"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi
Faculty of Letters
School of Philological Studies

Literature from Exile - Success and Alienation

PhD thesis abstract

Coordinator: Prof. Codrin Liviu Cuţitaru
Candidate: Zara Briscan Ciocîrlea

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Human migration is not a new thing, it's an old concept imprinted deep into our gene. Strong evidence of this statement are many myths that can be found in all cultures of the world on the theme of leaving home territory. Besides the apparent negative connotations that are associated with the phenomenon observed, there is at least a positive one: going beyond the territorial or spiritual borders is a trademark of maturity, of evolution. From this point of view we can say without hesitation that migration is a constant and contemporary human condition congenitally prone to progress, that man is born under the sign of migration, today more than ever.

The exile’s adaptation to the new space cannot be achieved other than as a compromise between what used to be and what is in that moment, a compromise often times radical, which transforms adaptation itself into a genuine metamorphosis. He assumes a state of skepticism, of generalized suspicion seen on a conceptual level as a profound understanding of the illusory and unstable nature of the world.

Basically there are two trends in addressing exile by individuals in general, writers in particular: the negative trend and the positive one. From a negative point of view, the
separation from the home space is perceived by the individual either as a breaking pain, pathological alienation, a traumatic uprooting or as a constructive penalty, a mandatory step towards purification, a reward in the negative sense of something bad committed in the past, arguments found in the philosophy of most religions. The *positive* approach to life and artistic creativity in exile entails abandoning all social, cultural, and even linguistic constraints allowing the practice of unfettered freedom, sometimes carried almost to an extreme. Literature written from such a perspective can acquire constructing aspects (new trends, groundbreaking new visions of art) or destructive ones (with the sole purpose to destroy or deconstruct art, culture in general), falling into what can be called *the art of counter-exile*. The latter, the most profound and complex vision puts specific emphasis on the general liberation of exile, having also as a positive effect the possibility of expressing, without any restrictions, intrinsic impulses, hitherto latent, creative or destructive within the individual detached from the diurnal habits, platitudes or cultural coercions of the native society that he accepted by birth, habit or need.
The common and absolutely natural tendency of all displaced artists, either positive or negative in vision, is to have the lost native place as a topic of meditation and creative expression with all its aspects in order to recreate or destroy it completely on a subconscious level.

Based on what is already written on this topic, we have reached a number of concluding observations. Thus, on a psychological level, we observed that, during exile, in every individual there is a crisis that manifests itself on five areas: space/location, time, language, culture and identity. Depending on each individual's responses to these requests the creative process is influenced, which ultimately helps in deciphering the works from an exilic perspective, discovering new aspects and meanings that would otherwise be lost while reading.

During the locative crisis the resettlement process, the rehabilitation one include nostalgia for the physical, geographical, material aspect of the home country that will never be completely abandoned, rather it will be placed on a higher level in the mind of the creative individual, higher than it had ever been. That territory is often recreated in the new
background, either mentally by idealization or purely physically through the use of surrogates (objects that recall the memory of the father land – books, for example).

Further on, analyzing the *temporal crisis*, we discovered that it reflects precisely the idea of distance in space which amplifies the effect of distance in time. The artist departed from the native land does not perceive the linear flow of time, having the feeling that things happen too recent or too far in the past. The temporal aspect of the world sometimes gets to seem completely suspended and replaced with a subjective, emotional one which tends, in turn, most of the times, to repeat itself, to be cyclical and relative, fractured, creating real tensions between different ways of perceiving it: the old one with which the individual was accustomed and the new one with which he tries to get used to.

The *linguistic crisis* reveals the fact that for most people, "home" is not just a comfort zone, the place to belong by right, not by compulsion or choice, but, above all, it’s where by the use of the common language, communication occurs most naturally. During exile, literature, especially poetry or comic language, pose the most difficult translation
problems limiting a great deal the natural ability of the message to be transmitted or received, so for most of the displaced artists, the linguistic aspect of exile is the most painful one leaving behind a perpetual uncertainty in expression and hence in behavior.

In the process of adaptation to the new experience, migrants give up aspects of their previous identity and assimilate new ones going through a long and difficult identity crisis. Many of them, because they were forced into exile, remain attached mostly to their previous identity, refusing to abandon many sides of it or rejecting entirely another one. The others, who somehow managed to rebuild a new one feel like being a different person than in the past, ruled by uncertainty similar to that caused by the language crisis mentioned above.

Knowing the overwhelming importance of culture one can easily understand the effects that appear after leaving a particular cultural territory that had become normal, natural by birth and tradition and entering a foreign culture. Suffering inevitably from a cultural crisis, the alienated individual, in order to become part of a new dominant medium, often assumes tasks that are unknown, he mimics the roles and
expectations of the "others" among whom he lives, that is, he seeks by conscious imitation to integrate "the other" into "himself".

In an effort to regain its lost balance after leaving home, without which he cannot live normally, the exile goes through a constant and assiduous struggle in all areas mentioned above and a work of deconstruction and reconstruction of life’s set values (concepts regarding home, family, love, friendship, profession, personal biography etc.).

Also on a psychological level, we outlined in this paper a profile of the exiled artist by three factors: nostalgia for the homeland (the degree to which it causes the creative manifestation of the artist), inheritance (how does the exiled generations influence the creative process and mindset) and personality (the personality type of each artist largely determines his way of looking at the world and the responds to the solicitations of the new territory).

The literature from exile, in the broadest sense possible, includes those works which, from a thematic and aesthetic point of view are mainly devoted to the native habitat and the
norms of its culture, privileging the original language. Trying to identify some features of this kind of literature, we have developed a number of methods for classification and analysis of works written outside the country of origin of the author in order to isolate and define the common, repetitive elements that form the hard core of this type of literature. We pointed out in this respect some notions of **symbolism, individualism, creativity, composition, themes and characters**.

We defined as part of the **primary exile literature** in its most stringent form, those works in which there is a nostalgic emphasis on the physical and spiritual beauty of everything connected to the time lived in the home country (memories, diaries and other autobiographical writings, folk compositions – legends, ballads, doings etc.).

A second discoursive canon which we called **secondary exile literature** includes writings focused on the adoptive country, specific descriptions of everyday life in the new space or critical analysis of the social and cultural assimilation process. Here we encounter issues such as the search for identity in a foreign environment (Joseph Conrad, Norman Manea, Mircea Eliade, etc.) or the meaning of life in
exile (Milan Kundera, Oscar Wilde, Roberto Bolaño), the failure to adapt to the new space (Dante Alighieri, Stefan Baciu Elia Canetti, etc.), returning home etc.

We identified also works proposing an almost complete detachment from the birthplace and engaging in a much broader problem, open virtually to infinity. We placed these works in the *counter-exile literature*. Here the separation from the place, class, language or native community is assimilated to such an extent that it becomes a positive influence on the artistic creation. The fictional themes, myths and ideas proposed by writers for debate are consequences of their change from the experiences of the native country, this being an expression of an intellectual evolution towards a complete detachment (Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Julio Cortazar, James Joyce, Joseph Brodsky, Vladimir Nabokov, Lawrence Durrell etc.). In turn, this type of literature can be divided in two subclasses based on the author’s *constructive* intent (those who have tried to quit the classical vision of their homeland by re-contouring and reinventing a new style, completely different from the previous one – D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, V. Nabokov, Henry Miller, Joseph Conrad, etc..) or *destructive*
one (the authors intended to destroy the old culture without putting anything else in place or to propose an original one completely opposite from before: Tristan Tzara – *Dada movement*, Isidore Isou – *lettrism*, Julio Cortázar – *anti-novel*, Ayn Rand – *objectivism* etc.).

The unique character of the literature from exile is given by the authors’ tendency to draw in their works allegorical representations of actual or imagined way back home that the narrator, most often an alter ego of the writer, follows and the image of the endless metamorphosis of his own self, descriptions of the inner struggle to adapt to a new world and to understand it, the same struggle that will remain a mystery to those who never live the certainty of not having a stable "home". What the exiles create, consciously or not, are actually books with and about memory in which the homeland image is creatively restored from disparate fragments like a broken mirror, resulting in the end a purely subjective image of the author reflecting his neverending struggle against forgetting. Here the big issues such as religious intolerance and racial discrimination are not the main problem of the writers, but the small things, usually overlooked ones, that gain
tremendous importance in the circumstances changed almost completely. From this perspective, appealing to art and creativity is no longer for an exiled author just a form of expressing the vision of the world and life, but a way of survival, of preserving his physical and mental integrity.

In the last part of the paper we confirmed the theory pointed above by analyzing specific examples of major works of literature written in exile, our goal being that to convince future literary criticism and art theory that these creations fall into a well defined and different canon having clear rules based on invariable psychological and sociological principles, that they should be comprehended starting from these precepts that constitute a true filter of values. Only in this way the exiles’ works will be fully understood and appreciated by receptors in their true complexity.

We included in our list works from the Anglo-Saxon area as destination (the richest in terms of complexity and frequency of exile), but from a wide temporal and spatial horizon as a source, reaching the most important causes that led to leaving the home country (political, economic, social, cultural and personal – Chapter I), including both external
exile (outside the country) as well as the internal one (within one’s own country). In Addenda we expanded the analysis to other areas other than the Anglo-Saxon one as destination, including the generation criterion, in order to gather in an overall vision the whole range of exiled types and shades to demonstrate that, after reading them, there are some common characteristics, namely those described in the previous chapters.

We also built up a very useful table containing many of the most important internationally recognized writers who were exiled and whose literature is suspected to be influenced by this biographical event thereby falling into what we have called and studied in this paper, the literature from exile.