

## ROMANIA AS A TRAUMA: CONSIDERATIONS UPON ROMANIAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE<sup>1</sup>

MIHAELA MUDURE  
Babeş-Bolyai University

### **Abstract:**

The aim of this paper is to analyze trauma as constructed in a corpus of texts identified as Romanian-American literature. More precisely, we have focused on the violence of departure from Romania and the violence of adaptation to America in the novel *Train to Trieste* by Domnica Rădulescu, in Petru Popescu's *The Deputy*, and in Alta Ifland's collection of short stories *Elegy for a Fabulous Land*. All these writers were born in Romania and were confronted with totalitarianism and its impositions upon individual identity. For many years escape was the main target of their identity politics .

**Keywords:** *trauma, Communism, post-Communism, exile, Ceauşescu*

Violence, and its resulting trauma, has always been a human problem but they turned into a central cultural trope in the collective imaginary only in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Trauma Studies emerged as a critical trend in the 1990s through the work of such theorists as Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Harpham, and others. This new scholarly interest was the consequence of the violence of two World Wars, the Holocaust, the Gulag, as well as the violence of other armed conflicts, the clash of civilizations, decolonization and globalization, as well as the emotional alienation brought about by the new technologies and the contemporary consumer society. In Arab histories the Crusades were a historic tragedy that turned into a traumatic event. Colonization and the imposition of Christianity in the New World led to other traumatic histories. The Holocaust was a historic tragedy that became a very important paradigm of traumatic experience. Later on, the violence of terrorist attacks by religious fundamentalists on the population of New York (11 September 2001), Madrid (11 March 2004), and

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier, shorter version of this paper appeared as "Romanian Immigrant Travel Routes to America" in *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4.2 (2011): 5-14.

London (7 July 2005) introduced trauma into our everyday life. The tragedy caused by Hurricane Katrina, more than other natural disasters, pointed to human responsibility in dealing with nature and also shockingly revealed the Third World poverty that existed in the country supposed to be the richest in the world. Trauma met not only politics, but also ecology.

The corpus of texts which I define as Romanian-American literature are texts produced in English and/or Romanian by authors of Romanian ethnicity or authors who identify as Romanians<sup>2</sup> and which mostly focus from a transnational perspective on the violence of departure from Romania and the violence of adaptation in America. Whether there are efforts to hide this violence by returning to a picturesque Romania of the haidouks and the Gypsy bear tamer (see Bercovici) or by telling immigration stories about Jews (see Neagoe), or by drowning the pain of leaving the country of one's childhood into lyrical emotion, that violence persists. For a more complete perspective on Romanian-American literature I suggest that the interested reader should consult Aurel Sasu's *Dictionary* and his bibliography about the Romanian communities in North America.

The aim of this paper is to analyze comparatively the violence of the immigrant travel routes as they appear in the work of three Romanian voices in American literature: Domnica Rădulescu, Alta Ifland, and Petru Popescu. More precisely, we shall focus on Domnica Rădulescu and her first novel *Train to Trieste*, Petru Popescu's *The Deputy*, and on Alta Ifland's collection of short stories *Elegy for a Fabulous Land*. All these writers were born in Romania and were confronted with totalitarianism and its impositions upon individual identity. For many years escape was the main target of their personal identity politics. We have chosen these writers because they are all fiction authors, their personal routes and literary achievements were marked by the trauma of leaving Romania and then the necessity to adapt to the American culture.

We shall analyze the ways in which travel and mobility have shaped the identities of these three writers as well as their different artistic strategies in order to counteract the oppressive dominant images of nationhoods. Domnica Rădulescu prefers the existential thriller, Alta Ifland finds her voice in short stories that often become poems in prose. Petru Popescu prefers the novel with a structure close to that of a memorial. These preferences point to an inclination and to the very deep structure of these writers' artistic personality.

The definition and redefinition of Romanian identities by Domnica Rădulescu, Alta Ifland, and Petru Popescu lead to the creation of a very specific discourse of displacement where roots challenge routes and impose routes. Rerouted, sometimes derouted, the main characters in these texts offer interesting

---

<sup>2</sup> Konrad Bercovici (1881-1965) identified as Romanian but he was Jewish if we take into consideration his roots, the ethnicity of his family.

samples of re-contextualization for the contemporary Romanian and American identities.

Domnica Rădulescu was born in Romania and came to the United States in 1983. She holds a Ph.D. in French and Italian Literature from the University of Chicago and currently she is a Professor of Romance Languages and Chair of the Women's Studies program at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. She has written and edited books and scholarly articles on European and Eastern European literature, and has also worked as a theater director for two decades. Rădulescu directed plays by Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Fernando Arrabal, and Jean Tardieu. She has been awarded grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities. In 2008 she was a Fulbright grantee at the Theater Department of Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj, Romania. She is a writer aware of the secrets and the mechanisms of her own craft and able to look at herself in a scholarly mirror. Among her published scholarly works we should mention: *André Malraux: The "Farfelu" As Expression of the Feminine and the Erotic* (1994); *Realms of Exile: Nomadism, Diasporas and Eastern European Voices* (2002); *Sisters of Medea: The Tragic Heroine Across Cultures* (2002); *The Theater of Teaching and the Lessons of Theater* (2005); *Feminist Activism in Academia* (2010). Her latest book is *Black Sea Twilight* (2011).

In 2008 Domnica Rădulescu's first novel, *Train to Trieste*, was published by Alfred A. Knopf. That same year, 2008, this novel was translated by Oana Durican into Romanian at Polirom Publishing House. The main character, the author herself and her novel return to Romania. This movement is one of the most important tests both for the author – an existential test about the solidity of her new roots – and a confrontational test for the book when read by the people who actually lived under the communist dictatorship. Routes and movements are extremely important for the main character, for the author, and for the book. *Train to Trieste* is actually made up of two movements, oriented towards the exterior: a movement out of Romania and a movement out of an American marriage towards an independent existence in the New World. However, regardless of how independent this new existence might be, the final check up is still with the homeland, with the land where your first routes were. Derouted, rerouted, the main character, the author, the book cannot escape from the fascination of Ceaușescu's Romania and any achievement is regarded only in connection with it. It is the parameter of all parameters.

In the summer of 1977, the seventeen-year-old Mona Maria Manoliu falls in love with Mihai, a mysterious, green-eyed boy who lives in Brașov, the romantic mountain city where she spends her summers. She can think of nothing else and no one else. The two youngsters live their love affair intensely and one would wonder how on earth the main female fear of time does not appear in the

text<sup>3</sup>. Miraculously, Mona Manoliu does not get pregnant. Still, life under the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu was difficult. Hunger, paranoia, fear infected everyone. According to Rădulescu, everybody was thinking of just one movement: getting out of the country, trying to live a better life somewhere else. This frantic desire to move outside the borders of communist Romania was counterbalanced by the slow rhythm of the long lines everyone had to stand in if they wanted to buy food. The result of these two contradictory movements was a neurosis that seized the whole nation. The description of the people standing in line and hoping to get something (food, toilet paper, soap, tooth paste) was the materialization of the never-to-be-fulfilled desire which was induced by the utopian ideology the communist regime relied on. “The last people in line generally look demoralized: there won’t be anything left on the shelf, they know, by the time their turn comes. They will leave with their empty bags and try to find other lines throughout the city, where they might have the chance of being the first in a line for butter or sardines or toilet paper. The running joke is that Romanians don’t need toilet paper any longer because they have nothing to shit.” (7)

Considerations about the past and the not yet acknowledged colonial implications of Romania’s historical birth<sup>4</sup> make the reader take a jump into the past. Also, they are a wonderful occasion to see Mona’s independent thinking. Usually the Roman conquest is regarded very highly in Romanian milieus, its colonial-before-colonialism implications being completely disregarded. This is not true for Mona. She says, “I don’t like the Romans, how they invaded and killed the Dacians and how they stole all of their words and left them with only fourteen.” (29) This colonial beginning led to contemporary attitudes the Romanians cannot get rid of. They swear “at the Americans who split and divided zones of influence with the Russians after the war” (32) and feel equally disempowered when the Russians, the new colonizers who invaded the country after World War II, “cut people’s hands off to get the watches from their wrists” (39).

The author succeeds in recreating a time, the final years of the Romanian communist regime (1985-1989), when freedom was defined by the possibility to get food easily. When making a comparison between the Romanian sixties and

---

<sup>3</sup> Between 1965 and 1989 Romania had one of the most severe anti-abortion policies in the world. Both the pregnant women and the doctors or nurses facilitating abortion went to prison in case they were caught. There were no contraception means. The pill, the condom were practically impossible to find. For years, Romanian women lived with the anxiety that they got pregnant in spite of their will. Thousands of women died because of illegal abortions. They are considered the unacknowledged victims of Romanian communism.

<sup>4</sup> The Romanian ethnicity appeared as the result of the expansion of the Roman Empire in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. when the Romans conquered Dacia, a kingdom north of the Danube.

the end of the eighties, characters make blatant statements. “This is the happy time in our country, when you find even dates and bananas and red caviar in the stores without standing in line...” (41). Oppression increased gradually. In the eighties, the fictional Romanians couldn’t own typewriters any longer – an artistic exaggeration meant to hyperbolize a reality that was atrocious enough. In fact, Romanians had to declare that they owned typewriters to the police and give a sample of the machine writing. The idea of the then authorities was total surveillance and prevention of the slightest critique of the regime. The author is able to create very powerful images. She is keen on giving the reader the sense of a horrendous panopticum. Everybody was under surveillance all the time, even in the most intimate moments of one’s existence. Every time Mona and Mihai made love, the girl caught glimpses of the enormous portraits of Marx, Engels and Lenin “spying... on us from the building across the street” (47).

One day, Mona saw Mihai wearing the black leather jacket which was the garb preferred by the secret police. Could he be one of them? The novel is spiced with a very unconvincing story, for a Romanian reader at least, about a possible underground movement which Mona’s father joined. But again the atmosphere is better caught than the details. Neurosis increases. Mona’s father thinks **They** are capable of anything. The secret police people are caricaturized but the author fails to render the awful reality: the *securitate*’s much more banal and also more frightening power over people’s lives. Domnica Rădulescu is much more successful and convincing in rendering the horror of the communist regime by an inward movement toward a pre-natal stage. Monica’s rejection of the actual reality of the eighties is rendered by her longing for a black hole where the reader can no longer feel the overwhelming power of the regime over its victims. “I am dreaming about the black hole in Romanian history that my aunt always talks about” – this is after the year 271, that is, the withdrawal of the Roman troops south of the Danube. For almost 1,000 years there are very few documents about what happens on the present-day Romanian territory. “That place of nonhistory, dark and mysterious like a womb, where I could curl up like a fetus and forget everything and float in the warm gelatinous waters of oblivion, waiting” (118).

Slowly, insidiously, life becomes more and more unbearable. Mona realizes that she has to leave Romania. The author creates a very unconvincing escape. Apparently, the policeman who checked the passports upon crossing the border was so distracted that he forgot to ask Mona about her passport. That such an oppressive regime as Ceaușescu’s could have such dumb and stupid guards at its borders is beyond belief, however much the Romanian reader might want to suspend his disbelief. Realistic details are not exactly Domnica Rădulescu’s speciality. What she is really good at is rendering the anxiety of having one’s roots cut off, one’s past left behind at the mercy of history and good luck. “I feel like sleeping. I don’t understand why I decided to leave. I

know that now that I've started, I have to somehow see it through, to keep going until I reach my destination. But what is my destination? There are still so many kilometers, so many checkpoints and chasms ahead of me, until I can start over, until I can begin my new journey" (153). Only the metaphor can render the truth of Mona's condition and the truth of the author's condition in the new country. Significantly, freedom is "a wild creature with disheveled hair" (157).

Mona's travel routes take her first to Italy, in Trieste, where she is the babysitter of a family. The Italian city that has itself a very troubled history, having passed from one country to another several times, is the best location for Mona's dis-location. Space helps breeding her new self. After a certain stage in this new formative space, Mona gets to Chicago, the town of Ron and Gladys, a religious couple who had sponsored her coming from the communist nightmare to the New World. In the big American metropolis, Mona tries to get (to) her true freedom. She abandons the religious couple and makes her own way into the world and society. Her new route leads to a gendered modification. She has to abandon her Romanian constructed femininity for a masculine-like ego, an almost hermaphrodite construct that is supposed to help her cross boundaries and adapt, adopt. "I adopt the self-assurance and nonchalance of a man, an American man. I experiment with this new American me: boyish, shaggy haired, irreverent, and careless" (206). It is symptomatic that during this gender-change operation, Mihai, her lover whom she left without saying good-bye, "is all squished up at the very bottom of the package" (206), where she keeps her Romanian past.

Gradually, Mona adapts to her new homeland. She brings her family to America, she becomes a doctoral student, she marries, has children, then she leaves her husband and begins a new, truly independent, life. She enters and gets out of several languages. Words create for her new worlds like "little fireworks" (265) or like "balloons in conference rooms... I launch them on stages of school theaters toward weary audiences who yawn and nod asleep" (264). A sense of fatigue and limited accomplishment is the sign of her disintegration and reintegration. Mona returns to Romania and finds out that her former lover was, in fact, a member of some underground anti-communist movement. So her fears had no justification. Questions are given answers, readers solve narrative puzzles, but solutions are not very good from the perspective of a well-constructed plot. Mihai continues to be involved in underground activities. This time he is hunting for his former oppressors, the members of the secret police. A parallelism that is not very good for the image of Romania's new democracy!

Not true, but truthful is the writing of Dominica Rădulescu. Her greatest achievement after deterritorializing her Romanian self is her narrative verisimilitude. For a writer, this is no small thing. Her gift of words is remarkable; her sensitivity with the words of her new language is to be appreciated. But narrative construction still leaves to be desired. And here is a

relevant example of Rădulescu wording her new self, her new “both-and” globalizing identity. “And maybe I will get used to having two countries, to having no country, to being my own country, and stretching across the Atlantic Ocean, one foot in the Indiana cornfield, the other in the berry-filled meadow in the Carpathians, like a huge baobab tree.” (301) In the paratext of the book, Sandra Cisneros, a very well known Mexican-American author and author of *The House on Mango Street*, gives a very generous tribute to Domnica Rădulescu, as a new member of the Republic of Letters. Sandra Cisneros says: “A spirited, passionate, funny look at the world in the time of the new millennium. Domnica Rădulescu is a remarkable writer enriching American letters with her Romanian perspective. We are lucky to call her ours.” My question is: but is Domnica Rădulescu theirs? The baobab is huge, vital, enduring, but alien to both American and Romanian lands. In spite of the benevolent metaphor, Domnica Rădulescu seems unable to tame her new alienness.

The other term of my comparison in this essay is Alta Ifland. Information about this writer is scarce. She was born, apparently, in Transylvania, Romania.<sup>5</sup> She grew up under Communism and immigrated to the United States in 1991. She studied French literature and philosophy in France. She writes (and translates) in French (second language) and English (third language). Her bilingual book of prose poems, *Voix de Glace/Voice of Ice*, was awarded the 2008 Louis Guillaume Prize. Alta Ifland’s writing has been analyzed in one of the best known sites for world literature. John Taylor talks about the “Languages of Alta Ifland”, commenting that

Alta Ifland’s writing raises important questions about the legitimacy and practice of autobiography that are too often taken for granted by American writers. In an alert literary age, the fifty-three thought-provoking short prose texts of her *Voice of Ice/Voix de Glace* would have attracted considerable attention outside the circles of small magazines and bookshop readings, in which this book indeed attracted attention when it came out in 2007. The author, described in a back-page résumé of this bilingual edition only as having been born in Eastern Europe, having studied literature and philosophy in France, and currently living in California, remains somewhat mysterious as a person. Yet this autobiographical discretion – so rare among contemporary writers – is justified thematically; it creates the possibility of speaking with an “im-personal” authorial voice, one of the several essential philosophical issues raised in this volume, which was first written in French, the author’s second language, and then self-translated into English, her third. Moreover, there are

---

<sup>5</sup> According to [http://emergingwriters.typepad.com/emerging\\_writers\\_network/2009/05/short-story-month-guest-post-alta-ifland.html](http://emergingwriters.typepad.com/emerging_writers_network/2009/05/short-story-month-guest-post-alta-ifland.html), she grew up in Eastern Europe. Her birth place is not mentioned in this site.

indications that 'Ifland' is a pseudonym, even perhaps a heteronym<sup>6</sup> in Pessoa's sense, with its imaginable literal meaning of an 'if-land', a 'place of conjecture', and a lofty one" as well. (Taylor 2010)

The Portuguese poet and the Romanian-American Alta Ifland share the idea that language does not truly belong to them. Fernando Pessoa says, "My language doesn't belong to me. All that belongs to me is a long, flowery absence at whose edges roses are growing alongside my legs, encircling them, climbing and covering my body like a tomb. Deep in the absence, my language unearths its words of fog, dead like me, and holds them for an instant above the tomb, then lets them fall like petals." (Taylor 2010) The main difference between the two writers is that Alta Ifland rejects any flowery coronation for her vocabulary. The experience of the dictatorship and the post-dictatorship anomic times gives another kind of tension to her vocabulary.

This characterization holds true for Alta Ifland's second volume: *Elegy for a Fabulous World*. Here, the narrative voice confesses to having been born and raised in multi-ethnic Western Ukraine, an area called Ruthenia; she is a Hungarian with relatives in all the neighbouring countries, including Romania.

The book is divided into two parts. As in the very existence of these writers, routing is important and signifying before and after immigration. This dyadic structure emphasizes the rupture that immigration entailed. Ifland recreates a very confusing, ambiguous space where proper names, for instance, belong to several linguistic repertoires: the Hungarian repertoire, the Russian repertoire, and the Romanian repertoire. The book is made up of a sequence of vignettes which together draw the contour of a larger portrait of the community. Alta Ifland successfully imports Sandra Cisneros' narrative strategy from *House on Mango Street*. As in her unacknowledged model, Ifland hides behind a female narrative voice who takes particular pleasure in constructing very short, but very particular characterizations, powerful narrative vignettes. Adelaide Bauer had a body "so thin it seemed more like a veil designed to cover an ashen absence." (13) Aunt Rajssa was "sour as lemon, bossy, a good housekeeper" (17). Uncle Otto's "body was made of dream-matter, dwelling in a galaxy of its own, in which time was nothing but matter's ceaseless longing to be, and space nothing but the crater through which an ageless volcano spewed out particles of being" (21). Ifland is very aware of the simultaneous existence of a material and an immaterial level of existence. As in Chagal's painting, the real, the earthly naturally, normally mixes with aerial beings and visions. Adele Bauer, for instance, "mounted the comet's tail the way a knight would mount a horse or a witch a broom, and the couple levited under confetti of words, higher and higher into the sky..." (22).

---

<sup>6</sup> The heteronym is much more than a penname. The heteronyms had distinct personal histories, styles, philosophies. The Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa has over 80 heteronyms.

Ifland's realism in depicting her native land is completely different from Domnica Rădulescu's. It is a realism that implies a genuine sincerity of perspectives, it is a paradoxical perception that involves and does not reject the other. "Truth is not the real, and to tell the truth means much more than to present the facts as they are. To tell the truth means to refuse the accepted pact between facts and the realists who see them." (24) The narrator's definition of beauty is also paradoxical because, in Ifland's view, beauty is disembodied and the human must carry it as something exterior, something added to one's corporality. "At some point in life I discovered that others thought I was beautiful and that the weight of their eyes on me was the consequence of this beauty. Carrying your beauty around day after day is a little tiring, but I don't complain ..." (25).

Slowly, but without any hesitation we find out that this narrative unfolds the truths form "a small town of Western Ukraine" (31). Nearby is the city of Dombrad, Hungary where the narrator has relatives. This remote place at the confines of the country is not only ontologically ambiguous, but also self providing. For instance, "Uncle Pista made the wine himself and kept it in wooden barrels in a dark, damp cellar" (33). This ability to provide for itself isolates this remote place even more than the authorities would like it to be. The difference between America, where the narrator longs to be, and the author's Eastern European birth place translates into the difference between cleanliness, order, on the one hand, and the disruptive dirt, on the other. Eastern Europe, the forgotten little town from Western Ukraine – a place where imperial interests have clashed so often – mock at the imposed order by cultivating dirt and disruption.

In a city like Los Angeles, a plastic chair has its feet in the aseptic world of efficient humans, and its soul shrivelled as it may be, illuminates the space around it with the message: "Man-made. Separated from the messy chaos of shapeless matter. *Ordered* for you." But in our town a plastic chair had its roots in the rootless wilderness of the mob's dark instincts. The space between chairs was peppered with cigarette butts, thick spit, beer bottles, and something else, which the eye couldn't see, but longed to be clean. (36)

Ifland proves to have very good knowledge of the inner mental mechanisms of the Europe she invokes. The lack of rules, the unpredictability of reality pave the way for the comic absurd. In this world "no one arrives anywhere because there is *no where* to arrive at" (132). In this marginal disruptive world which challenges hierarchies and order, there is a margin of the margin, the marginalized of the marginalized: the Gypsies. The aesthetic virtues of Alta Ifland's lexis is amazing in this part of the book. For instance, the Gypsies show, by contrast, the lack of freedom that characterizes the mainstream society in this forgotten corner of Europe. The Gypsies come and go from "a bitter-sweet-and-sour place where laws didn't exist and we could enjoy life's pleasures with no punishment, as in Pinocchio's garden of delights, but also where we could disappear without a trace,

caught in a dark vortex of lawlessness.” (41) The Gypsies’ secretive movements have a gendered component that increases the attractiveness of these disrupters. “The Gypsy women had a shameless way of looking at everyone ... as if behind their chanted invitation lay another secret one to something forbidden, vaguely obscene.” (42) This liminal world is protected by the Gypsies’ refusal to mix with anyone (44). Comments connect this part of the narrative with later segments. Unfortunately, in America uniformity gets even the daring Gypsies: “even the gypsies wear blue jeans in America, and the fortune-tellers live inside the TV screens.” (45)

The realities of the communist world and its imposed routes are satirized with mild irony by the narrator. Her family live on “Always Onward Street” (47), “yesterday’s news is also tomorrow’s, the same news of an eternal gray reality” (53). “Pioneers marched in the same hypnotic rhythm toward the peaks of Communist Neverland...” (60). And coffee, the miraculous drink which the communist leaders stubbornly refused to give to the people, under all sorts of pretexts, becomes, because of frustration, “a savory concoction extracted from life’s fullness” (60). Besides the stifling rules of Communism there is still in this part of the world some Austrian-Hungarian multicultural sensibility. People speak broken languages, they are “gluing them together like the wings of a fragile, fabulous bird” (58).

The very special qualities of this space where languages meet, empires used to meet and fight, people survive in spite of material shortcomings and dictatorial impositions entail a new perspective on space. For Ifland, space is not an obstacle, but a “mask” (69).

The second part of Ifland’s narrative gives one of the best solutions to the Eastern Europeans’ obsession with immigration: marriage to a foreigner. The new post-communist reality displays proudly its new in-authenticity. The church is brought from a near-by village into town, like a flower repotted in a new pot, the old dictator’s mansion becomes a restaurant for the benefit and full use of the people. Food is displayed in large quantities in order to do away with former frustrations. Everybody shows off – especially to the Americans. All these are the naive and also aggressive manifestations of the Eastern Europeans eager to get integrated and recognized by the world they were forced to leave in order to construct the Leninist chimera. Ifland mocks at the Eastern Europeans who pretend to have been victimized and who tell stories to the naive Westerners about their suffering under the communist regime when any insider knows that “everybody was spying and denouncing each other”, everybody was the persecutor and the victim at the same time.” (103) However, this both-and reality is difficult to grasp and even more difficult to make it be understood by the outsiders who prefer black and white, easier to understand stories.

The author is also able to catch two other peculiarities of those who “benefited” from the communist dictatorship, having been pressed down, squeezed

down. They show “lack of respect for any kind of rules or laws” (114) and have “an infinite ability to absorb and express the most contradictory opinions” (114) for having been mentally raped over and over again by senseless propaganda. This disorder is the form freedom takes in the anomic post-dictatorial world.

Leaving for a supposedly better life is a movement that is both sadness and mirth even if the destination is America, even if the reason is marriage. When the two newly-weds are about to leave for another world, the author describes, with the delicacy of a Japanese haiku, “the parents’ image framed by the door.” It is an image that would “freeze forever the never ending flow of the always present past.” (96)

Running from the past, anxious about the future, both Ifland and Rădulescu get stuck in a disquieting eternal present. Irony is not only instrumentalized when characterizing the old country and the new one. Irony is also directed at the authors themselves by the authors themselves. Ifland’s and Rădulescu’s spokeswomen try hard “to get official membership into the club of freedom, milk, and beef” (121). The two writers, Rădulescu and Ifland, construct various patterns of deterritorialized Romanian literary egos, they both point to immigrant routes that at a certain moment in Eastern Europe’s recent past expressed the hopes of everybody.

The trauma of living in communist Romania gets different forms in the novel *The Deputy* (*Subalternul*, in the original),<sup>7</sup> a fiction deeply embedded in Romanian reality by Petru Popescu. The writer published both in English and Romanian, both in the United States and Romania, and he wants to recapture his readership with the story of his much gossiped about romance with Zoia Ceaușescu, the communist dictator’s daughter. The novel is about power, love, and dictatorship in communist Romania. The writer does not want to get rid of his Romanian memories. Actually, he insists on the events preceding his defection. He wants to use the trauma of leaving his homeland in order to build his new identity on it and also to “sell” it as conveniently as possible. The love-power cocktail is, of course, hard to resist and the best pages in the novel are the description of the upper communist hierarchy as well as the emergent love affair between Zoia Ceaușescu, the pharaoh’s daughter and the protagonist: “... the young writer feels that that expectation of love is what the girl of power has most pure and special and most difficult to reject by a man.” (109)<sup>8</sup> One can find here the well known tropes of Romanian-American literature, tropes which refer to the trauma of a country restrained under dictatorship: surveillance, poverty, the humiliating lack of essential goods, such as soap, sanitary tampons, toilet paper, the Party’s intrusion into the most intimate aspects of human life. In this respect, mention must be made of the

---

<sup>7</sup> All quotations from this novel have been translated by Mihaela Mudure.

<sup>8</sup> „... tânărul scriitor simte că acea așteptare a iubirii e ceea ce fata iubirii are mai pur, și mai special și mai greu de respins de către un bărbat”.

world famous Decree of 1966, which forbade abortion and which is tragically illustrated in the novel by the death of Luminița, one of the protagonist's friends. Luminița has an illegal abortion and she cannot be saved.

The author's power of suggestion is remarkable and I shall quote here the description of the houses in the restricted district where the communist elite used to live:

Like family fortresses, the houses are protected by walls from the street. Nicely harmonized with the style of the houses, they are stucco walls to a stucco house, brick walls to a brick house, and, of course, there are no wooden walls. Florentine little villas are spread among English cottages, Swiss chalets, and mini-castles from the banks of the Loire, everything is harmonious and consonant with the exception of the low roofed wooden booths with flat entrances. They are all painted in pale grey, like the tool sheds from the stations, the workers' style. The houses have, all of them, a different style but the booths are identical and the stamp they put on the street is the stamp of what is real and one cannot see." (95)<sup>9</sup>

It is the stamp of the hidden dictatorship that holds lives and does not want to let go.

The love story and the ethical dilemma (should I stay or should I go?) are well spiced by a violent and shocking vocabulary meant to be a kind of Romanian equivalent of the vocabulary of the Western sixties. Luminița "[t]alks as all our generation talks, straight to the target and the target is almost always improper and vulgar. Love is a hole, man is a burping animal, life is like a stable – still, this does not prevent us from being interested in spirituality, DNA, anthropology, and French movies." (46)<sup>10</sup> A subplot of the book involves a youth gang, representative for the youth subculture as developed in the new and monotonous neighbourhoods built by the communist regime. The author oscillates between this world authentic in its dirt and impropriety and the world of power as symbolized by the dictator's daughter.

Finally, the title character decides to choose freedom, breathe purer air both physically and symbolically in the heights of Machu Pichu. The romance with the

---

<sup>9</sup> „Casele sunt ca niște forturi familial, sunt protejate de ziduri la stradă. Frumos armonizate arhitectonic cu stilul caselor, zid de stuc la casă de stuc, zid de cărămidă la casă de cărămidă și, firește, nu tu un gard de lemn. Vilettele Florentine se întretes cu cottage-urile englezești, cu chalet-urile elvețiene și mini-castele de pe Loara, armonios, consonant – cu excepția gheretelor cu acoperișuri joase și plate de la mai toate intrările, făcute din lemn și vopsite cum sunt vopsite magaziile de scule, prin gări, într-un fumuriu șters, muncitoresc. Casele sunt toate deosebite ca stil, dar gheretele sunt identice, și ștampila pe care o pun ele pe toată strada e ștampila a ce e real și nu se vede”.

<sup>10</sup> „[v]orbește cum vorbește toată generația noastră, drept la țintă, și ținta e aproape întotdeauna impudică și vulgară. Iubirea e o gaură, omul e un animal râgâitor, viața e un coteț – asta nu ne împiedică să ne intereseze spiritualitatea, AND-ul, antropologia și filmele franțuzești” (46).

daughter of power remains a promise and this actually saves the novel from a certain implicit, deeply embedded misogyny. The desire of Zoia is, deep down, the desire to subdue what she represents through her father. The relation with Zoia is, in fact, a relation with the dictator, her father, and sexuality – in its most aggressive act – is the only territory where the dictator can be defeated by opening the daughter's womb. Finally, luckily, the title character decides to leave these muddy waters and defect. Probably the best pages of the novel are dedicated to this unsatisfied hunger for sexuality which is interrupted by the young man representing the authorial voice, at the level of ardent kissing and touching.

The fictions by Domnica Rădulescu, Alta Iftand, and Petru Popescu fully prove the rising into prominence of new hyphenated literatures in the American republic of letters – a process occurring in the wake of the fall of the communist regimes. The violence of leaving Romania becomes the violence of integration. Traumas build on each other and writers such as Domnica Rădulescu, Alta Iftand, or Petru Popescu try to make us understand the movements that led to the appearance of a deterritorialized Romania that tends to become more and more post-national. These writers' different understandings of belonging and identity are also narratives of the Romanian nation which is fragmented by the effects of globalization and whose borders are more and more porous. The three narratives of Romanian (im)migration which we have analyzed belong to the complex process of building a post-nation.

### Works Cited

- Bercovici, Konrad. *Ghitza and Other Romances of Gypsy Blood*. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1921. Print.
- Golopenția, Sanda. *Cartea plecării*. Bucharest: Univers, 1995. Print.
- Iftand, Alta. *Elegy for a Fabulous World*. Rome, Georgia: Ninebark, 2009. Print.
- . Profile on Goodreads. Web. 15 June 2010.
- . Guest post on Emerging Writers Network. May 2009. Web. 13 June 2010.
- Neagoe, Peter. *Winning a Wife and Other Stories*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1935. Print.
- Popescu, Petru. *Supleantul*. Bucharest: Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2009. Print.
- Radulescu, Domnica. *Train to Trieste*. New York: Knopf, 2008. Print.
- Sasu, Aurel. *Dicționarul scriitorilor români din Statele Unite și Canada*. Bucharest: Albatros, 2001. Print.
- Taylor, John. "The Languages of Alta Iftand". *Words without Borders. The Online Magazine for International Literature*. Web. 13 June 2010.