
CULTURAL ISOLATIONISM, LIGHTS AND SHADOWS

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The issue of cultural and literary "minorities", of isolation and "insularity", "multiculturalism" in the culture and literature of the "majority" in general, has ceased to be merely a topic of academic, purely cultural and literary debates in our epoch. They are strongly ideologised and politicised latterly. Let us mention only two recently published international documents, both of which created a great stir and largely stimulated this process: The European Charta of Regional or Minority Languages (1992) and the Convention - Framework for the Protection of National Minorities (1994). Both of them received great publicity, even though they have not become daily reading.

They led to many controversies, political-diplomatic confrontations, negotiations and polemics, disputes that are as yet, not settled. We are not competent to deal with these highly current aspects, neither do they belong to our field of investigation. They are and continue to be firstly a political matter of the respective governments from the point of view of immediate practical solutions. However, the issue of cultural and literary "insularity" which could also be called "parochial", "closed" or "local", has also many larger dimensions. It belongs to the sphere of interest of political science, but also to that of the philosophy of culture, sociology and literary theory. Nevertheless, from this perspective which is as legitimate as a purely ideologic and political one, systematic thinking is not yet developed enough. We are not ignoring all its connections and interdependencies, though. The whole problem cannot be solved in a few pages. However, we can assert some clear ideas, free from any partisan spirit and prejudices.

First we should dismiss the profound misbelief that cultural-literary "isolation" and "insularity" is, let's say, a particular Central and East European question. On the contrary, it is characteristic - in variable proportions - of any Eastern or Western culture, either developed or undeveloped, majority or minority, being in different phases of historical evolution. Small groups with great cohesion and influence, specific structure and charismatic "bosses" (leaders), that have been initiated within greater social frameworks, have formerly been observed and studied by the American microsociology of Jacob L. Moreno (1892-1974) (he was actually born in Romanian). Nearer to us is "parochial political culture" (its basic features are characteristic, in fact, to any type of culture called "parochial"). This holds good for the recently translated, highly influ-

ential work for example, that has also a good introduction written by Dan Pavel: *The Civic Culture* (1963), by Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba. To claim that an issue of international dimensions is specific and applicable to a particular region only (though, of course, there are also local peculiarities) is clearly an exclusivism. It has nothing to do with scientific objectivity.

Another equally serious error is to see only the complete half of the question, without the empty one. Only one side of the coin, in other words, without the reverse side of it. First, we have to state stoutly: isolationism and "insularism" in culture and literature represent an undoubtedly legitimate form of resistance and fighting against any ethnic-linguistic discrimination on the one hand and of preserving the specific national identity, on the other. The core and the letter of the above mentioned international documents is quite explicit in this respect. It is, and remains, essentially indisputable, no matter how we define it: "self-defence", "regaining and preserving the national conscience" and the "national cultural inheritance", "defending and cultivating collective memory", "legitimate cultural nationalism" or "civic nationalism". There can be no legitimate objection or controversy over this aspect: minorities all over the world have these unchallenged and indefensible rights. They have therefore the right to oppose, by constitutional and strictly democratic means, any attempt of the Nation-State at ethnic-cultural levelling, assimilation and homogenising.

However, we may enter a zone of ambiguity, confusion and abusive interpretation at this point if we do not define, with the greatest clarity possible, the notions of our discussion. These ambiguities might finally prove profoundly negative and unproductive for all parties of the confrontation: for those who have such (we repeat: wholly justifiable) claims but also for those who oppose them (for historical, ideological and political reasons). Basically, any ism (isolationism, particularism, insularism, nationalism generally) inevitably introduces the idea of disassociation, separation and even of isolation, of strongly stressed otherness. A periodical of a high ideological standard, recently published by the Pro Europe League has precisely this significant title: *Altera*. In a recently published book (*Politics and Culture. Towards a New Romanian Culture; Politică și cultură. Pentru o nouă cultură română*) we ourselves speak, among others, about Official Culture, Alternative Culture. They are two irreducible, antagonistic forms of the free, post-totalitarian culture.

A question arises immediately, with the power of evidence: when is such an otherness and dissociation from the dominant, major culture legitimate, wholly rightful and when does it run the risk of failing, whether inevitably or

not, in good faith or not, to the other extreme. And this can be equally negative: complete isolation, a kind of monad with its windows shut, refractory and impermeable by any form of communication from the outer world, the cultural medium surrounding it. This leads not only to the refusal of any foreign cultural influence which, true, might in some cases endanger the conservation and development of some undoubtedly legitimate national characteristics, but also in the opposite direction, to a real exclusivism. In many cases, foreign cultural influences can be also beneficiary, fecund and extremely useful. A condemnable intolerance is answered by another, equally condemnable type of intolerance. A "blockade" appears thus, which impedes natural evolution and real progress in solving the inevitable conflict.

Ethnocentrism, xenophobia and cultural chauvinism might get unbri-dled in all directions, as often happens. To ignore and reject any knowledge about another culture, any contact and virtual dialogue with it, whether it is a "majority" or a "minority" culture in a given country, is a sign of underdevelop-ment, intolerance and total anachronism at the end of the 20th century, wherever it manifests itself and whatever they call it. In an age in which multimedia represents evermore a universal reality and we have entered, momentarily at least, the Western world, in the age of the global village (Marshall Mc Luhan's term) when even the above mentioned international documents are clearly edited in the core and letter of one world, a radical, intransigent and final isolationism in cul-ture and literature is no more possible, under any historical, ideological or cul-tural pretext. Modern, free and democratic society rejects such an isolation, in terms of the constitution and of the constitutional state.

Many ambiguities, abusive interpretations and conflicts are due to the fact that the issue of cultural "insularity" is discussed in very general terms only. This holds well in official and personal discussions, discussions between "spokespersons" of all categories and free critical spirits without any affiliation but with equal rights of critical analysis and free expression. Calling up some particular aspects could be useful in this respect. Moreover, the discussion of some precise data - some of them inevitably irritating - becomes absolutely necessary. Although the rights of national minorities of any ethnicity are unquestionable, the way how they can really be protected at present and - an essential detail - in everyday practice first of all, has also negative aspects. Without offering a practical solution and an exhaustive doc-umentation, we identified, in a sketchy formulation five basic obstacles to the objective, prejudice-free solution of this problem. Some of them might seem to be "minor", viewed from above, from some diplomatic Sirius. But in the

immediate, real, actual, inclusively Romanian context of this type of confrontation they have proved to be decisive. Small causes, great effects - they both have to be viewed with clarity and in a free spirit.

We are not "pleaders" of anyone and the change of regime from 1989 is worthless if we do not have the right (and the duty sometimes) to present in such cases our personal views and ideas, without reserve. Similarly, we must admit, openly and firmly, that a state or a "major" culture has much more possibilities to act and to dominate than a "minor" culture which is always on the defensive. That does not mean, though, that their negative aspects are not qualitatively the same and therefore they might be put in a state of equilibrium in the same way. There are no priorities, privileges and half-measures in the field of truth.

1. Be it a "majority" or "minority" culture, the basic obstacle is and remains - in all circumstances and on all levels - the irreducible and intolerant specificity and ethnicity. It is an ideology of a romantic-nationalistic origin, aimed at the exacerbation, on all levels, of any category of ethnic values. It also means the proclamation of their unquestionable superiority in all fields and the refusal and fighting of other ethnic values at the same time. This leads to the conviction of the absolute superiority of ethnic values when these inevitably come into a direct or indirect conflict or competition with other ethnic values. Power relations change into value relations of superiority and inferiority in the case when the ethnic values of the majority are quantitatively superior to those of the minority on the territory of the Nation-State. This proves to be a permanent cause for exclusivisms, antagonisms and conflicts. For any value proclaimed not only dominant but also absolute, always becomes dogmatic, intolerant and restrictive.

This way Orthodoxy - abusively assimilated with the Romanian spirit, the expression of a non-existent and mythologised "spiritual unity of the nation" - refuses Catholicism, the Unitarian Church and Protestantism; ethnicism becomes racist, xenophobe, anti-Semitic; ruralism and the village opposes the town, urban spirit and culture. Obviously, on this aspect or that of any real or possible guarantee, religious, ethnic and cultural minorities cannot have an easy life in such a perspective, being in direct conflict with the lay, constitutional state. Neither do they have real possibilities to develop themselves, a fact which entails, by a natural reaction of self-defence, a conscience of "local patriotism" and of "being a victim", sometimes as stiff and intolerant as that of the majority. The process repeats itself periodically. A well-positioned observer remarked on the following situation: "There is a common rhetoric of Hungarian and Romanian nationalism, or the extremists of both parties." (Andrei Roth, *Altera*

2/1995, p.68, at the round-table discussion entitled "Good" Nationalism, "Bad" Nationalism?) No real democratic mind, irrespective of its ethnicity, can be satisfied by this clearly negative situation. Many other examples can be given.

2. The immediate effect of this ethnicism, which is at the basis of the virtually hermetic closure of any ethnic, cultural and linguistic community, is the theory and practice of isolationism. Be it a majority or minority one, such a community locks itself up, becomes completely isolated and, full of resentments, tending to break up the bridges that link it to the exterior. We can observe this mechanism in the ideology of the extreme right, between the two world wars, as well as in that of the extreme left, in the period of the communist totalitarianism, in the national-Ceaușescan version as well. Let us give a single quotation relevant to the first category. Nae Ionescu asked for "...our isolation, as far pushed as possible (underlined by N.I.), within our borders" (in *Roza Vânturilor*, București, 1937, p. 286). He wanted complete political isolation therefore, but also a complete (utopian) cultural and economic one.

These politics of isolation - this time from "American imperialism", "bourgeois capitalism" and "the decadent Western culture" - have been theorised and, even worse, applied with great efficiency during the communist regime. Vladimir Tismăneanu, political scientist and a keen observer of these profoundly negative phenomena, remarks in a text in 1986: "A reductionist and provincial view on contemporary discussions has been granted civil rights in the past few years, a vision which threatens to lead to the entire isolation of Romanian intellectuals, to severing ties with the circuit of universal values (*Noaptea totalitară*, București, 1995, p.189). This idea returns after 1989 too: "Its sympathies [of the repressive apparatus, the Securitate Service] are of a clearly autarchic, isolationist nature." (*Balul mascat*, Iași, 1996, p.177) This has long been evident.

In order to restrain us to the negative effects in the cultural and literary sphere of this restrictive-isolationist ideology, we mention three essential and profoundly negative consequences:

a.) The concept, theory and practice of the centralised, unified and repressive Nation-State becomes dominant. The state is considered to be the pure manifestation of identity, of the instinct of preservation and of national features. It cannot be other than conservative, closed, autarchic, isolationist, centralised and potentially military. It has a single national religion, namely, the Orthodox (the modern version of the *cuius regio eius religio* medieval principle.) It opposes directly the modern constitutional principle of the lay state, of the church separated from the state. It has a single unified and uniform culture

which excludes or tolerates, at best, cultural institutions in languages other than the national, the major, on its territory. Such structures are considered to be "alien", potentially "unloyal" and, more than once, have made indirect or direct attempts to destroy national unity and integrity.

b.) This virtually repressive, nationalist mentality is embodied in two ideological stereotypes. The first one considers any criticism of some aspect or another of Romanian history, society or psychology by a Romanian author an act of "betrayal" and, moreover, a direct expression of some dark and dangerous international anti-Romanian conspiracy. It is claimed for example that H.R.Patapievici, author of a recently published volume of articles entitled *Politice* (București, 1996), an essayist who has been called by the *Vatra Românească* Union, Cluj a "great enemy of the Romanian people" was "instructed and prepared for returning to the country to help destroy this nation", "to annihilate the people". Which is, needless to say, a monstrous enormity, an aberration. The second stereotype is similarly repressive. All authorities were imperiously asked "to take the necessary steps against the Humanitas publishing house, inclusively" (*Adevărul de Cluj*, 28 May 1996). The reintroduction of censure and of the ideological police was openly recommended therefore.

c.) The other side presents similar or identical, no less significant and typical reactions. The first consists of a direct, public apology of cultural isolationism. A Hungarian journalist, of secondary importance, honestly declared for example at a meeting of the *Familia* periodical at Oradea (6 May 1993): "You have nothing to do with us, and we have nothing to do with you." In other words, these two cultures can very well ignore one another. They do not gain and do not lose anything because of this two-way isolation. We must immediately make clear that this declaration was issued without a shadow of aggressiveness and polemic spirit. A mere truth was uttered, something considered to be evident and undeniable, a basic reality and nothing more. Nevertheless it is a narrow and profoundly erroneous way of defining relations between two neighbour cultures which, on the contrary, can profit from each other.

The second, similar reaction can be included in the category of spontaneous, instinctive and innocent journalistic boycott. I am going to give an example from my personal experience. During the Ceaușescu regime G. Domokos, director of the *Kriterion* publishing house asked us to write a preface to the volume entitled *Literary Confluences. Studies in Romanian-Hungarian Comparative Literature*, by Károly Köllő. It could not be published at that time, only in 1993. However, nobody was interested in it even then. Romanian publications, either specialised or not, did not mention it at

all. The same lack of interest characterised Hungarian publications, apart from an amiable-charitable note in a local newspaper.

It is clearly evident that studies, even if of a limited, strictly documentary interest, on translations, influences and mutual Romanian-Hungarian literary contacts do not attract anybody, at least at this moment. This literature, its representatives, the publicists, content themselves with coexisting and developing in parallel their specific insularity, with few or without any kind of contact, relationship or mutual conditioning, although the history of literature definitely denies this completely unnatural isolationism. When and where did people read in one language only? Have there not always been influences and adaptations? Has there ever been a single, hermetically closed and completely isolated literature in world literature? Never. Mutual imperviousness is impossible, absurd and harmful. It is a radical and narrow-minded isolationist psychology with a profoundly adulterated ideological motivation.

3. The most acute and inevitable antagonisms of this kind are probably generated and consummated on a purely psychological level, the level of interpersonal relations. However, seldom is this reality taken into consideration, though it proves to be a determinant in most cases. A number of typical complexes arise, the more dangerous because they have many aspects that cannot be perceived at first sight: a. they can easily and insidiously be camouflaged in objective ideological motivations; b. they continuously generate endless conflicts which do not ever reveal their real cause and motivation; c. they lead to aggressive manifestations through continuous leaps from the latent, potential state to open, polemic manifestations. There is no ethnic conflict of any type and place which would not have, in various degrees, such a determinant psychological background.

The enumeration of these complexes follows an ascending curve. On the lowest level there is a clearly defensive and autistic reaction of isolation, even a psychosis of "being besieged", of "being a victim". There is a permanent fear from "assimilation", from an assault on national existence". It could also have some morbid aspects. Even a real "masochism" has been mentioned in such cases. There is an instructive and revealing "case-study" based on Romanian-Hungarian newspaper articles from *Țirgu Mureș*, after 1989: *Alter and Ego in Minority* (Majority, Minority, Victims) by Bodó-Cosmeanu-Mátéffy-Mărgineanu, published in *Alter* (1995, 1-2). For somebody who has lived in such Transylvanian medium, the real, everyday experience completely confirms observations of this kind.

The situation is at the same time produced, stimulated and was often exacerbated by a certain "localism" or "local patriotism". Even a certain "Tîrgumureşism" has been spoken about in this sense. This is a complex of local specificity, a permanent state of vigilance or alarm which generates the most troubling and dangerous aspect of all: the psychological deformation called the complex of superiority and inferiority. Real or supposed humility often breaks out in crises of arrogance and megalomania of "exclusivist arrogance" (the above mentioned study acknowledged this too). The more this state of mind manifests itself and proliferates in the intellectual medium, in "literary life", it becomes more and more acute and aggressive. The regrettable aspects multiply.

Egocentrism intensifies. The vanity of authors is exacerbated. The obsession of marginality and lack of recognition of their work (attributed, evidently, to ethnic adversity, for nobody can simply recognise their own lack of talent) causes even greater havoc. The cultural life of some Transylvanian centres is often corrupted by such complexes. They are more dangerous and lasting as they have, firstly, a general-human foundation and then an ethnic one. They hide and disguise each other, either innocently or not. Vainglory and literary vanity use the alibi of ethnicity to the full. There are not, in fact, real and definitive solutions to these conflicts. We can nevertheless hope for a civilised, documented and honest controversy.

4. The no less aggressive and intolerant local hierarchies are dangerous deformations of these provincialist and isolationist cultural tendencies. They have a profoundly negative effect. This is a typical provincial-cultural phenomenon, but also a direct consequence of cultural isolation and of the lack of international experience, a result of the restrictive, totalitarian regime. Local and regional values are directly or indirectly proclaimed superior to those acknowledged at a national level. Different local gurus, bards, masters and "geniuses" exercise in their reduced sphere of influence an authority wholly disproportionate to their real value, work and importance. Although a minor, mediocre, third-rate author is, irrespective of his ethnicity and the language he uses, minor beyond retrieval, there are many cases in which his literary self-love hides behind a great gesticulation and national "costume". Consequently, he claims himself the role of exponent and of the most competent defender of the "endangered" literature.

This latter is supposed to be in great danger only because the audience of such ambitious "spokespersons" does not go beyond a small local circle, an obscure editorial staff, a certain literary club. There is no overall reception and

appreciation in such cases. However, the tone is almost always superior and **inaccessible**. "I am the greatest lyrical poet in Apahida", says one. "I am the most formidable epic poet in Miercurea Ciuc", says another with emphasis. "I am the greatest critic in the town of Y", claims the third one. To be, to claim to be or to be sometimes even acknowledged as the "greatest" writer in some ethnicity, but always on a strictly provincial level is doubly false: a. because literary values in any national language are classified according to the hierarchy of the whole national literature; b. because even in the case of "minority" literatures, literary values, even local ones from a country or another have to be compared to the complete literature in the respective, written and spoken language.

In the case of Hungarian writers from Romania for example, some who have real talent and whom we wholly respect, an objective evaluation has to be done according to the hierarchy of the whole Hungarian literature, beginning with that from Hungary. Similarly, the hierarchy of Romanian writers from Basarabia has to be compared to that of the whole Romanian literature, where they naturally belong. To be "the greatest poet" in Cluj, Țirgu Mureș or Bălți is not sufficient or relevant. Every author has to be placed and evaluated according to the whole context of the literature he belongs to. The same principle has to be rigorously applied to the tricoloured national bards ordained "national tribunes" by private initiative. The above mentioned American political scientists also mention the fact that every "parochial culture" centres around some "chieftains". When these "bosses" become "masters in literature" and make "literature", the local hierarchy - which is false, abusive and exclusivist - prevails inevitably, though in an essentially illegitimate way.

5. Finally, we must not forget the fact that the whole issue of cultural isolationism has not only a national but also an international aspect. From the strict point of view of "world literature" every isolation of every "national literature" of the world proves to be no less than a "parochial", "insular", negative phenomenon. From the perspective of the European "literary canon" French literature for example seems to be inevitably "provincial". But from a universalist perspective, the perspective of the "universal canon", even the whole European or Eurocentric literature is "provincial". This highly up-to-date problem is discussed at length in "multiculturalist" studies, mainly American ones, as well as in the latest orientations of "comparative literature". We have also discussed it according to this sense in several contexts, more recently in "European" and "World Literature": A New Comparative View, in Proceedings of the XIIIth Congress of the ICLA, Tokyo, 1991. Isolationism, ethnicist featu-

res, strictly local hierarchies, the pre-eminence of "absolute" values haughtily blocked in a language of limited circulation are clearly and irrevocably in a decline in our epoch.

This does not mean that the issue is won once and for all. There are still great or, anyway, considerable obstacles. A conscience, a politics and practice of real cultural decentralisation are missing. Prejudices in all senses are still strong and deep-rooted in all zones of ethnic minorities. Therefore, thematic collections of studies in Central European literatures and cultural interferences published for example in the periodical *Aurora* (2-6, 1993-1996, Oradea) or the Soros Foundation program entitled *Bridges Between Romanian and Hungarian Culture* have an importance beyond their strictly documentary nature. Two volumes of the *Cumpăna* (1 and 2, 1994 and 1995, Cluj) and a Romanian anthology of the periodical *Korunk* have been published with this constructive aim. These are notable initiatives. Finally, we must not forget the importance of personal relations and the "international conspiracy of critical intelligentsia", as Vladimir Tismăneanu figuratively calls it (Balul Mascat, p.200). This refers to intellectuals from any country but most of all from this zone. It is a solidarity which defends all the values that oppose and effectively resist cultural isolationism under all its negative aspects. Ideological isolationism is and remains to be completely erroneous. Its strong resistance, by way of its international dissemination inclusively, is a real difficulty. When fighting against the "cultural and spiritual expansion of the West" and against "Western film invasion" tends to become an isolationist state policy, as is the case of some near Eastern zones, we have the most serious and legitimate reasons for anxiety because of the confrontations - mostly ideological ones - which are inevitable.