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‘The I Embodied from Somebody Else’ – place and Memory in Ioan Flora’s Poetry

Ioan Flora (1950-2005) comes from the Serbian Banat, a region which shapes his poetry and makes him generate themes and techniques along and against the mainstream culture. This multicultural region becomes poetic matter in his texts as geographical references are recurrent throughout Flora’s work. Another interest here is to analyze the ways in which the poet, a major representative of the postmodern canon, dwells on memory and uses irony to rewrite landmarks in Romanian literature such as Bolintineanu in the bilingual volume Cincizeci de romane și alte utopii / Fifty Novels and Other Utopias (1996). The text quoted in the title of the present study, “Din altcineva se întrupează Eu” / “The I Embodied from Somebody Else”, included in the bilingual volume Medeea și mașinile ei de război / Medea and Her War Machines (2002), concentrates on a third person figure who seems to be intent on otherness while scrutinizing his own self. Identity is shaped from a permanent relation to previous authors who have to be integrated into a sense of one’s own place in the history of the Romanian literature.

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Ioan Flora (1950-2005) is a Serbian Romanian poet often associated with the generation of the 1980s. He is acknowledged as a member of that generation by Mircea Cărtărescu who explains in *Postmodernismul românesc* that the traditional name lists did not include him initially (1999: 145). Despite the numerous voices raised against the relevance of an overall discussion of the 1980s writers as one unitary movement, some points such as this generation’s development of postmodernism are useful. Coming from the Serbian Banat to study and then to publish in Bucharest, Flora generates themes and techniques along and against the Romanian literature of the moment. Thus, unlike the work of other 1980s writers, Flora’s poetry uses *place* as a central focus and there is a sense that many poems project a located self. At the same time, along the lines of postmodernism, Flora dwells on *memory* and uses irony to rewrite landmarks in Romanian literature such as Bolintineanu and Cantemir among others.

The Serbian Banat, the multicultural region in which Ioan Flora was born and raised, becomes poetic matter in his texts as place-names and other geographical references invade the page. This space represents a constant preoccupation for Ioan Flora as critics notice. Gheorghe Grigurcu as early as 1983 establishes that readers owe Flora’s emphasis on a geographical world in which the Serbian Banat prevails to a lucidity applied to themes that belong to the environment (1983: 11). Many years later, in 1997, Traian Coșovei takes this

intuition further and states: “Ioan Flora needs keen senses and the ‘rattlebox’ with great stories from an unreal Banat that the author transforms rapidly into ... a fascinating Marquesian Macondo, obviously in a subtle register” (1997: 20). And as in the case of other mythical spaces, all the flamboyant features of Flora’s Banat are based on a kernel of palpable reality. The map is always there to confirm that the starting point of his mythologizing is real especially in the volume *Medeea și mașinile ei de război / Medeea and Her War Machines*.

The “I” in the poem “Spre Casă” / “The Way Home” re-enacts a return towards Vârșeț, a location identifiable on the map and in his memory:

Luminile Vârșețului
urcând, clipocind, urcând
din deal înspre dealul negru de deasupra
și spuzit de stele.

The lights of Vârșeț
climbing, flickering, climbing
the hill and, still higher, the black hill above,
sprinkled with stars. (Flora, 2002: 98-99)

Even if the image itself does not give the place individuality, the poet’s choice of associating the place name with light proves the luminous connotations of this space in the poet’s memory. For a fleeting moment home seems to be the center of the universe on which the self projects all hope, sense of direction and need of cohesion.

The same type of connotations resurface in memories of the mother figure who appears as a delicate silhouette: “Pășea ca o vrabie de câmp, fără a atinge asfaltul” / “She skipped like a field sparrow, never touching asphalt” (Flora, 2002: 50-51). The fragility of this stance is projected on a background with definite boundaries: “Între Timiș și Dunăre, hățșuri de ceață” / “Between the Timiș and the Danube, thickets of fog” (Flora, 2002: 50-51). This time the geographical data is given by names of rivers that shape the identity of people in Banat and give them cultural specificity. The two rivers actually delimit a small area that is integral part of the region on which Flora so often dwells and that can be perceived as his homeland.

The care with which the self relates to his native land is obvious in his noting with a sense of great loss the fact that a whole rural area in Banat is going to waste in the wake of depopulation. Not necessarily an isolated phenomenon, the turning of prosperous villages into wastelands acquires specificity and troubling dimensions in the Lipova Plateau, which the poet chooses to discuss. He captures the essential coordinates of reality in an oxymoron which serves as the title of the piece: “Despre singurătate, fântâni și morminte” / “On Loneliness, Wells and Graves”. Indeed, the abstract – “loneliness” is conflated with the concrete, the latter connecting two terms as contradictory as “wells” – the mark of life and “graves” – the mark of death. The poem uses the convention of an anthropological research

project that quotes local subjects such as an old woman who still lives in the countryside and represents a valuable source of information. Her testimony about the wells and the graves in the village, about the times when people from all around came to pray in great numbers seem to be recorded coldly. Moreover, it needs no commentary or addition on the part of an outsider:

“Vă spun că de nimic nu mi-i pagubă cum mi-i de pomi”,
mai zice Doamna din Pustiu:
“stau în urzici și zbeg, și pică mere ionatane,
și cireșe,
și pere;
pică prin iarbă și putrezesc, nu le are nimeni treaba;
atunci sânt io mai tare pustânătatea, când mă uit la pomii ăștia...”

“Let me tell you, nothing causes me more sorrow than the fruit trees,”

The Lady of the Desert Places goes on.

“I stand in the weeds and nettles, Jonathan apples drop to the ground below,
and cherries,
pears.

They drop in the unmown grass and rot. Nobody does anything about it.

That's when the deserted land hurts me the worst, when I look at these trees ...” (Flora, 2002: 58-59)

The culmination of her wailing discourse on the world around reaches the crux of the matter: the sense of loss, desertion, waste, uselessness and estrangement that can be encountered in these lands. Writing about losing connectedness to the homeplace seems to be a warning for the contemporary world as well as an illustration of the self's constant focus on one's place of origin.

In its turn, the Balkans are a recurrent topos of Flora's poetic universe. The poet does not idealize the region, but reflects on its most unsettling dimensions. In one poem the speaker in the text muses over the historical condition of the space:

... eu îmi băteam capul
cu vagi, dar mari nimicuri:
.....

scufundarea butoiului cu pulbere al Balcanilor

într-o mare moartă.

... I racked my brains

with shadowy, grandiose nothings:

.....

sinking the Balkan powder keg

to the bottom of a dead sea. (Flora, 2002: 16-17)

The solution that would make all the problematic issues go away seems to be extreme: the sea that is envisaged as salvation could also engender destruction. Yet, this very space has always brought upon itself destruction instead of salvation and has become notorious for its trouble-making potential in the whole of Europe.

This potential is tragically confirmed at the end of the twentieth century when sectarian war erupts in former Yugoslavia. Even if dislocated from his Serbian home, the speaker in "Aici discursul se întrerupe brusc" / "Here the Speech Is Cut Short" does experience shock and empathy with his friends when bombs fall over his homeland:

bombardiere B-52, Mirage și Jaguar,

Harrier, F/A-18, F-117

brăzdează cerul, însămânțând

cu cele trei rânduri de dinți ai șarpelui lui Marte

pământul meu natal,

cum ar întemeia Theba.

B-52 bombers, Mirage and Jaguar,

Harrier, F/A-18, F-117 jets

furrow the sky, sowing

across my native land

triple sets of teeth of Mars' serpent

as if founding Thebes anew. (Flora, 2002: 108-109)

Even in the face of tragedy mythology does offer an image that can give the full dimension of the present event. On the other hand, the analogy to Thebes can help the text escape circumstantiality: the moment captured in the poem does not have to be limited to the

bombing of Serbia, but can surpass space and time and be relevant for anyone whose native land is under attack. The need to prompt memory to record history in the making is a reflex typical of the chronicler's stance sometimes adopted by the first-person speaker in the volume.

As far as staging the self, one of the most significant poems in the volume *Medeea și mașinile ei de război / Medeea and Her War Machines* is "Din altcineva se întrupează Eu" / "The I Embodied from Somebody Else". The text concentrates on a third person figure who seems to be intent on otherness while scrutinizing his own identity: "citându-l, regândindu-l mereu pe altcineva" / "always studying, always rethinking somebody else" (Flora, 2002: 100-101). Identity is shaped from a permanent relation to previous authors who have to be integrated into a sense of one's own place in the greater scheme of things. One chooses to think that these lines also refer to the poet's constant return in previous volumes to groundbreaking moments in the history of the Romanian literature in what is recognizable as a postmodern endeavor.

As a matter of fact, Ioan Flora is known for his parodies of the classics, Octavian Soviany synthesizing this critical approach to Flora best: "Obsessively preoccupied with 'the comedy of literature' (reason for which his texts can be undoubtedly assimilated to postmodernism) ..., Ioan Flora is one of the major poets at the end of the millenium" (5). It looks as if patricide has to occur before one can take his rightful place in the history of literature. In revisiting the great works of the past that he embarks on deconstructing through irony, Ioan Flora first stops in the nineteenth century. The famous text by Dimitrie Bolintineanu "O fată tânără pe patul morții" / "A Young Girl on Her Deathbed" is transformed in "An Owllet on Its Deathbed", a series of poems in which owls feature primarily. If just the first text, "Intrarea în casă" / "Entering the House" is used as an illustration, one notices that death and victimization are the themes preserved from the old-fashioned predecessor, but instead of resorting to Romantic stereotypes, Flora introduces unexpected elements that surprise the reader with their surrealist overtones. The young girl's first-person lament about her "bitter fate", "fierce pain" (Bolintineanu, 1972: 195) and pitiful condition before death is replaced by a third-person account of an owl which "se văzu răpusă într-un târziu de spațiu, / de liniște, / de propriu-i spirit însetat de noțiuni și imagini" / "had ... seen itself overcome, of late, by space, / silence, / and its own spirit thirsting after ideas and images" (Flora, 1996: 132-133). If not agreeing with Ioan Bogdan Lefter's symbolical reading of the new "character" (1998: 20), one can accept that Flora is juxtaposing nature and culture, the concrete and the abstract, the predictable and the unpredictable in a manner that forces the reader to reconsider his preconceived perception of certain categories, thus enacting postmodernism.

Forcing memory to delve further back in time and literature, Flora uncovers the tremendous richness of Cantemir's book *Istoria ieroglifică*. Furthermore, the poet chooses to select one of the most surprising animal-characters from that universe and dedicate it an entire volume *Discurs asupra Struțocămilei / Discourse on the Ostriccamel* (translations from this volume are mine). The ostriccamel seems to conflate two species, thus presenting an abnormal element that Cantemir's description tries to subordinate to a sense of hierarchy (Moraru, 1997: 145). In Flora's set of poems in which the ostriccamel or Mister Ostriccamel appears, he is sometimes the undefinable inheritance from Cantemir's writing, a knot of contradictions doubled by the postmodern poet's word-play as in the title poem and other times, an ordinary gentleman who goes to a boulevard cafe in "Tabieturi" / "Rituals" (Flora,

1995: 40) or an authoritarian judge in matters beyond his comprehension or sense of justice “Ètica/Despre natura amăgitoare a adevărului” / “Ethics/On the Misleading Nature of Truth” (Flora, 1995: 45-46). What stands out throughout is the fact that the poet does not seem to be disturbed by the protean nature of the ostriccamel, on the contrary: he revels in its limitless capacity to recreate itself with each new sense, proving Cornel Ungureanu’s consideration right: “The education for the imaginary, in the name of non-reality, of the non-putting in Form could characterize this book” (1996: 11).

Throughout his work, whether by revisiting Cantemir’s legacy in *Discurs asupra Struțocămilei / Discourse on the Ostriccamel*, by relating ironically to Bolintineanu’s stereotype of femininity in *Cincizeci de romane și alte utopii / Fifty Novels and Other Utopias* or by remembering the Serbian Banat as the homeplace left behind, Ioan Flora focuses on place and memory in order to render a sense of identity with specific multicultural and postmodernist overtones that turn him into a unique voice in the context of contemporary Romanian literature.

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