Cultures in Translation

Translated Peripherality in György Dragomán and Radu Pavel Gheo's Fiction

Mihaela Ursa

As far as contemporary fiction is concerned, the idea of national literature is more than problematic. Are contemporary writers really national writers? Can we define their topics, subjects and even approaches as "specifically" national? The idiom they use remains integral to their national language, or maybe it is an untranslatable form of global communication? In order to explore such questions and to connect nationality with translatability, I shall take a closer look at two contemporary writers, György Dragomán and Radu Pavel Gheo, who present the particular case of writing from multicultural pockets of what is identified as national literature.

Apparently, their artistic identities have been shaped into different mindsets by different national contexts and even ideologies (Hungarian and Romanian). Nevertheless, their fictions, and—to some extent—their biographies, share enough features to encourage identification with a type of community, more specifically with a shared peripherality conditioned by translation and a never-ending negotiation of cross-cultural intersections. Born and educated in Western Romania, where national borders have changed a few times during the last century, the authors belong to very culturally diverse collectivities, and it is this diversity that shaped their creativity. I contend that their fictions, always telling of entangled histories of individuals and communities, exhibit a sense of belonging to a translational and a transnational culture rather than to national ones. The way in which they use characters, stories, styles, polyglossia, irony and parody, counteracts national and nationalist attempts at a totalizing narrative, shaping an imagined, peripheral Europe where totalitarianism and plurality are faces of the same coin.

While being a preliminary mandatory condition of translation and cultural sharing, contact is not sufficient for either to happen. Cultural contact does not necessarily bring interference[1] right away, but, in order for an interference to take place, there must exist a clear "desire for change," which "may promote a favorable attitude towards occurrences in another society, with the help of which, if transferred, one can hope to get away from an undesired situation."[2] In Even-Zohar's account, systems are not created equal

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and their distribution shows different degrees of stability and sensitivity to interference. Peripheral systems are more likely to allow for durable interference, more often than central ones:

> *With closer, more intimate contacts between communities, like those between Polish and Ukrainian populations in the Eastern Austro-Hungarian Empire, one wonders whether separatist national ideologies have not blinded us to the interference that has in fact taken place.*[3]

That being said, the existence of contact zones, especially in Eastern Europe, often remains strictly geographical, paradoxically coupled with strong resistance to inter-crossings. This is something that should be kept in mind, because it constitutes the main obstacle in the way of "sharing" a periphery and the main argument in favor of national cultural protectionism. However, the selected authors first belong to translational cultures because of the instability of their microcultures, highly susceptible to create communication bridges and negotiated equivalences in order to validate functional social and cultural affirmation.

A common topos in the narratives of both Gheo and Dragomán is an "internally colonized" world, much in the sense defined by Alexander Etkind with reference to the Russian model, as a world where "the state colonized its people."[4] The imposition of a monocultural, but very vague and fluid idea of a nation is met with resistance from the small, personal, forgotten or secret stories. As for the meaning of the "transnational" in this article, it is useful to remember Vertovec's takes on the notion: "as social morphology, as type of consciousness, as mode of cultural reproduction, as avenue of capital, as site of political engagement, and as (re)construction of 'place' or locality."[5] Of these, understanding the transnational as a *type of consciousness* and a *reconstruction of locality* are most significantly illustrated by the two authors.

As systems, national states tend to minimize heterogeneity, and this has most interesting results with regard to their literatures, as the desired continuity between national language, culture and country is never without problems. In the case of Eastern-European countries, ethnic heterogeneity was often recognized by national politics as an exotic variation from the ethno-norm, and the different cultural communities were given a peripheral, weak voice in the national choir. This is all the more interesting when considering the fact that Eastern-European countries as such have their own particular "in-between peripherality,"[6] with regard to both "the Great Europe" and the Western culture, on one hand, and to Russia and the Eastern values, on the other.

The transnational conversation is best illustrated by the case of the former Yugoslavia, a national unit that was in fact built as a multicultural and multinational conglomerate. Radu Pavel Gheo's novel *Disco Titanic*[7] narrates on the decomposition of this multi-nation as individual micro-communities reignite their hard feelings in segregationist claims for the same world, putting aside their idea of sharing the same periphery of Europe. As Snejana Ung demonstrates, the post-Yugoslavian system invites more than one systemic literary approach, depending on how the examination focuses on war representations, the dislocation topoi, on continuations of the Yugoslavian literary traditions or on the worlding possibilities of former national literatures. To Ung,[8] it is not the approaches

themselves that make a transnational system, but their *interconnection*, their common partake to the transnational renegotiation of literary positions. In this view, one can contend that the very plurality of approaches means to opt for the transnational, given the variations of frames, vantage points and methodologies proposed to replace the single frame national literary history.

A few concepts linked to national literature need clarification in this context, such as *the minor*, *the weak* and *the identical*. The notional category of *the minor* helps linking culture to nation in specific circumstances. *The minor* here

> *designates a lack of political agency and cultural significance, when compared to a major nation. The "minor" nation thus shares the same categories of definition as the major nation and participates in the same fantasies of power and significance; it simply fails where the major succeeds. . . . The minor is not a failed state or a potentially great one, but a translated nation.*[9]

For the purposes of this article, I shall not go into the intricacies deriving from *how* a minor nation has been minoritized, focusing on the result: the minor literature lacks agency and authority within its respective inclusive, major, systems. The argument of *the minor* is all the more important when looking at peripheral micro-communities and cultures within the national ones, because it automatically describes their conditions within the macro-system of the national literature(s) which claim them. In this sense, Dragomán pertains to a community of creation that has been minoritized within both the Romanian literature via the geographical argument (as authors "of Hungarian expression"), and the Hungarian literature via the language and tradition argument (as "displaced Hungarian writers"). Surely, in his case, the relocation to Hungary blurs the connections to the first macro-system, but the mechanism of this double-way minoritizing is accurately defined.

A second useful notion comes from poly-systems theory: *the weak*. As it applies to cultures and literatures, it properly describes the state of Eastern-European cultures, which are

> *established literatures whose resources are limited and whose position within a larger literary hierarchy is generally peripheral . . . such literatures . . . may also "lack" a repertoire which is felt to be badly needed vis-à-vis, and in terms of the presence of, [a larger] adjacent literature. This lack may then be filled, wholly or partly, by translated literature. . . . the ability of such "weak" literatures to initiate innovations is often less than that of the larger and central literatures, with the result that a relation of dependency may be established not only in peripheral systems, but in the very center of these "weak" literatures.*[10]

According to the latter, creation and innovation in weak literatures are greatly dependent on the position they allow translated literature within their own literary system, but also on what position the weak literatures gain within their respective macro-systems: if weak literatures give translated literature a high, central position, innovation is more probable, but if they keep translated literature as a peripheral system, their own creative

and innovative powers fade and a relation of dependency affects the core of the literary system. Too complex to properly analyze in this paper, multicultural communities are contexts of ongoing translation, since their members navigate daily between languages, micro-cultural identities and easily float from one to the other, starting from how they speak in a polyglot mixture of dialects and linguistic adaptations to how they imagine one's own place in the world. From this perspective, I find Radu Pavel Gheo's fictions to be inclusive of the translational flows intrinsic to his education in Western Romania.

I come to the question of *peripherality* only to add and underline that I understand spatiality "in a highly active and politically enabling manner,"[11] and not only in a geographical or even cultural meaning. As such, peripheral "locations of culture"[12] are very often sources of revitalization for national literatures[13] and manifest higher mobility (some say creativity) due to their meta- or trans-national position. It is with respect to this higher mobility that Christian Moraru and Andrei Terian[14] speak of "marginocentric nodes," where the binarity of the Eastern-Western dynamics is not completely absent, but "loose," flexible, allowing

> *for a stretching out of the cultural-historic fabric that, in a particular knot or node (Banat's main city of Timişoara, Banat itself, or Romania), "blows up" almost photographically and thus brings into view a complexity of texture, shape, and color, a worldedness that, back at the "strong" artistic and academic center (Vienna, Austria, Paris, or France), may be elusive, invisible, and, in extreme situations, inexistent.*[15]

The reconstructed spaces in the narratives of Gheo and Dragomán fit within this definition of blow-up multiculturality, both under the aspect of their marginocentricity and their flexibility.

One more notion needs to be carefully addressed, that of *identity*. It is in itself problematic and suspicious, now more than ever: on one hand, globalization drives identities to uniformity, and mobility erases borders and cultural specificities; on the other, communities express social and cultural desires to identify themselves (as opposed to being identified by others) as entities, either in violent refusal of the other, or in interdependence. I would argue in favor of a new design of identity formation that has at its core performativity, more precisely *translation* as linguistic, cultural and social mediation. The act of translating today has become constitutive for the new type of migrant, multinational self that replaces more and more the utopia of a national identity. For the new generations of educated Romanians, for instance, who spend much of their university years in European mobilities, *living in translation* is more familiar than living at home. For the millions of Romanians who work in Western Europe or in the rest of the world, while not giving up home-related nostalgias, *translated life* is a new form of existence.

MORE POSITIONS than one are possible in contemporary literary practice with regard to translation and its ongoing negotiation of cultural meaning and value. First, we can identify national writers who are translated because of their cultural prestige and their appeal to more types of publics (such as Mircea Cărtărescu), or because of branded expectations of foreign publics (such as Dan Lungu, who thoroughly

imports his professional training as a sociologist in his choices as a writer). Second, there come exilic writers, claiming belonging or resisting it, associated in the name of their common approach (in spite of their artistic individualities) to nostalgia topics, fantasies of "motherland," investment in displacement narratives at all levels, trauma narratives, relocation, reappropriation of reality, acculturation, enculturation, assimilation or other probable outcomes of their migrating status. Finally, the best position to look at how transnational affirmations emerge, for the purposes of this demonstration, is from within the literatures of contact zones, or marginocentric nodes, represented by writers such as Radu Pavel Gheo and György Dragomán. Their narrative worlds give a different meaning to the idea of minor and weak floating identity, to the "fuzziness" of cultural specificity. The instability of identities is here a direct result of intercrossing, shared histories, and of multicultural histories and spaces. The marginocentric nodes are hubs of translated lives and microcultures, because they make it impossible for national hegemonies to function unperturbed or even to impose their norms.

Apart from a set of symmetries between their biographies (both born and educated in multicultural communities of Romania, both translators and graduates of humanities, both relocated in some sort of migrant move, both very well received by public and critics alike), the two chosen authors show different artistic choices, but still manage to communicate a sense of shared peripherality. The metanarratives the two authors put in place, their ongoing negotiations and translations, are encouraged and contextualized by certain topics, which can be, in their turn, associated with transnationality. The end of innocence, political upsets, geographical and cultural relocations, and other forms of turning points and big moves with regard to a given condition, status or space of belonging, are defining topoi in the two authors' fictions. A lot of narrative energy is devoted by both authors to spatiality and to the spatialization of national geography, transnational aspirations, ruptures between communities and territories, but also to fractures in history (the fall of the Iron Curtain, the separation of former Yugoslavia), as well as to theories and propaganda guiding peoples apart (conspiracies in Gheo's novels or imaginary enemies in Dragomán's).

In his *Noapte bună, copii!* (Good night, children!)[16] and *Disco Titanic*, Gheo mixes the stories of a group of childhood friends in communist Romania, more precisely in the Romanian Western region of Banat, dreaming to escape to the "real West," to the free world. Preoccupied with how political change is negotiated individually, Gheo concentrates on the Romanian political turmoil of the nineties and on the ex-Yugoslavian fracture of their communist state, playing on flashbacks and back-and-forth moves between narration times. Circumventing the danger of trying to tell a general, totalizing (and inherently national) story of postcommunist disillusionment and hope, Gheo gives very personal, autobiographically loaded, individualized accounts of these changes of the big history by focusing on the area he knows best. In a very similar manner, although with less autobiographical input, György Dragomán also targets, in his *A fehér király* (2005) (The white king)[17] and *Máglya* (2014) (The bone fire),[18] the trauma inflicted on family lives by political intervention. In the center of the first novel stands a family destroyed by communist repression, while the second one follows a lost grandmother and granddaughter reconnecting on the background of intra-community civil conflict. With

Dragomán, who relocated with his family, as a teenager, away from his home, telling the story from a child's perspective serves his play on unsettled narrations, punctuated by affective overloads.

Memory narratives have a lot to gain from having children or teenagers as main characters, who are in themselves fluid identities and floating between possibilities of existence. On the one side, children perfectly fit the role of unreliable narrators favored by transnational perspectives. On the other, they allow the intervention of irony, parody, mimicry in the fictional discourse, very much in line with the unsettledness of the non-linear, non-chronological narrative of the transnations.

Typologically speaking, *Good Night, Children!* is part and parcel of a well-illustrated lot, that of the coming-of-age narratives. But beyond that, one cannot miss the author's investment in defining an entire generation via a material memory-database. It is in the materiality of this database that one transnational trait comes to the fore:

> *They followed the Western musical top hits on Yugoslavian radios and they tried to stay connected to the World Beyond, to the West. They wore Yugoslavian clothes or things you could buy at the famous* ***ocsko*** *in Timişoara . . . They had* ***punk*** *and* ***new romantic*** *hairdos or they wore their hair long, rocker style, risking a haircut from the police or the stricter teachers in schools. They exchanged cassettes and tapes of poor recordings of LP-s that others—the lucky ones—managed to get from abroad. They pretended to smoke (most of them were going to become real smokers), and they used to buy a pack of Yugoslavian cigarettes now and then, whose package looked so much more elegant than the porous paper in which Romanian cigarettes were shoved.*[19]

Almost to the letter, the quoted description follows the collage-like techniques of identity formation which authors have noticed in *transnational migrant fiction*.[20] However, the possibility of transnational affirmation within what is traditionally seen as national literature undergoes less scrutiny than the explicitly migrant standpoint. This erasure or absence becomes even more important when taking into account the fact that *being a migrant* is an aspirational aim to the characters seeking escape in the two authors' narratives.

The great Beyond is the absolute aim for Gheo's teenagers in Teicova, even after they see their dream come true and get to the United States of America. The home they left behind and their age of innocence turns into a second great Beyond, as soon as their illusions are shattered abroad. The topic of fleeing over the border has this transnational ease about it, because the Beyond itself is elusive, it moves and changes shape as the characters' destinies unfold.

An entire transnational geography is mapped in the novel, from the eccentric travels of the four friends to the West and respectively, to Eastern Romania, to their American and Western-European tribulations. With a comical nod to the instability of world borders, Gheo also graphically maps a route for the disguised Saint Peter and God himself trotting the earth as two old men, leaving behind a trace of minty flavor, as well as a devilish red route for their hellish counterpart, also involved in the present time of narration. But the geography that is most extended and freely manifested in the novel is the imagined one, residing in the memory-database quoted above. Aspiring to become citizens of the free

world, the teenagers in Teicova use pieces of music, clothing, imported foods, music, books, magazines, as identity transporters fueled by their power of imagination, as well as building blocks for a world much larger than their ethnic or national homes.

A similar thing happens in Dragomán's *The Bone Fire*, but on a smaller scale. A grandmother and a granddaughter remake an entire lost space and time with their collection of objects and with help from some white magic, unintentionally summoning a whole lot of hatred and intra-community tension. With regards to this novel, his author claims in an interview that it dwells on silence. However, in the same interview he contends that this silence is in fact hiding the fruits of a "collector's conscience." He describes how, before leaving the country as he knew they were about to, he tried to train his memory to take in as much as possible:

> *Every night of those two years, before I went to sleep, I thought about what I had seen that day and about how I could narrate it. This way, the town [Târgu-Mureş] got into my head. . . . I much rather liked the idea of the town in my head, a town that became my fictional home. This space is connected both to Târgu-Mureş, and to the little town where we moved in Hungary, in the Western part of the country, next to the Austrian border—in our first years there, the memories I had brought with me from Romania were projected onto this new space. Both towns have led me to a new one, that I have built step by step and that I intimately know and see, so well that I could draw its map.*[21]

While in Gheo's novel this remapping of the world in a transnational way is implicit, in this excerpt from Dragomán's confession, spatial reconstruction becomes explicit in relation to one's own displacement from their former life. More than that, there is a certain sense that "training" to remember, schooling one's memory with regard to one's shared peripherality, can turn into an enabling condition for the ability to imagine oneself worlded.

In their novels, both Radu Pavel Gheo's and György Dragomán's own experiences as citizens of shared peripheries and marginocentric nodes come into play. The narrators are involved in the experience of remapping the world in a manner that looks very similar to the involvement of exilic writers in their reappropriation narratives. But this is where the analogy ends, because for diaspora writers displacement very often creates trauma and writing means alleviating the pain of not being able to answer questions of identity and belonging. For transnational writers of the category explored here however, displacement is the very condition of identity formation, as is translation, both in its linguistic sense and its sense as negotiation of meaning and symbolic capital.

To the Haïtian-born Canadian writer Joël Des Rosiers, there is a need to change the idea of diaspora, a "word heavily loaded with ancestral anguish,"[22] replacing it with the more contemporaneity-proper *métaspora*, which he defines as "the digital perversion of nostalgia" whom he dubs intrinsically literary, because *nostalgia*, just like literature, preserves against death: nostalgia

> *is reversible and allows you to go back in time looking for that state of origin without which one cannot re-enchant the present time. It is devised to allow you to escape a mediocre now*

> *by reconnecting with a splendid* ***then****. It empowers identities who have been weakened by the computational globalization to relieve their existential anxieties, a sort of artificial repair of traditions and rituals of cultural belonging.*[23]

I find the beautiful wording of his connection between nostalgia and literature misleading (as it implies a sort of passé overcompensation), so I would rather focus on how Des Rosiers disavows diaspora as a form of totalizing narrative and instead proposes a Borgesian spatio-temporality:

> *Lighter, formed with slices of life instead of linear narratives, metaspora measures the distance between intimates and intimacy, as it is also a marker of the unexpected intimacy of distance, whether geographical, temporal or cultural. . . . If the idealistic and romantic concept of diaspora is rooted in real or fantasized memories, by virtue of remembering a loss of origin, the concept of metaspora aims to* ***make the future become present*** *[emphasis added]. The writer enriches his intimacy with the places where he lives or has lived, as long as he keeps an exquisite consciousness of his dignity as a suffering foreigner. Places, faces, artifacts, all are 'intimates homelands' that he carries with him wherever he goes.*[24]

It is in this *lightness* of remembering and this *sampling* of different materialities while remembering that the metasporic subject gets built.

In a similar manner, Patrick Chamoiseau, the Martinique-born French writer, makes use of the same term, *metaspora*, well before Des Rosiers, to reconsider the issues of conceptualizing "negritude." Less metaphorical in discourse, Chamoiseau contends that, given the present state of migration and population fluidity, questions of *independence* and *nationality* have been, as they should be, replaced by that of *interdependence*. The intricacies of this reconsideration are, however, amplified by the fact that our recent pasts have been shaped by our ability to self-identify by division from others and we are now forced to rethink relationally, as beings "belonging to the same world":

> *The big nationalist movements, based on ruptures—"my God, my skin, my language, my borders"—these are . . . not well adapted to the contemporary world. . . . we must today invent something which goes beyond the nation state, to the* ***"meta-nation"*** *[emphasis added]. A "meta-nation"—a relational nation—is something which legally, politically and economically, must be imagined. . . . For me independence is the mastery of our interdependences.*[25]

An unlikely illustration of Chamoiseau's words is at work in Gheo's novel *Disco Titanic,* where the writer proposes a narration centered on fracture, much in the way Dragomán chooses civil and ethnic fracture to build his *Bone Fire*. Vlad from the present day of the narrative, 2011, is a successful businessman with a dark secret and a wish to restore the evanescent Republic of Banat, shortly lived in 1918. The flashbacks to his youth in 1989, to a Yugoslavia boiling with inter-ethnic tension and segregationist aspirations, create a context in which individual ties are linked together in an overarching story of hatred, as Vlad's wife, Emilia, points out in her furious rant:

> *Independent Banat. Independent Croatia. We're sick of the bastards that rule over us, we want to be free, we can take care of ourselves. Let's get rid of the others, let's kill them. 'cause it all comes down to that: kill. Kill a man, kill one hundred, it does not matter, it is for… for the country, for honor, for whatever! . . . You gather your own gang, you beat people up, you kill, go to war, protect your fatherland, your country, you protect your women, nothing matters! That's what you do! You like it. You get all pumped up all of a sudden. You have no idea what is going on.*[26]

The narrow-minded nationalisms are implicitly opposed, in *Disco Titanic,* to the possibility of a metalocation and metanation in tune with Chamoiseau's understanding. What should be underlined in the "meta" turn of Chamoiseau's proposal is the mandatory task of self-reflection. Both Gheo and Dragomán place a great deal of importance on self-reflection as a pre-condition of any transnational redistribution of memory narrations.

As a privileged condition of translation, peripherality defines micro-literatures or, respectively, conditions literary productions of multicultural communities. There is also a methodological advantage in looking at the peripherality of different literatures created in micro-communities, since the latter illuminate features of the national, centric literatures by contrast. Being a migrant, whether exilic, diasporic, metasporic, or otherwise, means to already place oneself as a negotiator, interpreter and traffic guide of literary relations between center and periphery. Being "born translated" does not always mean becoming a migrant or being a "citizen of the world," but sometimes it infers being born and educated "in-between," in a contact zone, in a marginocentric node, as a citizen of an "accented world,"[27] defined by mobility and connection, multiple cultural and linguistic formations, new nomadism.

To sum up more methodically, there are a number of approaches available for a systemic view on the particular set of contemporary writers whose peripherality stems from their belonging to a contact zone or to a marginocentric node. The most functional approaches manage to match the authors' metapositions with some form of self-reflection on the conditions and the modes of cultural and literary investigation. One of the most widely used already in literary studies has to do with poly-system theory and different contentions on the center-periphery dialectic. Another productive conceptualization is that of "entangled histories,"[28] in the sense Werner and Zimmermann give to their comparative approach linking transfer studies to the sociological reconsideration of nationhood after 1989. Finally, a seminal method is based on the tradition of repurposing Adorno's "constellation" from his two *Dialectics* (already reworking Benjamin's proposal of the term indicating the nature of ideas being both subjective and objective). In the light of the transnational repositioning of cultures, founding a systemic understanding of literature on *constellations of reading* (few close readings on very few objects) would allow the development of a non-hierarchical world literature, and a clear shift from the national frame to the transnational one. More to my point, this self-reflective approach points to a metalocation, to a discourse on how the event of literature is singular and to how it makes relational sense in an explanatory narrative that includes being aware of the modes of narration, as well as of the investigative manner.

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Notes

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16. Radu Pavel Gheo, *Noapte bună, copii!* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2010).
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19. Gheo, *Noapte bună, copii!*, 74.
20. For this, see Kai Wiegandt, "Transnational Migrant Fiction As World Literature: Identity, Translatability, and the Global Book Market," in *The Transnational in Literary Studies: Potential and Limitations of a Concept*, edited by Kai Wiegandt (Berlin–Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 206–207.
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Abstract

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This paper aims to address a frame shift in literary studies from the national literatures approach to the transnational systems approach. While it employs several available standpoints and methodologies (polysystem theory, *histoires croisées*, metalocation analysis, transnational literary mapping), conceding to their usefulness in systemic reading of contemporary literature, the research concentrates on two case studies, more precisely on novelists Radu Pavel Gheo and György Dragomán, who both emerge from cultural contact zones and imagine shared communities in their fictions. The paper discusses how literary topoi, narrative techniques, memory negotiations and self-reflection contribute to the transnational character of such writings and argue in favor of a translational reconsideration of these authors that could be duplicated in other readings of similar authors.

Keywords

contemporary novel, minor literatures, transnational, translational, cultural contact zone