Cultural Association and Spiritual Dissociation in Petru Popescu's *Întoarcerea and Supleantul*

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The present paper examines the complex relationship between cultural association and spiritual dissociation in the works of expat author Petru Popescu. While it has often been argued that Popescu has perfectly adapted to the American publishing market by internalizing American cultural values, the interviews he conducted in Romania, as well as his novels in Romanian, which are far more complex than his American ones, speak for a different reality. What I have attempted to show is that Petru Popescu not only did not spiritually abandon Romania, but that his most complex works are tied to Romanian cultural, emotional and linguistic realities.

Keywords: Petru Popescu, culture, expat literature, bilingual writers, communism

In the aftermath of his decision to permanently move to the USA, as a result of the scholarship awarded to him by the University of Iowa, Petru Popescu made a decision not only regarding his future residence, but also regarding his cultural, social, and ideological belonging. His escape from communist Romania signified a breach on many levels: political, intellectual, and even sentimental, considering the novelist's decision to end his relationship with Zoia Ceaușescu, as the author himself confesses, out of fear of her father: "I broke up with Zoia because I feared Ceaușescu"[1]. The departure was by no means an easy one – a proof in this respect being the novel *Supleantul*, written in Romanian, which marks the author's return to his mother tongue after a break of more than thirty years. The symbiotic relationship with the Romanian language is of crucial importance for the complex understanding of Petru Popescu's status, both as an author and as an expat. This is what the author states regarding his relationship with the Romanian language:

> Everything that is related to remembering Romania, generally speaking, even if I do not always realize if I indeed am articulating words while dreaming, is in Romanian and is very vivid. I have sometimes dreamed about smells, I have dreamed about Bucharest's humidity, that I had forgotten in California. And there have been numerous times when I dreamed about my father, actually I continue dreaming about him. All these dreams unfold in Romanian. However, something interesting is happening. All that I dream about in connection to my children, who are not born in Romania, I dream in English, but I sometimes have dreams in which me, my brother Pavel, and my children are of the same age. We are walking

> together on a beach, and it seems like we are not on another continent, or in another country. These are pieces of me and they unfold in a sort of celestial Romania where we are all children. I believe I am transferring my children's childhood, which has not happened in Romania, into a Romania of the fantasy realm. We do not talk, we walk. I speak Romanian to my father in my dreams. My father had an expression. When he started explaining something, he used to say, as a conclusion: "Simple." I sometimes hear this utterance in my dreams, and I wake up in the morning with a sort of determination, as if I had just solved something and were moving on to the next step.[2]

We can observe from this confession that the novelist did not only keep his connection with the Romanian language, but also with everything Romania stands for regarding the memories of his life here. The dream, a profound expression of the subconscious, grants him access to the places and personages he left behind, simultaneously stirring melancholy and bringing inner peace. It is quite obvious that Petru Popescu never abandoned Romania mentally and spiritually, not from a cultural, not from an intellectual, and certainly not from a sentimental point of view. His escape from his home country left him with a certain feeling of loss, of incompleteness, of fragmentation – we are referring here to experiences he was not able to have directly or to transfigure ideologically, and the shadows of which are still cast over his present identity. Such experiences are the death of his father and of his twin brother, the funerals of whom he could not attend:

> I have felt all the negative emotions. I felt very guilty, then I was, a thing which rarely happens to me, quite confused, asking myself if I had done the right thing by leaving. I could not attend my twin brother's funeral, because he dies of polio and I was quarantined. It is as if these big goodbyes made me constantly search for them in life. Regarding my brother it often happens to me, while I am in Bucharest, that I somehow wait for him to appear. At a traffic light, at a street corner, I often felt like my brother could have been in that place, at that moment. And after my father passed away, I did everything in my power to find a book manuscript he had left behind, containing theatre play reviews. I only managed to do this in 1992.[3]

The feelings of guilt and of confusion are the echo of his spiritual association with Romania, in spite of his physical dissociation from it. No individual who is completely spiritually dissociated from his home country would feel guilty or would ethically weigh the decision of permanently leaving the country. Petru Popescu's return to Romania happened, as we can see, not only after a physical absence of thirty years, but it unfolded also on a spiritual and mental level, numerous times, as a process of conscience. It was often stated that the novelist managed to perfectly integrate himself into American society and culture, and has never regretted leaving Romania. His above quoted statements seem to contradict this hypothesis. We cannot deny the fact that Petru Popescu has successfully adapted to the American publishing market, out of necessity, we might state, rather than out of an authentic desire to do so. We can note a significant stylistic difference between his Romanian novels, much more complex, and those written in English, obviously conceived according to the traditional bestseller, popular novel pattern. Writing in English, however, also had its undeniable advantages, as the author himself confesses: "For my new career as a writer in the Romanian language, I have learned certain things not from the English language, but from the act of writing in America. Pragmatism, film, screen-writing, conciseness, clarity of expression. If you express nuances and ambiguity, it should be clear that you are expressing nuances and ambiguity."[4] Cultural association and dissociation therefore had an equivalent also in the linguistic sphere: the association with the English language in order to survive on the American publishing market, and the simultaneous dissociation from it through the return to his mother tongue:

> What language does Petru Popescu think in? I believe he simultaneously thinks in both. I managed to think and write in English as swiftly as in Romanian, but to reach this point I needed many years of practice. In the beginning I was not bilingual. I spoke very good, academic, cultivated, English, I had translated great novelists' works from English into Romanian, but my English was not as organically practiced to be able to say that I used it in the same way I used Romanian. Not by a long shot. The process was not long, but it was arduous. Working in the film industry was a great help, it was an extraordinary way to stimulate me to work faster, to pile up experiences quickly. After a while, your brain starts to establish certain synonymies. There is a linguistic theory that states that languages are in fact systems of synonyms. In English you have the same words, experiences, feelings, logical schools. There are very few words which exist only in one language or the nuances between them are so fine that they cannot be multiplied. For example, the Romanian term "dor" has equivalents in all languages but everyone claims that in other languages it does not represent the exact same emotion. Otherwise, languages are a good tool for expressing human depths.

> Regarding the extraordinary year of my escape, which is now very present in my mind, I now fantasize about re-writing *Supleantul* in English, probably under the title *The Disident*, or *The Last Disident*. That would be a very interesting process because a certain charm and humour implicit in the Romanian language is based on the fact that there is a certain secret society and a solidarity of generations as well as a certain outlook on sexuality, which is typical for Bucharest. I have revisited all these nuances in Romanian, they are delicious, and I have not forgotten any of them. [5]

Petru Popescu has encountered, like most of the writers who chose or were forced by circumstances to write in a language other than their mother tongue, the difficulty of expressing experiences and emotions closely tied to his culture of origin in a foreign language, the hidden sensitivities of which, as much as one might master the language, will remain out of your reach. That "I have not forgotten any of them", ripe in significances, proves the strong ties, the spiritual association that the novelist still has with Romania. Those human depths Popescu refers to are nothing more than individual consciousness, which sets him apart from others, and makes him unique.

His diary *The Return (Întoarcerea)* is also a chief example of association versus dissociation on a spiritual level. As Dinu Bălan states, the diary "registers the workings of an individual and artistic activity with symbolic value (subversive survival and the exile of a successful author) encompassed by the terrifying experience of the communist system."[6] Consequently, Petru Popescu's diary is nothing more than the desperate attempt of the ego to achieve reunification after the experience of exile and division inflicted upon it by living abroad. Simultaneously the diary becomes a means of voicing and working out, on the level of the consciousness, the experience of having one's individuality crushed by a totalitarian regime. The diary is still fighting for its place within the high ranks of literature, Eugen Simion argues in his „Ficțiunea jurnalului intim – Există o poetică a jurnalului?" („Fictionality in the Intimate Diary – Towards a Poetics of the Diary?"): "Only in the last decades, narratologists, sociologists and literary historians have focused closely on this niche, have discovered its roots and have tried to establish a poetics of it. At first sight this seems rather strange, because what poetics can there be where there are no rules, and not even halfway coherent organization of the text?"[7] Eugen Simion also holds that this genre will be debated upon for a long time to come and its aesthetic justification will be searched for.

Written at a thirty year distance from his experience of Ceaușescu's Romania, and six years after his return to his home country, *Întoarcerea* combines personal and collective history, the public and the private. The author's personal history never becomes bothersome or sensationalist, but mingles harmoniously and coherently with the collective history of a nation branded by the communist regime. The novel's leitmotiv, the obsessive "Listen to me" („Ascultă-mă!") is not only addressed to the reader, invited to take part in the internal universe of a spiritually and culturally divided author, but also to the very creative consciousness, to the narrative persona, encouraged to undertake the same journey back in time in an objective, courageous and complex manner. In other words, the author encourages himself to listen to his inner voice, the only one capable of telling the story that needs to be told. It is a call for authenticity, for courage, for introspection:

> Identifying a voice, isolating it from the noise of other past voices, means capturing the right tone for telling a story. Searching for the right narrative tone is of primary importance, in order to convey the impression that what is being told is truthful. Petru Popescu is not a disident, he is not a hero. The narrator repeats this aspect numerous times. But he is a voice sensitive to the times he has lived. Petru Popescu resembles the protagonist of the movie America, America by Eliza Kaza, due to his ingenuity, idealism, and thirst for freedom in hard times. The reference is called upon in the novel, as a guiding point for the similarities between the character Petru Popescu and the movie's protagonist. [8]
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> (translated by M. Ciocoi-Pop)

The Return is not only geared towards a readership that has had direct contact with communism, but also to those "associated" with the events on view. At the same time, it is a book for those "dissociated" from these realities - that is the American public. From this point of view Petru Popescu's journal becomes an extremely interesting cultural phenomenon: it is the author's attempt to establish and trace a distinct Romanian identity within the American cultural space, it is a simultaneous process of both association and dissociation. 'His Romanian background is his most intimate identity"[9]. However, this heterogeneity is not uncommon in the American cultural space. Thus, the author's mission becomes quite difficult: to establish a distinct, powerful and interesting voice for himself within a cultural, literary and publishing space in which cultural diversity is not unusual. "Spending two halves of his public and very successful life in Romania and the USA, Popescu reveals the torturing conflicts that hide behind appearances. In the process he reveals to us the complicated connections between Psyche and history, as well as his aspirations towards the Whole

and Healing", said Andrei Codrescu[10]. This Whole, this Healing are only possible by using a complete and shocking sincerity – in the end, *The Return* is also the accomplishment of the author's career as a journalist.

In *The Return* the author's personal destiny is linked symbiotically to Romania's collective destiny, thus resulting in an individual dissociation and a collective association. The association relies heavily on the readership, acting force and direct participant in the events happening in communist Romania. The dissociation also affects Petru Popescu's public image: in his youth he came across as a popular writer, who became wealthy off of copyright and famous due to his relation to Zoia Ceauşescu, a sort of VIP of Romanian literature. These personal myths are shattered in *The Return* – novel that becomes the voice of an extreme sensibility and vulnerability:

The author expresses the hurt feelings of a conflicted I, born from the tensions and unhappiness accumulated behind the bars of a totalitarian system. Recovering his roots (the metaphor is a powerful one) that were severed once he left Romania becomes a priority. Honesty (one of the book's assets) is searched for and as much as we try to delineate the narrative I from the subtextual one, we can't succeed, because the author selects some true, powerful, and exemplary feelings, governed by vulnerability. These confessions to not tackle a certain type of intimacy (sexual or secret) typical to successful journals, because the subject of this book is a spiritual "return" to one's own origins, a path towards the innermost and profound center of the self.[11]

Due to this complete honesty the journal seems to centre both the reader and the author in midst of the happenings, as they participate directly in the recounted events. Thus, the principle of spontaneity is mimicked skilfully. Petru Popescu is an asserted devotee of authenticity, his novels being composed vastly of real life experiences. Nonetheless, even though it may seem simple to render an objective and realistic experience that is exterior to the self, the process of describing inner emotions or a spiritual universe, on the other hand, is complicated. Thirty years distance can become a binding agent between memory, melancholy, and affective imagination and as such, recounting events may become rather fictional than realistic. This is not the case of Petru Popescu.

The journal is also based on two karmic coordinates, as the author calls them: the author's experiences with the totalitarian state, on the one hand, and his wife, Iris Friedman's on the other. Communism and fascism become two different facets of the same coin: the perversion of a political system that obliterates the very essence of individuality. Popescu's return to his past sufferings facilitates his understanding the distress of others and places him within the collective, global experience of pain.

As far as the novel *Supleantul* is concerned, one of the major Romanian editorial successes in 2009, for which Petru Popescu received several scripting proposals, it was also marked by the phenomena of spiritual association and dissociation. It is a romanced biography, with clear novelesque undertones, but it is far from being solely a commercial novel, as the 80.000 soled copies might induce. In the words of Alex Ştefănescu, Petru Popescu is talented enough to invent himself as a character, to simultaneously associate and dissociate from his own self. The novel's slightly sensational subject, his romance with Zoia Ceauşescu, and the portrayal of the dictator's family members have often been accused of lacking truthfulness. Popescu has been accused of not rendering objectively the events of 1973-1974, as well as elements pertaining to his own biography. These critics seem to forget that they are dealing with a fictional text, despite its being a documentary novel. "By writing the novel *Supleantul,* a trial of returning to the matrix of Romanian language has been attempted, the recreation of an atmosphere characterised by the earthy smell of the streets of Bucharest from the sweet youth of older days, in sepia tones of the past"[12]. Nevertheless, a certain artificiality is to be noted in the novel. The rendering of the past has lost the naturalness and charm of the novel *Prins,* which Petru Popescu wrote in his youth. Both in *Supleantul* and in *The Return* the tone and the narrative style are "unnatural to the Romanian spirit"[13], despite the authenticity of the storyline. The presence of the American spirit and the American culture can be felt, which is understandable since the author has been a part of these for several years. Thus we can speak about an ideological and spiritual dissociation between Petru Popescu the Romanian and Petru Popescu the speaker of Romanian.

One can also observe the process of erotic association and dissociation in the novel: his romance with Zoia Ceauşescu is marked by the interference of "political power". As a consequence, this romance simultaneously brings him closer and further away from the Ceauşescu family and from the essence of communist Romania. The relation is, at the same time, one between power and victim(s) (Zoia can bare this attribute herself) and between public and private, and being characterised by impossibility, given that the two partners belong to different worlds. *Supleantul* is a novel that has been announced even before being launched, in novels such as *The Return* and in several articles published in journals such as the Washington Post or România literară. The author's chronic obsession with revisiting the past can be observed, as he tries to reconcile two identities, the two radically different experiences of his life. Both novels intend to bring the writer's American self closer to his Romanian identity, as well as the

personal self closer to the public one, the inner one to the social one. Both cases end in a captivating narrative plot, both authentic and courageous, that not only facilitates the author's connection to past events, but also reconciles the Romanian readership (characterised by its direct experience of communism) with the past or even with phantasms of the dictatorship.

Note:

1. "M-am despărțit de Zoia pentru că mi-era frică de Ceauşescu", http://jurnalul.ro/special-jurnalul/interviuri/petru-popescu-m-am-despartit-de-zoia-pentru-ca-mi-era-frica-de-ceausescu-527247.html.
2. Ibidem, trad.n. Miruna Ciocoi-Pop
3. Ibidem, trad.n. Miruna Ciocoi-Pop
4. Ibidem, trad.n. Miruna Ciocoi-Pop
5. Ibidem, trad.n. Miruna Ciocoi-Pop
6. Bălan, Dinu, *Petru Popescu, prins în istorie*, Bucureşti, Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2013, p. 226, trad.n., Miruna Ciocoi-Pop
7. Eugen Simion, *Ficțiunea Jurnalului Intim,* Bucureşti, Univers Enciclopedic, 2005, p. 16
8. Bălan, Dinu, *Petru Popescu, prins în istorie*, Bucureşti, Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2013
9. Ibidem, Translated by Miruna Ciocoi-Pop
10. Andrei Codrescu. Endorsement for the English edition of Petru Popescu's *The Return*
11. Bălan, Dinu, *Petru Popescu, prins în istorie*, Bucureşti, Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2013,p. 302, p. 229, translated by M. Ciocoi-Pop
12. Ibidem, trad. n. Miruna Ciocoi-Pop
13. Ibidem, trad. n. Miruna Ciocoi-Pop

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