in leaving one's birthplace?"

With Witold Gombrowicz we come across another schizoid perspective on the ethnic condition, this time in a literary guise. The novel *Trans-Atlantic* (1953), his 'most Polish' novel, one might say<sup>2</sup>, develops the social and especially cultural stereotypes of ethnicity. The question of what means to possess an ethnic identity crosses the story at all its levels. Written during the writer's Argentinean exile, it is autobiographic in nature, and also marked by the use of the first person narrative. In August 1939, Gombrowicz – the writer, the narrator, and the protagonist of this book – arrives in Buenos Aires. The war breaks out so he decides to stay in Argentina for no other reason than because he happened to be there. 'Home' becomes a place impossible to get back to.

Nevertheless, by crossing the Atlantic, the narrator discovers an anamorphic version of Poland, and he starts wondering whether and how the 'real' one still exists. An opposition begins to unravel, between the tragedy of the country occupied by the Nazis and the tepid, coward mood of the Polish community in Buenos Aires. The Consulate here functions as an emblem of the country, displaying all the flaws of the national character. There is also the conflict between two types of behavior of the Polish diaspora: the traditionalist one, parading a fake patriotism, and the lucid, realistic one (undertaken by the narrator). The 'patriots' don't miss any opportunity to cry for 'Homeland', 'Honor', etc., in a grotesque celebration of Polishness. The protagonist experiences the absurdity of the situation and of his countrymen's acting. Each new acquaintance is described by him as "the strangest man I have ever met". Worth citing is the discussion of the exile writer looking for means of survival with an alleged relative he meets here:

"...a difficult advice to give, I understand your Pain, but you can't leap over the ocean, so I appreciate your decision or I don't, and you did well to stay here although maybe you didn't. (...)

'Do you believe that?'

'I'm not so stupid to believe or not to believe during these times. But since you've decided to stay here, go quickly to the Consulate, or don't go, and register, or don't register, because otherwise you get into deep trouble, or you don't get.

'Do you think so?'

'I do or maybe I don't.'" (Gombrowicz 1999, 14-15)

His reaction is to curse the persistence in a futile tradition at a time when the country's freedom became history. The narrator-character gets enraged with the whole set of essences, superlatives, and capital letters attached to the idea of nationhood. Some readers would be (actually were) shocked by the licenses he takes with respect to this sacred concept, in their opinion. The contestation in which the writer engages is not actually carried on to reach the side of blasphemy; it may even prove to be inspiring in a non-ostentatious manner.

The individual represents the ultimate priority within the ideology of the novel; he/she needs "to protect himself from the people as from any collective aggression" (Preface, 6). Defending himself from possible and real objections, the writer emphasizes one's duty to oneself in the first place, on the individual's humanity, which is broader and more important than one's nationality. "I have never written a word about anything else than myself", he highlights (Preface, 7), almost in Cioranian terms. He wonders in the novel itself: "why does one have to be Polish by all means? (...) Didn't you have enough of that Torment? Don't you wanna be Somebody else, somebody New? Do you want all your Sons to endlessly repeat everything after their Parents?" (71)

The writer's inclination toward eccentricity, toward representing the absurd and the grotesque in everyday life is well-known (Borinsky 1998). All these features are realized at the level of the novel's structure through the use of hyperbole, through the exaggeration of moods, thoughts, ideas. The result is a global tension. In this context, the huge roar of laughter in the end becomes logical: it puts an end to the structural conflict, it overcomes the dilemmas of the individual vs. the people, immaturity vs. experience, form vs. anarchy. Gombrowicz's solution, expressed in the Preface, proves convincing

from a narrative point of view: “being a Polish, try to be all-embracing and more important than a Polish” (6).

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The confessional writings prove once more the similarities in the two writers’ visions, similarities which they were unaware of<sup>3</sup>. It has to be said from the start that we are not dealing here with diaries in the conventional sense of the word; this fact was several times noticed by critics. One cannot draw a clearly separating line between the autobiographical notes and the “fictional” or “philosophical” writings of the two authors<sup>4</sup>. Cioran’s *Cahiers* (I, 1957-1965) and Gombrowicz’s *Diary* (1953-1966) roughly cover the same time horizon, yet without significant references to the historical or exterior contingencies. Each work speaks solely about its author, his *ego* and what is important for him: the concern with self-definition, accomplished very much through similar elements – loneliness, negation, and the act of writing (the fight with style or, respectively, with Form). A radical denial of mind habits, of common places is constitutive to each of them. “I cannot write but only to attack or to lament”, confesses Cioran (Cioran 2005, 90), placing himself « under the spell of *No* ». Correspondingly Gombrowicz makes a personal ethics out of protest and revolt, and acclaims the values of negativity (Gombrowicz 1998, 244, 128, *passim*). « He persistently wrote against something », notices the Polish critic Kazimierz Jurczak, in his Preface to the Romanian edition of the *Diary* (7); this ‘something’ was either Form, Polishness, aristocracy, or Catholicism, communism, etc.

Given these circumstances, the writers’ loneliness becomes not only a status accepted as such, but something they willfully forced to happen. Deeply original and individualistic in their characters, the two would have most probably felt exiled even in their own countries. The novel *Ferdydurke* provoked a scandal among Gombrowicz’s compatriots before World War II. *The Transfiguration of Romania* encountered a similar public reaction, to be repeated in the case of *La Tentation d’exister* (1956). They both managed to experience the feeling of an essential exile, an irreducible estrangement. The similitude is overwhelming, up to the expression of this particular state: « There is no place for me, I have no place of my own, as if I didn’t live on this earth » (Gombrowicz 1998, 194); « I am not from *here*; the status of an exile *in itself*, nowhere I feel at home... » (Cioran 2005, 16); or defining himself as « a man for whom there is no homeland on this earth » (43). It is not the place here to discuss the amount of pride and sufferance that these words may contain. I would only emphasize that, as different from the ‘classical’ tradition in experiencing exile, this is redefined by the two authors as a (painful yet) necessary form of freedom. One cannot really speak about Poland or Romania but by taking a certain distance. (The Polish obsession seems to be stronger with Gombrowicz, who continues to write in Polish and publishes in *Kultura*, the émigré journal based in Paris.) The way in which Cioran and Gombrowicz understood to live their ethnic condition was by reference to the general level of humankind. They did that in a strange and contradictory manner, prioritizing the individual ego, and disguising their personal, very special type of humanism as either misanthropy (Cioran), or the superior pride of a writer who is aware of his value (Gombrowicz). For Cioran, the ego will represent a consolation, the only possible subject to be treated, and at the same time a

torture: „me, me, me – I’m sick of it!” (146), he exclaimed, exhausted. Let us remind here of the famous – and “infamous” – beginning of the Polish writer’s *Diary*:

„Monday

Me.

Tuesday

Me.

Wednesday

Me.

Thursday

Me.” (Gombrowicz 1998, 17)

Yet this ego is far from being a unitary and stable entity. Gombrowicz sees it as a system of masks and sees himself as a character related to Hamlet or Don Quixote, emblematic types of the Baroque period.

With both authors, a frequent rhetoric device – which is an existential device as well, one might add – is contradiction. It implies their variable ethnic and personal identity, their attitudes toward religion, language, style, ethics or aristocracy (in the case of Gombrowicz). « I enjoy contradicting myself to the point of madness », writes Cioran (Cioran 2005, 231), soon to change his mind about it and say that it was his nature and not an option. Gombrowicz as well, in a warning addressed to some imaginary disciples, reveals the same kind of nature: « You never know how to deal with me. Any time I might say some stupid thing, I might lie or trick someone » (Gombrowicz 1998, 320).

The two writers surprise their readers once more when experimenting in their biographies the feeling of nostalgia that each avoided in their works (the Polish writer’s *Diary* attests that later on, during his last years spent in France, he became to feel a sort of nostalgia for Argentina too!). Their ambivalence as far as ethnic origin is concerned (a negative category, as Hugo Friedrich would call it) stands for a symptom of their modernity – a lived one, not only the aesthetic or intellectual type. In fact, Cioran defines the modern by impurity and doubt: « A bit of deceitfulness in the tragic, a drop of insincerity even in the incurability » (Cioran 2005, 118). Any written line is laid under the sign of doubt – of himself and everything else. Paradoxically, here lies the strong link between his « life » and « work » (he would put the quotation marks here). As far as Gombrowicz is concerned, the authenticity of the *Diary* that resides beyond his farces and sometimes tragic masks surpasses the traditional « rule » of genuineness – very often, nothing more than a fake in this type of writings.

Both E. Cioran and W. Gombrowicz anticipate, up to a certain point, the deconstructive experience, enacting the logic of ‘neither-nor’ (rather than that of ‘both-and’, also present with them) built on an existentialist background, and displaying a resolute anti-essentialism in their relationship with their origins.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The translation of all the quotations in this text belongs to the author (O.F.).

<sup>2</sup> Although the action of the novel is not located in any real or imaginary homeland, as it is the case in many of Gombrowicz’s writings (*Ferdydurke*, *Pornography* etc.).

<sup>3</sup> Even though G. commented upon a text by Cioran about the exile's condition (commentary reprinted in his *Diary*, p. 64-67).

<sup>4</sup> The Polish writer is autobiographical in his fiction and fictional in his *Diary*, while the tone and the themes of Cioran are the same in his *Notebooks* and in the books he published during his lifetime.

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