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“I travel myself” – nomadic motives originating from the Balkans

Abstract

The article examines the special role of the journey - spiritual and physical, in three novels by immigrant authors from the Balkans: *Paris-Athens* by Vassilis Alexakis, *Hotel Europe* by Dumitru Tsepeneag and *Murder in Byzantium* by Julia Kristeva. Represented is the idea that, by leaving his motherland, the immigrant could never attach himself the same way to any place and be fully accepted in the new community. Thus, his constant movement appears as a peculiar reaction to this specific ‘uprooting’ and becomes a way of life and thinking – i.e. a modern ‘nomadism’.

Key words: Comparative Balkan literature; migration; identity; otherness; nomadism; Vassilis Alexakis; Dumitru Tsepeneag; Julia Kristeva.

Резюме

Статията разглежда особената роля на пътуването - духовно и физическо, в три романа на автори, емигрирали от Балканите: *Париж-Атина* от Василис Алексакис, *Хотел Европа* от Думитру Цепеняг и *Убийство във Византия* от Юлия Кръстева. Представя се идеята, че емигрантът, веднъж напуснал родината си, никога повече не може да създаде същите укрепени връзки с което и да било населявано пространство, нито пък да бъде приет за напълно ‘свой’. Неизменното му движение се явява своеобразна реакция от това ‘обезкореняване’ и се превръща в начин на живот и мислене – т.е. в един съвременен ‘номадизъм’.

Ключови думи: сравнително балканско литературознание; миграция; идентичност; другост; номадизъм; Василис Алексакис; Думитру Цепеняг; Юлия Кръстева.

In her book *Strangers to ourselves* the Bulgarian-French researcher and writer Julia Kristeva presents the idea that: “The space of the foreigner is a moving train, a plain in flight, the very transition that precludes stopping”¹. Thus, Kristeva reveals some very distinctive features of the immigrant mentality – the “disturbing otherness”, the feeling of being “without an origin” and without home, the profound alienation that the immigrant experiences in regard to his surroundings, which in turn leads to a continuous journey in search of his true identity. Kristeva believes that her real identity could be found only through the exclusion from any kind of origin:

Je ne suis pas plus une Bulgare que je ne suis une Française. La psychanalyse m’a conduite à penser que c’est l’exil qui me constituait, et non pas une appartenance. Que notre vérité (la mienne et, j’ose le prétendre, la vérité de chacun) n’est pas dans notre appartenance à une origine – bien qu’elle existe et qu’il faille la reconnaître -, mais dans notre capacité de nous exiler vis-à-vis de l’origine².

¹Kristeva, Julia. *Strangers to ourselves*. Translated from French by Leon S. Roudiez. New York, Columbia University Press, 1991, p. 7-8.

² Kristeva, Julia. *Au risqué de la pensée*. Préface de Marie-Christine Navarro. Ed. définitive. Ed. de l’Aube, 2001, p. 24-25. “I’m no more Bulgarian than French. Psychoanalysis led me to the thought that I’m defined by migration itself, and not by belonging somewhere. That our truth (mine and, I dare say, everyone’s truth) is not contained in our belonging to some origin – although it exists and we have to admit it - but in our ability to emigrate from our origins.”

Dušan I. Bjelič, a researcher from the University of Southern Maine, discloses that for Kristeva, being in exile is not only closely connected to the idea of ‘Oedipal revolt’ against the maternal space, but is also a site of dissent³: “exile is already in itself a form of dissidence, since it involves uprooting oneself from a family, a country, or language”⁴.

In this study, I will use precisely Kristeva’s concept of the immigrant as a modern nomad, doomed to constant motion. I will discuss in comparative aspect how this specific type of nomadism is portrayed in three novels: *Meurtre à Byzance* [*Murder in Byzantium*] (2004) by Julia Kristeva, *Paris-Athènes* [*Paris-Athens*] (1989) by Vassilis Alexakis and *Hotel Europa* [*Hotel Europe*] (1996) by Dumitru Tsepeneag.

Like Kristeva, who has left Bulgaria in 1966 and has immigrated to France, Vassilis Alexakis and Dumitru Tsepeneag are also immigrant authors from the Balkans, writing in a French environment (Alexakis has left Greece in 1967, and Tsepeneag has emigrated from Romania in 1975). However, what unites them and gives grounds for them to be analyzed in comparison is not only the common immigrant fate and the Balkan origin, or the relatively close period of them leaving their homelands. They come from places in the Balkans characterized by severe and repressive for freethinking intellectuals political reality - the communist regimes in Bulgaria and Romania and the regime of the colonels in Greece. In fact, one of the main links between these authors and an important premise for understanding the ideas in their work is the fact that in their writing always is represented the motive of the restless movement, which plays a major role in the development of the literary characters and the plot construction.

Kristeva, Alexakis and Tsepeneag place strong autobiographical element in the images of their characters and their fate is very similar to that of their creators. The characters in their novels are always immigrants, foreigners trying to fit into the new reality and environment and at the same time feeling painfully separated from the others. They feel like they do not belong fully anywhere – neither in France, nor in their native countries. This tragic sense of incomplete belonging irrevocably leads to a state of internal anxiety and constantly forces immigrants to seek psychological and spatial change. Or, as the Canadian writer and literary researcher, Simon Harel, states: « quitter un lieu,

³ Bjelič, Dušan I. *Julia Kristeva: Exile and Geopolitics of the Balkans*. – In: *Slavic Review* 67, no. 2, University of Illinois, Summer 2008, p. 364.

⁴ Kristeva, quoted in Marx-Scouras, Danielle. *The Cultural Politics of Tel Quel: Literature and the Left in the Wake of Engagement*. Philadelphia, 1996, p.195.

c'est alors être condamné au déplacement »⁵, i.e. once immigrants have left their home space, they could never fully settle anywhere else.

It is not surprising that as title of this study I set precisely the motto of Stephanie Delacour – the main character in the trilogy of novels by Julia Kristeva about the fictional city-state Santa Barbara – that states: « Je me voyage » – “I travel myself”. The overall thematic thread that is observed in the novels *Le Vieil Homme et les Loups* [*The Old Man and the Wolves*] (1991), *Possessions* (1996) and *Murder in Byzantium* is the continuous wandering of the French journalist-detective Stephanie Delacour between Paris and Santa Barbara. She is so accustomed being a regular correspondent for a Paris newspaper in Santa Barbara and investigating various criminal cases in this mired in vices place, that she considers as normal to always be at the airport or on the plain, traveling to Santa Barbara. This constant movement, however, creates a feeling of a specific psychological and physical homelessness: “People think that I live in Paris, but I'm not there.”⁶ The alienation and nomadic feeling disclosed in her image are explained by the peculiarities of her descent – a Russian mother from which Stephanie inherited the Orthodox values, and a father who was for many years the French ambassador in Santa Barbara. In other words, her complex personal history dooms her to be a ‘foreigner’ either in France or in Santa Barbara.

Stephanie’s pursuit to reinvent herself and to build a deep connection with certain place draws her closer to another main character in the novel *Murder in Byzantium* – namely Sebastian Chrest-Jones. Again, the character is symbolically fated to be different from the others, on the one hand, because of his professional activities – Chrest-Jones is a migration historian, and on the other hand, because of the immigrant origin of his family – he discovers that his father has a Bulgarian descent. Sebastian Chrest-Jones is consumed with the need to find the historical traces of his forefather and this passionate desire puts him in an almost insane study of *The Alexiad*, written by the Byzantine princess Anna Comnena. In time, the obsessive state of the historian deepens and he decides to go to a symbolic crusade in search of the lost memory of his father's family. The professor embarks on a long journey first in Bulgaria (Plovdiv), and then in Le-Puy-en-Velay (France), in search of his imaginary Byzantium. He hopes that by discovering this symbolic homeland of his ancestors, he will find also the meaning of his existence. Reading the diary of Chrest-Jones and his notes on *The Alexiad*, Stephanie Delacour rediscovers herself in his ideas, shares his dreams of the

⁵ Harel, Simon. *Lieux trahis, déplacements entravés dans l'oeuvre d'Antonio D'Alfonso. Lieux propices. L'énonciation des lieux/Le lieu de l'énonciation dans les contextes francophones interculturels*. Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2005, p.50. “To leave one place means to be doomed to move”.

⁶ Kristeva, Julia. *Murder in Byzantium*. Translated from French by C. Jon Delogu. Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 353.

mythical Byzantium and even sees him as her spiritual brother. For Stephanie, the image of Byzantium also represents the relationship with the family memory – the journalist feels in herself the turbulent blood of the Orthodox Russian mother and defines herself as a real “daughter of the steppe” (again an image that refers to nomadic symbolism). Moreover, if Sebastian Chrest-Jones and Stephanie Delacour resemble in their constant journey from one place to another a modern Ulysses, the coveted Byzantium is a utopian and unattainable Ithaca. Eventually, the return in the space of family memory and identity is impossible, and the journey must continue.

Tell Hermine there are no happy foreigners because they’re all in mourning for their mothers. I know that’s no surprise to you. Newborns know it, and young children too. The old only become old because they forget it. One can remain the ambitious inheritor of one’s father from afar, even in exile. In fact, that’s what they’re for, fathers – to keep you far off, upward and onward. But a mother! She’s that feeling presence, that language of taste before the code of ideas, that envelope of aromas – in a word, Love. Reread the Song of Songs! So if you go without the body to body, if this communion of tongues is lost, paradise is lost. Then all that’s left is nostalgia. You’ve noticed, Estelle, how all nomads are melancholic, their songs speak lamentation with ever breath⁷.

Through the character of Sebastian Chrest-Jones, Julia Kristeva directly represents her idea of the nomadic nature of immigrants and foreigners (in the comments of Stephanie Delacour on the personality of the professor, he repeatedly is called “nomad”) and the psychological frustration and melancholy they constantly experience.

In the novels by the Greek author Vassilis Alexakis the geographical mobility of the characters is an integral feature of the narrative, and it is not limited only to the travel between Paris and Athens, rather covers wider European and intercontinental space. Naturally, the greatest emphasis is given upon the return to Greece – an important point, which is basically the plot of many of his novels, including *Talgo* (1983), *La Langue maternelle* [*The mother tongue*] (1995) and others. This does not mean that, unlike Julia Kristeva and the inaccessibility of the mythical Byzantium in her novel, the area of family memory in the works of Alexakis is tangible and can be restored. On the contrary, the return to his native Greece launches new identity issues and civilizational clashes. The reality of the homeland turns out different from the idealized view of characters, who have immigrated a long time ago, and sometimes is even incomprehensible to them. This accordingly drives them to new travels through which to rediscover the lost or forgotten cultural codes.

The novel *Paris-Athens* is the most autobiographical work by Alexakis. The text is written in first person and follows the departure from Greece, the establishment of the writer in France, the

⁷ Kristeva, Julia. *Murder in Byzantium*. Translated from French by C. Jon Delogu. Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 363.

beginning of his literary career and the many hardships surrounding his integration into the new cultural model and the change of language. At its core, the plot of the novel is constructed around the continuous spiritual and physical movement of the writer-narrator. Besides the implied in the very title of the novel movement between France and Greece, Paris and Athens, which symbolizes the psychological duality of Alexakis between both cultural and ethnic origins, many other destinations are also mentioned, such as his travels to Canada and the USA, and the impressions gained there. However, as Alexakis himself admits – being always on the road, makes it impossible to recognize a certain space as really ‘his own’: « Ma fatigue est peut-être due aux efforts que j’ai consentis depuis longtemps pour conquérir une nouvelle identité sans perdre l’ancienne. [...] Mes déplacements incessants m’ont empêché de m’habituer complètement aussi bien à Paris qu’à Athènes »⁸.

The writer reveals in depth the complex role of immigrant authors and the dilemmas posed by the exercised bilingualism. He constantly emphasizes upon the irrevocable identity fragmentation and the fact that despite the constant questions and even reproaches as to why he writes novels in French, and not only in Greek, he couldn’t and probably would never be able to make definitive choice between the Greek and the French identity. On the one hand, Alexakis associates Greece with childhood memories and nostalgia for the past, which could never be denied. On the other hand, the author has spent most of his life writing in French and he could not imagine leaving France forever and abandoning the language. Also, his children speak French and grew up in a French environment, i.e. for them the home of their father is unknown, distant and in many ways ‘foreign’. Thus, describing the irreconcilable and various factors that prevent him from belonging completely to one side or another, the writer finds no other solution but to try to synchronize with his duality and to accept as normal the eternal residence at the train station or at the airport, traveling from France to Greece and vice versa.

The constant travel as thematic and structural thread is typical for the writing of the Romanian author Dumitru Tsepeneag, as was the case with Kristeva and Alexakis. Already in the titles of his early experimental novels written in French, we could see the idea of the immigrant’s irresistible impulse to travel and to feel the freedom of the spatial displacement. On the one hand, we have the image of the flight of the dove that symbolizes the inability to deter the aspiration for mobility (in the novel *Pigeon vole* [*Fly, dove!*...] (1988)), on the other hand, we have the image of

⁸ Alexakis, Vassilis. *Paris-Athènes*. Paris, Seuil, 1989, p. 212-213. “My fatigue may be due to the efforts that I have exerted a long time to conquer new identity without losing the old [...] My constant movement prevented me from fully adjusting to either Paris or Athens.”

the vehicle, in this case – a train, which is the instrument for this mobility (in the novel *Roman de gare* [*A train station novel*] (1985)).

However, the real culmination of the nomadic nature of Tsepeneag's work is his series of books, including the novels: *Hotel Europe*, *Pont des Arts* (1998), *Maramureş* [*Maramures*] (2001) and *Camionul bulgar* [*The Bulgarian truck*] (2010). In these four novels is represented the fate of the Romanians who have emigrated from their country before and after the events of 1989 in search of a better life in the European West. The narrator of the story in all four books is a Romanian dissident author, who has escaped from the totalitarian regime and has settled in Paris. It is obvious that this narrator is a literary counterpart of Tsepeneag himself and through his voice we can see many of the aspects of the professional and personal life of the exiled author.

In the novel *Hotel Europe* are intertwined multiple storylines, united by the feeling of a perpetual motion, a spontaneous and irreversible nomadism. On the one hand, the novel describes the escape of a young Romanian, named Ion, from his homeland and his difficult journey through Hungary, Austria and Germany, until he reaches his destination – France. During the tumultuous events in the Romanian Revolution of 1989, emigration was the chosen path for many Romanian and was seen by them as the only possible salvation from the surrounding horror. Ion also believes in this imaginary dream, until he falls in the new environment and, instead of prosperity, he faces the criminal underworld, hiding in the shadows of the developed western civilization. On the other hand, *Hotel Europe* simultaneously follows the efforts of the narrator, the already mentioned above immigrant dissident writer, to write a novel about what is happening in Romania, a novel in which the adventures of Ion will also find a place (thus Tsepeneag actually writes about writing a novel). In fact, the narrator, similar to Ion, is also a character defined by the idea of motion – spiritual and physical. At one point, he wants to write a novel about his past journey by truck from Romania to France, when he crossed almost all of Europe – i.e. we have a journey in his memory, a spiritual movement. Then, the same narrator decides that he will write more relaxed, if he is alone and undisturbed, so he travels from Paris to the countryside – i.e. we have a journey in real time, a physical movement.

Tsepeneag reveals the positive and negative aspects of immigration. On the one hand, for him, this displacement will always be associated with 'forced exile', which leads him to irreversible alienation and constant mental crossroad. On the other hand, it allows the human spirit to break away from restrictions and to be fully realized (throughout the text Tsepeneag uses the images of the bird and the sky that embody the idea of infinite space and absolute freedom). The novel *Hotel Europe* is saturated with the symbolism of the travel and the migrant nomadism (the title itself alludes to the

nomadic transience – the hotel is a space in which one can only live for a certain period of time, it cannot be a place to settle down and create home), and even seemingly insignificant moments hide double meaning. For example, in one episode Ion and Marianne, the wife of the Romanian dissident writer, go to the cinema and the movie they watch relates a story about migration and people who choose to leave their birthplace to become a homeless wanderers: “Filmul e povestea unui exod. Populația unui sat, dacă nu a unei întregi regiuni, își ia lumea în cap, pleacă, se duc tineri și bătrâni unde văd cu ochii”⁹. Thus, Tsepeneag presents from all viewpoints the complex problems of migration and the cultural and identity issues, which accompany this process.

In connection with this incessant mobility in the works of the three authors, special role is given to such interim and autonomous spaces such as airports, railway stations and vehicles. There the immigrant feels most comfortable and relaxed, because it is part of his nature. It is not surprising, that Alexakis’ characters spend a suspiciously long time at airports and railway stations and the transport they use varies widely – cars, buses, trains, planes, and even ferries. Thus, for example, the character-narrator in the novel *Paris-Athens* during most of the time is situated on the train on the way to his next destination, pondering on his traveler’s destiny. As was mentioned above, Stephanie Delacour, the main character in *Murder in Byzantium*, is almost constantly located at the airport, and when in Paris or Santa Barbara – she’s almost always behind the wheel of her car and travels the roads. In Tsepeneag’s works special role is given to the train station and the train is one of the favorite vehicles of his characters – often there they think over their problems, experience unexpected events and meet unusual people.

As a conclusion, we could say that one of the main characteristics of the immigrant identity observed in these novels by Alexakis, Tsepeneag and Kristeva is the fact, that such an identity cannot be bound to one particular place. Once their literary characters have left their homeland, which until this moment has been their general source of identification codes, they experience a specific internal alienation and separation from the surrounding environment and could never create the same strengthened relations to any newly inhabited space. Therefore, the incessant motion turns into a way of living and thinking, into a way of surviving the imposed otherness. To travel means to exist.

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⁹ Tsepeneag, Dumitru. *Hotel Europa*. București, Albatros, 1996, p. 486. “The film is a story about mass migration. The population of a village, if not of an entire region, is left without any hope and leaves, young and old take the road.”

Indo-European, and Balkan Linguistics with the Faculty of Slavic Studies). Recent publications: Мигрантската идентичност в творчеството на Василис Алексакис и Думитру Цепеняг. – В: Балканските езици, литератури и култури. Дивергенция и конвергенция. София, Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2015, с. 477-484. [The migrant identity in the works of Vassilis Alexakis and Dumitru Tsepeneag. – In: Balkan Languages, Literatures and Cultures. Divergence and Convergence. Sofia University Press, 2015, p. 477-484.] Coordinator of Sofia University e-journal Colloquia Comparativa Litterarum.