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## Reflections on the "In-Between:" A Romanian Expatriate in America

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# REFLECTIONS ON THE "IN-BETWEEN:" A ROMANIAN EXPATRIATE IN AMERICA

Michael J. McKinlay

[Marcel Cornis-Pop has taught in the UNI English department since coming here on a Fulbright scholarship in 1983. Next year he will teach at Harvard University, where he has been granted a fellowship. Michael McKinlay, an English graduate student, spoke with Dr. Cornis-Pop about his thoughts on Romania, leaving his home-land, and his experience in the United States.]

*What is Romania like? What is important to Romanians?*

I don't want to simplify things, but Romania is a mixture of East and West, a Latin oasis, a little western island adrift in the east. An interesting part of Romanian culture is a focus on language and languages. Romanians can speak many foreign languages, they have to, you might say. Romanian is a very rich language; you cannot understand it without knowing Latin, some Slavic, some Hungarian, without knowing some Greek or something about the modern romance languages such as French. Every language adds a little window to the world outside and also a very important window on your own language and culture.

This kind of linguistic emphasis and language consciousness goes all the way back to our folk culture. There are strange productions in Romanian folklore; surrealistic, language oriented folk ballads that talk about the medium in which ballads are supposed to be uttered and the problems of the utterer.

After the second world war, language orientation/linguistic consciousness became a matter of politics — one of the tasks that Stalin undertook, this very busy man otherwise, was that of deforming Romanian language and linguistic history. He even wrote a brochure on its origin in which he argued against the "mis-concept" that Romanian had anything to do with Latin, decreeing that it was pure Slavic!

*I am sure the Romanian people didn't accept that readily, but it must have made it difficult to learn.*

I had many students who had come to the university to study English and French and German with the idea that they were adding an almost forbidden territory and gaining some sort of access to the tradition, reconnecting ties with Europe. You must understand that English studies were banned for a time and reintroduced in the curricula only in the later 50s.

That was part of the liberalization process, what little we had of it in the 60s.

*You make it sound as though language became a freedom in Romania. Not just the American ideal of freedom of speech, but a more basic freedom to communicate. Knowledge. Understanding.*

Language-awareness is a freedom, absolutely. Language-awareness is a freedom not just in the Romanian or the Eastern European context, but in other, more open cultural contexts as well. One of the things that annoys me about some of my students here is the difficulty I have getting them to talk about their own language. It amazes me to see these generations losing literacy; not literacy in the old sense of the word, the humanistic sense, but the very basic literacy — that of knowing and caring about your own language; the language that you use and that other people use, for or against you.

*One general impression of Americans is that they are careless of using their freedoms and yet very protective of their freedom of speech. Perhaps its guarantee in our government structure nurtures complacency in its citizens. Yet if America did not promise this freedom it might not have much else to offer.*

America is still a very attractive myth for Central and Eastern Europeans — the promised exilic land. As a professor of American and British literature, I had to come here at least at some time in my career. Perhaps if I had a chance to do this earlier and the opportunity to teach some years here and then go back to Romania I would not have taken the radical step that I took in 1983.

*Leaving your homeland must have been very difficult. But did things in Romania really get so bad that you had to leave?*

I still talk to friends here who remember the Romania that was declared in the 60s as a Miracle of Liberalization. They remember the Romania that was one of the most active, balanced and intellectually-oriented cultures of the time. But that period lasted very little, say from 1963-64 to 1971. I stood my ground, some say "heroically," through the rapid deterioration of the political and cultural reforms. In the late 70s I had not only the feeling but the certitude that whatever I was able to do a few years before I was not able to do any longer: I had increasing difficulties in getting things published, I was not allowed to go abroad, I was not allowed to publish abroad,

I had problems even with my classes.

*But when you were offered the Fulbright you were given an opportunity to come to America. What did you expect to find when you got here?*

That essential myth of America which is a creation of central Europe.

When I came here, almost unconsciously the first great trip that we took was to California. It wasn't just to see San Francisco and Los Angeles, but to scout out every canyon and desert in between. We drove thousands of miles all-in-all. I had a sense that I needed to go as far west as I could. The end of the trip was a great disappointment; a very cold Pacific Ocean. I didn't make it to Hawaii.

*If your myth of the American continent was somehow diluted by your coming here, perhaps now you are reconsidering the myths about American freedoms and intellectual ideologies.*

I come from a skeptical culture, one with an active underground and totally censored — every word, every passage that you publish involves some dickering, a rough battle with the censors and your own self-censorship. In this post-modern western world of total eclecticism you can publish anything and yet sometimes you wonder if what you publish is significant or if it is just lost in a sea of countless other things that are going on. In my culture the unsaid occupies vast territories and sends, like Freud's subconscious, cryptic messages to the surface. Whatever is said is only the tip of the iceberg. Here somehow the iceberg is reversed — the bottom looms at the surface and the little tip is hidden deep in the sea. There is a problem in adjusting to a culture of many tendencies, over-rich and contradictory manifestations; the post-modernism that Leotard calls "the degree zero" of culture because the various trends somehow cancel each other.

*You just described what I have come to call the western "marshland" that has replaced Eliot's "wasteland" through the steadily increasing downpour of ideas generated by an atmosphere of self-fulfillment and self-contemplation. Everyone's answer is different and everyone has an answer. Sometimes I wonder if there is any reason to get mired in it.*

I argue with friends around here who sit back and wait for so-called "fads" to vanish. I've been telling them that they may

end up wasting their entire professional lives waiting for the fads to disappear. The "post-structuralist" fad, people like Barthes and Derrida and Heidegger have been with us for quite a while. You can't waste your life waiting for these people to disappear. I am satisfied to do my little work on the people I think are important in literature and in criticism hoping and, in fact, knowing that they will stay important.

*From a society of non-self-expression to a society of over-expression, here you find yourself. Culture shock notwithstanding, it seems as though you are on the fringe, sort of surveying the boundaries of your discipline.*

I think of myself in a double position; the typical position of the exile, *homo duplex*. I am the self-exile who did not defect but chose to stay on to transplant something, bring out something from my culture. What I am also doing is allowing my new culture to absorb me. Ideally, the exile should produce as much as possible in the interregnum because once

speaking loudly  
three in conversation

a child, a tree, a gold crayon.

— michael swanson





*Pam Bunkofske*



Bone Shadow I, by *Tim M. McAninch*



The Puh-Puh-Puh Slap of the Canoe Paddle Against the Water,  
by Nicholas Stewart

he is totally absorbed, he loses that particular perspective, that inbetween perspective. A wonderful metaphor of Derrida's is this "inbetween." The typical inbetween zone of the reader of which Poulet also speaks. You might think the inbetween is a very grey area, but not in this case, not inbetween cultures. Inbetween cultures is a very interesting area — it produced writers like James, Conrad, Joyce, Beckett, and so many others. In immediate human terms it is an area that generates a lot of anxiety — you are inbetween statuses and inbetween homes, it is not easy to be suspended inbetween — but culturally speaking it is interesting to be at the crossroads of cultures, the generic intertext, at least for awhile.

*During the 19th and early 20th centuries America was called the melting pot of the world, absorbing all cultures into something unique. But even in America there are still cultural differences, socio-economic differences, so that all of us are still inbetween in some way or other.*

Of course. I was inbetween in Romania too, because I was studying and writing about American and British literature. I was politically "bilingual" — condemned to a schizophrenic inbetween where you profess one thing and do another . . . where you speak one language and secretly produce another. That sort of thing people call the inner exile. Many of us who came out of eastern and central Europe wonder, "How did I

adapt so quickly? so easily?" I was accused, even as a student, of cosmopolitanism and maybe that's the explanation. If ever I was assimilated, it was in the 50s and 60s.

*To draw an analogy, you were artificially acclimatized to a different environment and then transplanted here. There is a shock in the transplanting process, but you are still here, trying to thrive in a new atmosphere, a new environment. How are you doing?*

Right now I am trying to function as an insider as much as I can. Mircea Eliade, a great predecessor on this journey to America, talks about the ordeal of the "passage," in this type initiation into a new world. It's not easy for someone at 40 to start over again. I am at an age where people here or people in my own country relax, sit back; start to suck their fingers of the wisdom they have accumulated over the years. I realize I have an advantage over this, but there will always be some doubt, however small, "Am I inside, I mean, really inside? Or is there just some area where I am overlapping?" My situation mirrors the archetypal condition of the literary critic (which I am): desiring to gain access into the warm intimacy of the text's secrets and establish himself as an authoritative *insider*; yet knowing that his claim of objectivity depends directly on an evaluative distance from (to quote Melville) "all this din of the great world's loom." Can anyone ever solve this paradox of the interpreter inbetween cultural texts? ■