

Between Political Exile and Personal Identity: Virgil Tănase's Identity Discourse

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Résumé: *La censure politique en Roumanie pendant la période communiste déclenche le soi-disant exil. Les écrivains roumains qui ne se soumettent pas au régime politique, se penchent vers une littérature du réel, esthétique, transparente et ouverte. Leur écriture renonce à l'opacité des mots afin de cacher la vérité; par conséquent, ils se voient obligés de choisir la voie de l'exile. Pour certains, le voyage vers un autre territoire ne connaît pas de retour. Le prosateur et dramaturge Virgil Tanase n'accepte pas la notion d'exile et, de plus, il ne demande jamais d'asile politique dans la France, son pays d'adoption. Il sent comme un roumain et s'identifie par sa propre création, vivant à travers son art.*

Mots-clés : *identité de l'écrivain, régime totalitaire, art littéraire*

Confined in a horizon dominated by social conflicts and smothered by the oppressive space, in January 1977, Virgil Tănase “decides” to leave Romania. While in France, the writer obtained the diploma from the École pratique Hautes Études Paris in 1977, sustaining a thesis about the actor (*La Presence du comedians*) and completed a doctoral degree in Sociology and Semiology of Arts and Letters (*Semiology of mise en scene*) under Roland Barthes's scientific command. At the end of 1979, he obtains French citizenship for the entire family: for him, his wife and their first son, Thomas. Virgil Tănase constantly repudiates the notion of exile and never asks for political asylum. He considers himself a free man, not only in his own country, but also beyond. He feels an excruciating pain once it gets separated from the provincial childhood and estranged from the places where he once discovered peace, that is, in the midst of the ruins. It is the apocalypse of a young man torn from his universe, but who succeeds to survive through art, through literature: “To me, exile was the very moment I left my home, my garden and my city to go to school and then to university. Leaving to Paris was only a detail compared to the rupture of my provincial childhood and the road to Bucharest. I came to Paris as a free man, as I had been in Romania” [1].

Political censorship in the Romanian communist era triggers the so-called exile. Romanian writers who do not defer to the political regime and lean towards the aesthetics of a real literature, transparent and open, dismissing the opacity of words in their writing and hiding the truth, have to endure the path of exile.

Once arrived in the French capital, the young writer Virgil Tanase says: „Je suis de ces écrivains que le régime roumain essaie de tuer en les empêchant tout simplement de publier : pour un écrivain, c'est la mort... Les intellectuels que je fréquentais ont été avertis qu'il fallait me laisser en paix,... Dans la rue, je suis évité... Peut-être rejoindrai-je la foule des écrivains et des artistes qui ont été toute leur vie bannis, injuriés, et auxquels la mort a conféré le droit d'être présentés au peuple et acceptés par lui?” (*Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 1976) [2].

While in Paris, the young writer is considered to be an exile, even though he doesn't admit of this position. The notion of exile made him think of the unfortunate Ovid, who was abandoned among the barbarians at Pontus Euxinus (*Combats magazine*, 2004) [3].

The refugee writers and artists from communist countries, started wearing the label as such from the very moment they arrived in Paris, fact which brought about their putting under the protection of generous souls from different wards. “They were not considered exiled like Beckett or Garcia Marques, term applied most often to those who, out of political reasons, could not travel to their country. Exile was thus, a category related to the permeability of borders - a question of geography, political science, however, unconnected

with the substance of creation. For a writer, being an exiled represented rather an administrative situation and not at all an artistic identity” [4].

But Paris symbolized a new home for the writer, who found peace among his brethren, in the literary cafes. He confessed that he faced administrative difficulties in the French capital - humiliating queues at the police office, hostile mistrust of estate agents and other awkward situations (he becomes employed as luxury doorman of a building, being at the same time a contributor to the Flammarion Publishing House). Even though at the end of 1978 Virgil Tanase obtains French nationality, he will never give up its status, even if the security recommended on 2 December 1977, the withdrawal of his Romanian citizenship (“Acts committed by Virgil Tanase represent a propaganda crime against the socialist order, provided and penalized by Art. 66, Penal Code.... As a result, the State Council may withdraw the Romanian citizenship ...”) [5].

For Virgil Tanase, exile “was that of a solitary traveler in a world where one is asked to walk only in groups accompanied by a military music” [6]. Settled in a foreign country, the writer remains convinced that the communist regime was only the form of a transient, historical monster which arrays the form of an ideology, and that his crusade is only against this monster. He does not wish to be placed among those who turn the exile into a job or at least a job requirement.

The naturalness, finesse, talent, and sophistication of the Romanian novelist and playwright, impresses the French literary criticism: „Malgré ses origines, rien ne destinait Virgil Tanase, venu d’une Roumanie qui semble sortir d’un délire de Jarry, à écrire ces textes amers et grinçants où la mort s’amuse avec des héros paumés et désabusés. Admirateur de Valéry, disciple de Barthes, professeur d’art dramatique, esthète raffiné, ce romancier aurait été certainement plus à l’aise dans la composition de livres bercés par la nostalgie des ports du Danube. La réalité terrifiante de nos temps, la traque et l’exil en ont décidé autrement.... De ce jeu d’écriture, ce ces jeux de miroir demeure un mal de vivre, une angoisse essentielle rendus soutenables par l’humour de Tanase, cet humour si étrange qui témoigne d’un authentique désespoir” [7] (*Le Monde*, 22 June 1984).

Bypassing the French administrative system disadvantages, challenging the idea of political asylum, writing rigorously, acting with diplomacy and honesty, Virgil Tanase will encounter a well deserved recognition. “None of us, who used to read novels published in Paris in the early eighties with such joy, was surprised to learn that the Latin Union Prize for Literature was awarded in 2004 to Virgil Tanase. It is, in fact, eventually, as natural as it can be. And is not only because was born in Romania, on the banks of the Danube River, and settled for more than thirty years in Paris, but mostly because “Virgil Tanase is by itself one of the Latin quintessence” [8].

His writing amazes through a specific kind of imagination, falls into a particular category of genre, and besides this, his novels are animated by a specific “spirit” and a great profoundness. Behind the curtain, there is and will always be the man and artist Virgil Tanase, which from time to time leaves himself discovered and acknowledged through his art, afterwards taking refuge in his universe, one without external constraints, once again waiting for the moment in which he, the novelist, will be absolutely necessary. Moreover, after a long and intensive introspection, Virgil Tanase defines itself as “a unique individual, and in addition to this, considering the context in which the artist lives today, and avows” it is needed some time to be spent in this work for my presence to become indispensable and my death, aberrant“.

Confessions from Exile: A Romanian writer put to silence, speaks

I allowed myself before entering the Romanian space, to consider my book *Ma Roumanie* to be worth mentioning, first published in France in 1990, Editions Ramsay-of-Cortanze, immediately after the Romanian Revolution, and after six years in Romania at the Didactic and Pedagogic Publishing House. The volume of texts seems to be a kind of "back in time", a mixture of memories, a meditation on human feelings, or in other words, an amazing attempt of an autobiography with bibliographic accents (my italics). The title of the book may mislead, because *Ma Roumanie* is not a "tour guide" with subjective implications or historical exposure with propaganda purposes. In this paper, remarkable for its refinement and elegance of design style, a French journalist, Blandine Theses - Delafon, is "trying to decipher the enigma of a country through a character, enigmatic and contradictory in itself: Virgil Tanase, appointed by the employer from Medias" unconventional spirit, both in France and Romania" [9].

It is necessary to emphasize the fact that this book of conversations or confessions, *Ma Roumanie* is an interesting introduction to the work and biography of the writer, a shattering testimony about the fate and feelings of a man born on our land, then forced into exile. At the same time, we can read between the lines, about the tragic fate of a nation, of a country. Virgil Tanase is the character of its books, who intermingles from one story to another under various forms, warning us that in these films, it is played the destiny experienced by many of us, the readers. Although the fate of the man and writer Virgil Tanase is not common, there are countless biographical data that come to confirm the above assertions. Perhaps in this way, some of us will feel closer to Virgil Tanase, the man, and even to some extent identify with him or his experiences: "My destiny is very similar to that of most of my peers who did not want to be heroes, who have tried more or less successfully, not to drown in the mud, which is bestowed upon us, who would not want to be partakers with those who committed crimes, but neither the victims of a regime that I felt rather as a historical catastrophe that would have been absurd to go against and, as one can not stave off an earthquake or an overflow, each and every person had to make the best of the situation, with the exception of the cowards, of course, whose malice I would not put at the expense of the political system, but of their nature, as beasts remain the same even if they cross a border - and the experience of exile in Paris has done nothing, but reinforce this view I had".

Liberated from the terror of provincial snobbery, Virgil Tanase considered himself without false modesty, a provincial and even a peasant, in the best sense possible, however, an heir of those who worked the land and had no other bearings than the seasons, sun, great rhythms of the world (my italics). From the assumption of this austere genealogy derives its prudence in face of other events, which he tries to bring together, placing them into a larger whole, in a cosmic motion. Prudence, however, does dismiss neither boldness, *nor dignity*. For, in full age of socialist dogmatism, Virgil Tanase asserts its independence of thought. The history of his humiliations is also the history of victory over the Communist terror".

His notes on the Romanian exile are, with minimal exceptions, too flattering: "Exile is not a value. It is a temporary and administrative situation. I have always thought that the Romanian literary life is not happening elsewhere but in Romania. Not in exile. But the regime, communists, censorship... Despite all these constraints, it is there that is actually happens. Here is the French culture, French public, French literature and French taste, and a further stage of development"... "The writer must live in its natural environment, like a wild animal. He must be able to fight, to tear and be torn, to feed and hide, to watch out for the public, to seduce, to assault. That's the meaning of freedom! Exile is a zoo, a form of lost freedom, if you can accept this paradox" [10].

Convinced that the Romanian culture and politics are done within the country and not in a café in Paris, Virgil Tanase discovers that he has nothing to do with this “ridiculous and rueful exile”.

In the early years of exile, the French press is seen as a place “full of hurry and unscrupulous journalists, who do not give trouble to check the most basic information: It seems to me that press today it’s just a parlor game - Virgil Tanase notes with bitter skepticism, in which we decipher the reflex of a moralist in whose reason the shades do not seem to always find their place”. In these induced confessions, the reflection often takes the form of a brilliantly intelligent aphorism” [11]. In the interview, there can be noticed the “*inquisitiveness*” of the reporter who does nothing but arouse the emanation of the novelist's life in snapshots, stirring daily experiences with art. The writer is the hero of its own stories, stored in an inextricable relationship between his work and his being, his confession becoming a recession, most often a queer one, towards the “deeper layers of memory”.

“This encrypted journal of a unique and controversial figure is often remarkable for its fine and incisive interpretation given to historical events”. For Virgil Tanase is a reliable writer, who takes full responsibility for his statements and is entirely aware of what he can give its readers or auditors, simply through the means of honesty.

Notes

- [1] Virgil Tănase, *România mea*, E.D.P., București, 1996, p. 95.
- [2] Jean Louis Ezine, *Un écrivain roumain baillonné parle*, articol apărut în « Les nouvelles littéraires », 21 octombrie-28 octombrie 1976, Anul 54, nr. 2555, pp. 4-5.
- [3] *Virgil Tanase: le promeneur solitaire*, « Combats Magazine », Périodique multilingue. Littérature/politique/culture, 18 octobre 2004.
- [4] Cornel Nistor, *Discobolul*, Alba-Iulia, iulie-septembrie, 2004.
- [5] Florin Manolescu, *Enciclopedia exilului literar românesc 1945-1989*, Ed. Compania, București, p. 659.
- [6] *Virgil Tanase : le promeneur solitaire*.
- [7] Edgar Reichmann *Les morts ludiques*, « Le Monde », 22 iunie 1984.
- [8] Patrice Bollon, *Un latin balcanic*, „Caiete Critice”, Nr. 1(207), 2005 p. 19.
- [9] Ion Cristofor, *Confesiunile unui exilat*, „Tribuna”, An II, Nr.23, 7 iunie 1990, p. 4.
- [10] *România mea*, p. 99.
- [11] Ion Cristofor, *art.cit.*, p. 4.

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