

Balkan Influences Mirrored in Bucharest's Image as Discovered in Some Romanian Postmodern Novels

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Abstract: The paper justifies the necessity to analyse the Balkan influences that survived in Bucharest's image, despite the dictatorial communist regime and Western influence and the way in which those influences are mirrored in the novels of some of the representative postmodern prose writers such as Mircea Eliade, Constantin Toiu, Mircea Cartarescu, Radu Aldulescu. The analyse is done by using the main theoretical works of Maria Todorova, Tzvetan Todorov, Vesna Goldsworthy or Mircea Muthu as main tools. and underlines the aspects that remodel the ideal shape of Romanian capital city, as a literary image. Postmodernism puts into value all kind of individual "voices", therefore history is reinterpreted by the writer's talent and so is the image of Bucharest.

Key words: Balkan post-modernism, influences, stereotype, remodel

INTRODUCTION

Since Mateiu Caragiale wrote his unique and marvelous *Old Court Libertines* [*Craii de Curtea-veche*] South-Eastern European space has been analyzed through the anthropogeographical constants" as well as through the prism of a common historic destiny which lead to political religious or cultural similarities for the country of the region" [1 – 27] Over time words such as Balkanism, Bakanic acquired meanings and a negative connotation due to a large number of western stereotypes. During the last half of the 20th century Romanian writers reconsidered their attitude concerning the Balkan heritage of their culture and the way in which the Levant is regarded and understood as a mark of national identity, compared to western models. Accompanied by the cohabitation of three cultural strata: archaic, medieval and modern, the Balkan background has been reconsidered lately by many prose writers who relearned their own past and discover the beauty of that type of culture as well as the pride of the Byzantine heritage.

The reconsideration of the Balkan heritage started at the beginning of the 20th century with Nicolea Iorga's *Byzantium after Byzantium* a book in which the scholar analyses the transition from a post Byzantium universalistic culture to national model of national states, the particularities that allowed the penetration of the French influence and with George Calinescu's and Eugen Lovinescu's literary theories. Their attitude leads to a reconsideration of the dichotomy centre-margins that always influenced Romanian culture. At the time started the process meant to change the attitude of those who considered that cultural Europe is one, with no differences and its features are definitely set by Western culture alone and Eastern Europe has the only merit to continue the models set by Western cultural spaces. The 450 years under Ottoman rule Orthodox Christianity lead to a difference in sensitiveness and mentality and as a consequence to a different identity.

Postmodernism and its taste for reinterpreting the past in modern frames, returning to the reassuring classical forms, offered a good opportunity for this reconsideration. Previously rejected, the Balkan heritage started to be considered as mysterious and fascinating, a mark of identity, of otherness.

In order to demonstrate the way in which the Balkan aspects are mirrored in postmodern literature the selected authors are Mircea Eliade, Constantin Toiu, Mircea Cartarescu and Radu Aldulescu. One may be surprised by the fact that Mircea Eliade was selected. Is he really a postmodern writer? According to one of the most important of his analyses Eugen Simion, Eliade's prose has many characteristics of early postmodernism, especially his last short-stories and his main novel *Forbidden Forest*¹. [2].

¹ Mircea Eliade's novel *Notepadă de sănzienă* first translated in French and the English translation actually translated the French title. I suggest as a better a translation *Midsummer Night*, closer to the symbolic value of the original title.

Even if most of the quoted writers use real details to recreate Bucharest Balkan image, what one reads is not a re-creation of deconstructed image of a real town but a rather poetical image of a place ruled by fantasy, legends and myth, brought to life by the author's sensitiveness and nostalgia. What Eliade described, the city in which Toiu's characters or Mircea Cartarescu are walking is a projection of the writer's imagination, according his knowledge about the 17th and the 18th century period.

BUCHAREST – AS A MAIN TOPIC

The process of ruralisation that affected the whole Balkan world, the decline of some old cities as Targoviste (old capital of one of the Romanian medieval states) has turned Bucharest into the single city of the region, the cultural Christian centre of the Balkan world in the 18th century and a large city in the coming time. Consequently the city has become the center of Romanian culture and that is probably the reason why the plot of most of the outstanding novels of the postmodern period of Romanian literature are set in Bucharest. The city has acquired quite a fascinating cosmopolitan character, gradually developing from a small Oriental trade town into a large city where the old Oriental and Byzantine marks are covers by elements of French architecture in the 19th century and modern globalization buildings in the 20th century. The structured oral traditions of rural essence characterizing with the exception of Greek culture, all other South – Eastern cultures, resistant and conservative [3] is shared by the city as well. Lately Chisinau, the capital city of the Moldavian republic seems to turn into a second main urban topic, but Bucharest is still considered to be the main referential point

In the second half of the 19th century the city as well as the whole Romanian society suffered a process of structural modernization which covered the Balkan traces, replaced legends and mythical visions by realistic descriptions. In the late 20th century, during the communist period, human relationship as well as urban structures were ruined, the dichotomy centre margins becoming deeper. Bucharest as the whole country was embedded by a dark and sad atmosphere. Beyond the facts determined by political and economic factors, the city has been transformed by its cultural roots, which includes Balkan identity. In the analyzed work, Bucharest is not just a topic is more then that, it is what modern critics name a chronotop².

Hated or loved, criticized or praised Bucharest is the cradle of some writers' inspiration. Mircea Cartarescu, who often claimed his Balkan origin³ writes about his city an essay which sound like a poem "Joyce has Dublin, Borges, Buenos Aires, Durrell Alexandria, but good Lord what have you give me? None of those mythical cities were given to me" [4 – 85]. The answer to that rhetoric question is quite clear. God gave him Bucharest, which is neither as exotic as Alexandria or Buenos Aires, nor as picturesque as Dublin, but it is his city, having his unique charm and magic atmosphere. As a poet he was fascinated by the "beautiful Levant" which gave the name of one of his outstanding volumes.

MIRCEA ELIADE'S VISION

As he, himself confesses in his Journal, Mircea Eliade used his childhood neighbourhood as a main topic for the short stories written in his exile. A precise number of old streets around the Mantuleasa⁴ street each one with a strange legend going back to the 18th century. In the same work he writes about his deep attachment to his native town⁵. "Setting in Paris and publishing my books in French that did not make me feel that I had

² The term indicates the fact that the suggestion is complex including time and place.

³ Many times and in many essays, novels or short stories Cartarescu tells the story of his mother's family which cross the Danube, due to religious problems and had to come from the Balkans to Romania.

⁴ Mantuleasa is the archaic feminine of a family name Manta, meaning Manta's wife, suggest the fact that this is a place connect to the past.

⁵ The translation of this fragment and that of other quotations are done by the author of the article

lost contact with Romanian culture" [5 – 247] and goes on writing about the fact that he can "see" his city, remember the atmosphere, people and places, even if in exile. The reader can reconstruct the image of the city due to many realistic elements, for example the streets which have real names, some of them being the same today, the chestnuts shadow, the sound of the trams in early summer morning. It is obvious that for Eliade the magic Oriental charm of Bucharest is revealed by hot summer days.

At the same time Eliade's short stories depicted a world in which the reader faces a dichotomy present versus past, actually fantastic versus real. In *The Old Man and the Officer*⁶ as well as *In Dyonissos Courtyard* complicated stories interrupt the main subject as in Oriental fairy tales. The reader learns about the beautiful Arghira, talented, theatre lover, but unfortunately almost blind. She is magically saved by a good witch who is the ancestor of Mantuleasa, the lady who gave the street name. Only some of the characters, those with magic power themselves are aware of the way in which present and past, real and magic mingle in special places, caves or old gardens [6]. One is the old man, former grammar school teacher who knows a lot of those stories, not only that of Arghira, but also that of the rabbi's child that one day disappeared in a cave of an old house on Mosilor Road (real name of a Bucharest main road, realistic detail which makes the story more interesting), or that of Oana a giant girl, whose family comes from the Balkans, south of the Danube.

Eliade tells strange facts which happened before the First World War, facts connected with present day, but actually their roots go deeper into the past. The luxurious structure of the story, typical for the Balkans, hides their magic meaning to those who are not supposed to understand it. The old trees on Bucharest's narrow streets have the same meaning at the image level. The old teacher is a "translator" – he reinterprets the magic facts for the officer, for whom only the real facts seem important, he does not pay attention to their significance. In modern age, when the main stream of the plot takes place, the old man looks as a displaced person. The French and the English name of the short story underlines the opposition between these characters, when the original Romanian title reveals the importance of the place – *Mantuleasa Street*, a symbol of old Balkan Bucharest.

WANDERING ON THE OLD COOVRT LIBERTINE'S FOOTSTEPS

Like Maria Todorova in her famous book *The Balkanism and the Balkans* [7], Constantin Toiu fights against western stereotypes. The city he depicts is charming. He agrees with the mystery and the picturesque, but the image offered is that of a friendly city, gentle, a place where traditions are valued and people are interested in the glory of the past, not a place of violence and conflicts. The writer's main characters of *The Gallery with Wild Wine*⁷, a young writer and an old antiquarian like to walk around, remaking the way described by Mateiu Caragiale's heroes. During their walk they arrive in the middle of old Bucharest, near the Old Court, where one of their friend lives: "They were living in one of those houses on gabroveni, in which you got through a dark and dirty passage. At the ground-floor there were shops, merchandise, warehouses, upstairs there were offices" [8 – 268] then they go on to that part of the city, which according to the author's opinion turns Turkish and Oriental. They are on the right shore of Dambovitza river, an old area, which image is opposed to the so called western image of the large avenues.

The image is a post-modern version of the city face, fragments and pieces, describing small masterpieces of architecture, churches or just anonymous old houses. The writer cuts pieces, deconstruct the image and through those fragments the author recreates another image of the city, not the communist grey one, but a charming city covered by a

⁶ Again the English translation follows the French version *Le vieil Homme et l'officier*. The Romanian original title is *Pe strada Mantuleasa (On Mantuleasa Street)*

⁷ The original title *Galeria cu viță sălbatică* points the fact that the main characters of the novel used to gather in a court-yard, under the Wild Wine.

shell. The beauty of this image is almost magic. In Constantin Toiu's novels *The Gallery with the Wild Wine* as well as in *Obligado*, the main characters talk a lot about all facts and events that marked Bucharest and there is always an position between the past and the present, where the past represents an ideal world. The old antiquarian or the architect JT are witnesses of those past times and share their experience with their younger friends. it is recurring image of a city that no longer exists but can be reconstructed by storytelling.

Almost the same part of the old Bucharest, along the Dambovită was turned by Radu Aldulescu into the setting of one of his best novel *The Old Lady's Lover*⁸. After a longer communist period the town seems to loose its charm and shows a dirty and decomposed face. Human drama is revealed by the ugliness of the old charming part of Bucharest.

Unlike other writers, Radu Aldulescu does not sympathies with his main character who is a projection of all sorts of "bad things" which are considered to be marks for the late communist period. His attitude is due mainly to the Balkan philosophy of "as if" which, despite the dictatorial regime, empowers him with a sense of great inner freedom and the capacity to resist to all kind of restrictive frames and gives the sense of otherness. This attitude is reflected on the city description and the city image is the reflection of that type of mentality.

Radu Adolescent's Bucharest is dirty, is unpleasant and terrifying because people has change it. As a real postmodern chronotop the city mirrors the epoch.

MIRCEA CARTARESCU'S BUCHAREST

As many other famous writers, Mircea Cartarescu seems to be obsessed by his native town, Bucharest. It is the town he hates and loves at the same time, in which he changed himself from a little boy who walks along dusty streets with his mother into a student who discovered the large boulevards of the down town and later into the writer he is today. The dichotomy margins/centre becomes in his case his own self building achievement.

In fact the image of the town becomes the center of the writer universe, a large spiritual centre spreading from the house of his early childhood, an imaginary and real house at the same time, from the Balkan and picturesque town to the contemporary city. He presents a postmodern vision of city fragments which interfere with his creative process. As a postmodern writer Cartarescu uses the image of the town depicted by other writers before him, such as Mateiu Caragiale, Mircea Eliade or Constantin Toiu, but reinterprets them and the town seems to be a huge butterfly, ready to fly by the novelist imaginary wings.[9]. He faces the Balkan image of his native town without any complex, aware of the fact that this is the centre of a magic geography.

When describing Bucharest, Mircea Cartarescu pay attention to all kind of details, old fences, savage gardens, the way in which flowers smell, all kind of an important things, which make the city look so different. His keen eye observes all sort of aspects belonging to the Oriental face or to the western one, details that mangle in order to achieve the unique charm of a city which is considered to be "his Bucharest"⁹, the city he knows so well, loves and hates at the same time. In his description one may find a city like a mosaic where ugly communist block of flats stay close to a beautiful old house with Oriental architecture details and large modern avenues are marked by bookshops, libraries or exhibitions, by place where you can meet a friend or read a book. The author walks start in reality and end in a mythological past, often belonging to a long - time lost archaic period, in search of the assumed Balkan roots or of his personal and artistic identity. The image of a door or an open window marks the passage.

⁸ The Romanian title *Amantul Colivaresei*, suggests the promiscuity of the last period of the communist era.

⁹ In the volume *Always young and wrapped in pixels (Pururi tânăr înfășurat în pixeli)*, the title of one of the essays is *My Bucharest. (Pururi tânăr înfășurat în pixeli, Humanitas, Bucuresti 2003, pag 14)*

According to John Lye, Postmodernism can be defined a writing of "reflexive" or meta fiction, fiction which is in the first instance aware of itself as fiction and which may *dramatize the false or constructed nature of fiction*, on the one hand, or the inevitable fictionality of all experience, on the other" [10, p. 4], a deep reflexive attitude explains Cartarescu's vision. His image is subjective, but the reader is invited share the writer experience and to understand or to reject that vision. Actually this attitude makes Cartarescu's books so post modern and so rich in symbols.

CONCLUSIONS

The author's intention to look for a Balkan influence and Byzantine roots in the work of some of the most important Romanian postmodern prose writers is challenging but rewarding task, because there is quite difficult to use the tools of scientific research and accuracy on a territory belonging to fantasy. The analysis tried to demonstrate that in some novels of some Romanian postmodern writers the reader may discover an other face of Bucharest, a old Balkan friendly environment, hidden under the modern global face of the contemporary city. This is a image that the sensitivity of a writer can reveal to his readers.

At the beginning of a new millennium Romanian culture is still searching for its identity between the Balkan heritage, the Western influence of the 19th century and contemporary globalisation. How much do we owe to the Oriental past and how much to our Latin origin? In contemporary times, geographical boundaries are no longer considered important – but the imaginary boundary between East and West is still a challenge and that is where the magic of art and literature can help to overcome it.

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