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Vassilis Alexakis and Dumitru Tsepeneag – Otherness and Exile

Abstract

The paper displays and analyses the characteristics of the writing of two authors from the Balkans who immigrated to France in the 1960s and 1970s – Vassilis Alexakis (of Greek descent) and Dumitru Tsepeneag (of Romanian descent). The study traces their critical reception in both France and the lost motherland and outlines certain peculiar features of the immigrant mentality and the complicated self-perception of the immigrants in the context of the dual reality of their existence. It also addresses the causes of the inability of the writers themselves and their literary characters to belong fully to one cultural heritage, and the identity issues that arise from this fact.

Keywords: Balkan literatures; migration; identity; otherness; Vassilis Alexakis; Dumitru Tsepeneag

**Василис Алексакис и Думитру Цепеняг – другост и изгнаничество
Резюме**

Статията разглежда и анализира характеристиките на творчество на двама автори, мигрирали от Балканите във Франция през 60-те и 70-те години на ХХ век – Василис Алексакис (с гръцки произход) и Думитру Цепеняг (с румънски произход). Проследява се критическата им рецепция както във Франция, така и в напуснатата родина, и се очертават определени специфични черти на мигрантската менталност и на сложното себеусещане на мигрантите в контекста на двойствената реалност на тяхното съществуване. Посочени са причините за невъзможността на самите автори и на създадените от тях художествени образи да принадлежат напълно на едно културно наследство и идентичностните проблеми, произлизащи от този факт.

Ключови думи: балкански literatury; миграция; идентичност; другост; Василис Алексакис; Думитру Цепеняг.

Amin Maalouf, writer of Lebanese descent who has lived in France since 1976, reveals some very distinctive features of the immigrant mind-set and expresses his views on the identity issues and the internal duality of the immigrant in his book of essays *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*:

How many times, since I left Lebanon in 1967 to live in France, have people asked me, with the best intentions in the world, whether I felt “more French” or “more Lebanese”? And I always give the same

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answer: “Both!” I say that not in the interests of fairness or balance, but because any other answer would be a lie. What makes me myself rather than anyone else is the very fact that I’m poised between two countries, two or free languages and several cultural traditions. It is precisely this that defines my identity. Would I exist more authentically if I cut off a part of myself?²

Maalouf argues passionately that there is no necessity to choose only one cultural and ethnical allegiance and each individual has the right to reinvent himself and his beliefs and not to be bound by some “fundamental truth” or “essence determined once and for all at birth”³.

That being said, the author himself admits that the inherent duality of the immigrant is unique and very often misunderstood by others around him. The immigrant is simultaneously more and less than other individuals: he speaks more than one language, he belongs to more than one culture and sometimes even has more than one ethnical and national consciousness, which certainly fuels his creativity, but, on the other hand, creates the constant need for him to prove his affiliations and to defy the preconceived notions and prejudices standing in his way. As a result, the immigrant very often feels like an observer and an outsider in the communities he wants to be fully accepted by.

In the introduction to her anthology *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travellers, Outsiders, Backward Glances*, the literary and cultural critic and theorist Susan Rubin Suleiman defines the broad connotations of the concept of exile and explores its “melancholy tension”⁴: “In its narrow sense a political banishment, exile in its broad sense designates every kind of estrangement or displacement, from the physical and geographical to the spiritual”⁵. Therefore, despite how successful his integration was and how well everyone treats him, the exiled individual is fated to be more or less “the other” and “the foreigner”, the constant traveller without home and roots.

This research explores the specific situation of two writers, Vassilis Alexakis (of Greek descent) and Dumitru Tsepeneag (of Romanian descent), who emigrated from the Balkans and settled in France in the 1960s and 1970s. Born in 1943, Vassilis Alexakis studied at the journalism school in Lille (France) in the period 1961-1964 and then returned to Greece. Because of the Greek Military Junta (The Regime of the Colonels) of 1967-1974, he went into exile to Paris in 1967. Currently he is constantly travelling between France and Greece. Dumitru Tsepeneag was one of the founding members of the *Oneiric group*, a surrealist Romanian literary group formed in Bucharest in 1964. He did not hide his misgivings concerning the political life in Romania and was very vocal in his opinions against the totalitarianism in the Romanian society and the lack of literary freedom. As a result of his

² Maalouf, Amin. *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*. English translation by Barbara Bray, New York, Arcade Publishing, 2000, p. 1.

³ *Ibid.* p. 2.

⁴ Suleiman, Susan Rubin. *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1998, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 1.

dissident activity, Tsepeneag was placed under surveillance by the Romanian secret police, the *Securitate*, and was formally indicted in 1975. The same year, while he was in France, Tsepeneag's citizenship was stripped through a presidential decree signed by Ceausescu, and the writer settled permanently in Paris. Currently he resides in both Paris and Bucharest.

This enforced separation of the two writers from their countries due to political and ideological disagreements with the authorities leaves a deep wound in their personal identity and greatly influences their writing. As individuals who express themselves in two languages and within two literatures – their native (respectively Greek and Romanian) and the French – they are subjects to literary criticism by both sides. Because of that, one of the main topics explored in the works by Alexakis and Tsepeneag is the awareness of the immigrant that he exists between two cultural and ethnical entities but ultimately belongs fully to neither one of them.

At the very beginning of his autobiographical novel *Paris-Athènes*⁶ [*Paris-Athens*], Alexakis emphasizes his vague and ambiguous place in the modern literary history: « Je pensais que, si les Français me considéraient comme auteur grec, mes compatriotes seraient davantage fondés à me classer parmi les étrangers »⁷. His inability to assign himself exclusively to any of these two cultural and literary domains, within which he functions as a writer, is clearly expressed in the novel *Je t'oublierai tous les jours*⁸ [*I will forget you day by day*]. Here, regarding his first published novel, Alexakis writes the following: « Il n'appartient pas à la littérature grecque. Peut-être n'appartient-il pas non plus à la littérature française ? »⁹ Dumitru Tsepeneag also suffers from such doubts and cannot accept easily his imposed detachment from the Romanian literary space. Affected by the fact that some of his compatriots¹⁰ marginalize him within the Romanian literature and do not let him out of the imposed label of “writer in exile”, he seeks to re-establish himself as a Romanian author.

The characters in the novels by Alexakis and Tsepeneag are always immigrants, foreigners trying to fit into the new environment. They feel like they do not belong fully anywhere – either in France or in their homeland, however, they actively fight to protect their right to speak and write (or be translated) in both languages and to be mediators between their two cultural and literary worlds.

⁶ Alexakis, Vassilis. *Paris-Athènes*. Paris, Seuil, 1989.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 20. “I thought that if the French consider me a Greek author, my compatriots could rightly attribute me to the foreign writers”. [My translation]

⁸ Alexakis, Vassilis. *Je t'oublierai tous les jours*. Paris, Seuil, 2005.

⁹ *Ibid.* p.96. “It [the novel] doesn't belong to the Greek literature. Maybe it doesn't belong to the French literature either” [My translation]

¹⁰ Here, I allude to some of the Romanian writers, literary critics and historians, who are commonly known as “the generation of the 80s years of XX century”. For example, Ion Negoitsescu, a literary critic, historian, poet and novelist, declines to accept Tsepeneag's novels written in French language as part of the Romanian literature, with the argument that “the language is the sole criterion for determining a literature”.

The autobiographical novel *Paris-Athènes* by Vassilis Alexakis follows the writer's journey between Greece and France. It describes the experience of changing countries and languages and explores the identity issues that arise from this complicated process. This work is perhaps the most personal and intimate reflection of the inner struggle that torments Vassilis Alexakis, and it represents a thorough psychological analysis of the inevitable crossroad position of the immigrant. Alexakis writes not only about his personal feelings and experiences, but he is also very interested in meeting other immigrants and observing their circumstances and levels of integration. He has the ability with an astounding acuteness to recognize and point out the symptoms of the endangered and fragile identity – especially when it comes to the next generation, the children of these immigrant families. In his opinion, the parents have the privilege to remember their homeland and even to dream of a return that will never take place, but the children have no such dreams anymore. They have been culturally assimilated and Alexakis sees them as « tirillés entre deux cultures qu'ils ne possèdent le plus souvent que partiellement »¹¹.

As implied by the very title of the novel *Paris-Athènes*, the mobility between France and Greece, between Paris and Athens, symbolizes the psychological duality of the immigrant author. 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 »¹². The writer is so tired of this incessant geographical and spiritual travelling, and the internal conflicts it creates, that he even considers going through the process of becoming a French citizen, but his Greek cultural and ethnical consciousness and the loyalty to his childhood memories¹³ are too strong to allow him to do this. He also fears that the French citizenship will fracture his dual identity even more and will leave him in a state of no identity whatsoever. However, ultimately Alexakis does not give in to depression and does not let himself be defined by either the French or the Greek side. He takes the decision to embrace his duality and to learn to live with it, and even to see its positive sides: « J'avais décidé d'assumer mes deux identités, d'utiliser à tour de rôle les deux langues, de partager ma vie entre Paris et Athènes »¹⁴.

¹¹ Alexakis, Vassilis. *Paris-Athènes*. Paris, Seuil, 1989, p. 95. “Torn between two cultures they usually possess only partially”. [My translation]

¹² *Ibid.* p. 212–213. “My fatigue may be due to the efforts that I have exerted for a long time to conquer new identity without losing the old [...]. My constant movement prevented me from fully adjusting to either Paris or Athens”. [My translation]

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 195. “I decided to assume my two identities, to use in turn both languages, to share my life between Paris and Athens”. [My translation]

As was pointed above, Alexakis feels deeply the need to reconnect with his Greek heritage. Therefore, in his novel *La Langue maternelle*¹⁵ [*The mother tongue*], which also intertwines autobiographical and fictional, the author returns to his native Greek world, however, not without emotional turmoil and increasingly complicated identity issues. The main character in the novel, the Greek immigrant Pavlos Nikolaidis, after twenty years of living in France finally returns to Greece. Pavlos takes as his project the deciphering of the meaning of the letter epsilon displayed at the entrance of the temple of Apollo at Delphi. His coming back to his homeland coincides with the Easter holidays, and the choice of this sacred time is not accidental. The religious calendar celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ, while Pavlos experiences symbolic resurrection. He rediscovers his relationship with the mother tongue, with the ancient Greek history and the abandoned homeland or, in other words, undergoes specific cultural re-assimilation. However, this re-assimilation is not absolute and does not occur without problems. Pavlos, as the representative of two cultural codes, the acquired French and the native Greek, continuously compares and evaluates the two codes, which in itself is a sign that he cannot belong to them completely and will always be more of an observer than a full participant in the cultural and ethnical relationships:

Il était évident qu'ils se connaissaient tous très bien, je n'entendais autour de moi que des prénoms, Yorgos, Nicos, Socrate, Éléonora, Dimitra, Catérina. À Paris, dans les mêmes circonstances, il me semble que j'aurais surtout entendu des noms de famille [...] J'ai été jaloux de ces démonstrations d'amitié comme si je ne faisais pas partie de la même société, comme si j'étais un intrus¹⁶.

Similar are the topics and the problems that we meet in the novels by the Romanian writer Dumitru Tsepeneag – especially in his series of books, including the novels *Hotel Europa*¹⁷ [*Hotel Europe*], *Ponts des Arts*¹⁸, *Maramureş*¹⁹ [Maramures] and *Camionul bulgar*²⁰ [*The Bulgarian truck*]. These four novels represent the fate of the Romanians who 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 escaped from the totalitarian regime and 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.

¹⁵ Alexakis, Vassilis. *La Langue maternelle*. Paris, Stock, 2006.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.45. “It was obvious they knew each other very well, I could hear around me that they were on a first name basis: Yorgos, Nicos, Socrates, Eleonora, Dimitra, Caterina. In Paris, in the same circumstances, I’d have heard mostly family names... I was jealous of the friendly demonstrations, as if I were not part of the same company, as if I were an intruder”. [My translation]

¹⁷ Tsepeneag, Dumitru. *Hotel Europa*. Bucureşti, Albatros, 1996.

¹⁸ Tsepeneag, Dumitru. *Ponts des Arts*. Bucureşti, Albatros, 1999.

¹⁹ Tsepeneag, Dumitru. *Maramureş*. Cluj Napoca, Dacia, 2001.

²⁰ Tsepeneag, Dumitru. *Camionul Bulgar*. Iaşi, Polirom, 2010.

In the novel *Hotel Europa*, multiple storylines are intertwined, united by the feeling of a perpetual motion, a spontaneous and irreversible nomadism. The novel describes the escape of a young Romanian, named Ion, from his homeland and his difficult journey to the final destination – France. During the tumultuous events in the Romanian Revolution of 1989, the migration was the chosen path for many Romanians and was seen by them as the only possible salvation from the surrounding horror. Ion also believes in this imaginary dream, until he comes into contact with the new environment and, instead of prosperity, he faces the criminal underworld, hiding in the shadows of the developed western civilization. Ion is “the other”, “the outsider” in this new world, he is looked upon with suspicion (a couple of times he is called disdainfully a “gypsy”) and very often is forced to seek help from other illegal immigrants like himself who are part of the criminal underworld, which puts him in many dangerous situations. In the second storyline, the novel *Hotel Europa* simultaneously follows the efforts of the narrator, the already mentioned above immigrant dissident writer, to write a book about what is happening in Romania, including in it even an account of Ion’s adventures throughout his long journey (thus Tsepeneag actually writes about writing a novel). This Romanian dissident writer, as opposed to Ion, is a representative of the legal and intellectual migration group. He is well integrated into the French community, and his work is accepted with respect, he is even married to a French woman – Marianne (also a recurring character in Tsepeneag’s novels), but that does not mean that he does not go through serious identity issues and insecurities. The writer has to defend constantly his loyalty to the Romanian literary and cultural space, and in every conversation, he has to explain to his French friends and even to his own wife the specifics of the Romanian mind-set and his own political and social opinions.

In the novel *Maramureş* Tsepeneag develops the theme about the complex role of the immigrant writer as an intermediate figure between two literatures and two languages. He describes the consequent problematic reception of his work by the French reader who is not familiar enough with the Romanian literary trends. At the beginning of the novel, in a phone call with a French reader the Romanian dissident author defends his role as a representative of the Romanian literature who, despite living in France, writes in Romanian and has a Romanian consciousness:

- So, you are a Romanian author.
- Yes, I’m a Romanian. And for some time I’ve been writing again in Romanian.
- I didn’t even know that there are writers in Romania.
- And yet they exist. Look at the title page, there is written: translated from Romanian.
- Yes, of course, but who looks at the title page. Although, you live in Paris, right?
- Yes, I’ve lived in Paris for nearly thirty years.
- Yes, of course, now it’s getting clear...
- What exactly?
- You’ve lived in Paris since you were a little kid...

- Not so little²¹. [My translation]

In *Maramureș* we meet again many of the characters from *Hotel Europa*, but this time the journey is back to their roots – they travel from France to Romania. Here, we see that often the imagined return to the homeland has very little to do with the real physical return. Despite that at the beginning of the novel, the narrator, the immigrant dissident writer, defends passionately his Romanian identity, when he is at last back in Romania, he remains misunderstood and alone, a little out of place. His return to Romania is accompanied by many more personal and identity crises, and it is obvious that even on his home soil the writer still considers himself a foreigner:

I hope it heals not only the rheumatism but also the mental pain, or at least assuages them, prevents them from becoming deadly, such as the pain of exile, which has less to do with where you are, and more to do with the bad habit of thinking of yourself as an individual detached from the community... individual without an address, isolated and tormented by the longings. I want to say that here in Maramures, I don't feel more at home than in the foreign countries; maybe for me "at home" doesn't exist... ²². [My translation]

From all of the above, we could say that, although both Vassilis Alexakis and Dumitru Tsepeneag experience the feeling of profound alienation from certain places or people and recognize the specific "otherness" in themselves, they react in different and very personal ways. Alexakis believes that by accepting his dual identity, he will reach some kind of harmonious coexisting between his two "essences", the French and the Greek, and will protect them both. Unlike him, Tsepeneag passionately defends the priority of his Romanian identity, even when he feels estranged and displaced from the Romanian cultural entity.

These different attitudes towards the immigrant situation are also reflected in the distinctive aspects of their imposed bilingualism. This bilingualism does not occur in the same way by both authors and is motivated by different ideas and beliefs. Because the use of two languages – French and

²¹ Tsepeneag, Dumitru. *Maramureș*. Cluj Napoca, Dacia, 2001, p.8.

- Sunteți român așadar.

- Da, sunt și român. Iar de câtva timp scriu din nou în românește.

- Nici nu știam că există scriitori în România.

- Există totuși. Uitați-vă, scrie pe pagina de gardă: traduit du roumain.

- Da, sigur, dar cine se uită pe pagina de gardă. Însă locuiți la Paris, nu-i așa?

- Da, locuiesc la Paris de vreo treizeci de ani.

- A, sigur, atunci se explică...

- Ce anume?

- Locuiți la Paris de mic copil...

- Nu chiar așa de mic.

²² *Ibid.* p. 300. "Sper să nu lecuiască doar reumatismul dar și bolile sufletului, ori măcar să le aline, să le împiedice să devină mortale, boala depeizării de pildă, care n-are nici o legătură cu locul în care te afli, ci cu năravul de a te gândi pe tine însuși ca pe un individ rupt de colectivitate, oricare ar fi aceasta, individ izolat și măcinat de doruri fără adresă. Vreau să spun că nici aici, în Maramureș, nu mă simt mai acasă decât pe meleaguri străine; poate că pentru mine nici nu mai există un acasă..."

native (Greek or Romanian) – plays an important role in the life and work of the writers and in their self-identification, it becomes one of the most discussed topics in their prose.

Vassilis Alexakis accepts and fully realizes his linguistic duality. At the beginning of his writing career, he published his novels directly in French, but some of his compatriots criticized him because of that and claimed that he had forgotten the Greek language. To prove them wrong and to assert himself as a Greek author, he decided to return to writing in Greek language. His first novel, written directly in Greek, was *Tάλγο*²³ [*Talgo*²⁴], followed by the novel *Η Μητρική γλώσσα*²⁵ [*La Langue maternelle*]. Alexakis self-translated *Tάλγο* into French and since then has been writing simultaneously in French and Greek: “tous les livres que j’ai écrits sont le fruit d’un dialogue tantôt avec la langue française, tantôt avec la langue grecque”²⁶. The writer reveals different aspects of his character and achieves various ideological goals depending on the language he uses. On the one hand, writing in Greek symbolically returns the author to his childhood, to the world of memories and undisguised emotion; on the other hand - French is the language of fantasy, fiction and creative recreation: « Le grec m’attendrissait, me rappelait qui j’étais. Le français me permettait de prendre plus facilement congé de la réalité »²⁷. However, coming to terms with this bilingual identity is invariably accompanied by the fear that his increasing dependence on the French language could alienate Alexakis from his native Greek: « Je me suis rendu compte que j’avais pas mal oublié ma langue maternelle. Je cherchais souvent mes mots et, souvent, le premier mot qui me venait à l’esprit était français [...] Mon grec s’était sclérosé, rouillé »²⁸. Therefore, the rediscovering and reconnecting with the Greek language become one of the main themes in his work – for example, in the novel *La Langue maternelle*, the main reason for the return of Pavlos Nikolaidis to Greece is his craving to restore the lexical and emotional fullness of his native language.

Dumitru Tsepeneag adopts a much more confrontational bilingual model. Even after his permanent establishment in Paris, he initially continued to write in Romanian, and his works were translated into French by the famous translator Alain Paruit. In the 1980s, however, Tsepeneag had lost any hope that the totalitarian regime in Romania will ever fall and his place in the Romanian literary life would be restored, and he decided to turn away from his mother tongue and to write and

²³ Αλεξάκης, Βασίλης. *Τάλγο*. Αθήνα, Εξάντας, 1980.

²⁴ Alexakis, Vassilis. *Talgo*. Paris, Fayard, 1997.

²⁵ Αλεξάκης, Βασίλης. *Η Μητρική γλώσσα*. Αθήνα, Εξάντας, 1995.

²⁶ Alexakis, Vassilis. *Paris-Athènes*. Paris, Seuil, 1989, p. 6. “All the books I’ve written are the result of a dialogue either with the French or with the Greek language”. [My translation]

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 249. “Greek moved me, reminded me who I was. French allowed me to escape more easily from the reality”. [My translation]

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 11. “I realized that I’d quite forgotten my mother tongue. I often searched for words and the French ones came first to my mind [...] My Greek was getting sclerotic, rusty”. [My translation]

publish three novels directly in French, under the pseudonym Ed Pastenague – *Le mot sablier*²⁹ [*The word 'hourglass'*], *Roman de gare*³⁰ [*A train station novel*] and *Pigeon vole*³¹ [*Fly, dove!*]. Tsepeneag claims that the main reason for him to begin writing in French is that in the translation of his works from Romanian to French he sees the words written by him “murdered” by the words of the translator³². Writing in French did not last long and in the 1990s years, after the fall of the Ceausescu’s regime, the author returned to writing in his native language and started publishing his novels in both Romania and France (again translated into French by Paruit). As opposed to Vassilis Alexakis, Dumitru Tsepeneag does not believe that it is possible for a writer to belong simultaneously to two languages. Explanation of this interesting phenomenon could be sought in the very ideological and theoretical attitude of the author, who maintains that “belonging to a certain literature depends on the language one is writing in, rather than on the ethnic or racial criterion”³³. In other words, according to Tsepeneag, if you write in Romanian language you are a Romanian author, if you write in French that makes you a French author. Therefore, choosing to write in Romanian, Tsepeneag actually reinstates himself as part of the Romanian literary tradition and seeks to escape the imposed immigrant isolation. This desire manifests itself as an integral thematic thread in his novels: for example, the nostalgia that the narrator of *Hotel Europa* and *Maramureș* experiences is directed not so much at the territorial and ethnic picture of Romania as at the language that is spoken there: “[...] beyond the area of dissemination of the mother tongue, the estrangement is felt more strongly”³⁴.

Despite the different aspects of their bilingualism, Alexakis and Tsepeneag create prose, deeply influenced by the interaction of native and acquired language, and explore in depth the internal fluctuations and turmoil that this bilingualism causes in the immigrant mentality.

The identity of the immigrant writers is a diverse and fragile structure subjected to continuous attacks by external factors. The questions whether the authors feel “more French” or “more Greek or Romanian”, and whether their affiliation to one or another literature is more strong, couldn’t lead to a full and thorough response due to the simple reason that the process of self-determination is much more complex and incomprehensible than one may think. To force them to choose one side over the other would only deepen their feeling of alienation and otherness. Perhaps the only way to a better and

²⁹ Pastenague, Ed. *Le mot sablier*. Paris, P.O.L, 1984.

³⁰ Pastenague, Ed. *Roman de gare*. Paris, P.O.L, 1985.

³¹ Pastenague, Ed. *Pigeon vole*. Paris, P.O.L, 1989.

³² Tsepeneag, Dumitru. *Războiul literaturii încă nu s-a încheiat*. București, Allfa, 2000, p.20.

³³ *Ibid.* p. 192. “apartenența la o literatură e în funcție de limba în care se scrie, nicidecum de criterii etnice sau rasiale”.

³⁴ Tsepeneag, Dumitru. *Maramureș*. Cluj Napoca, Dacia, 2001, p. 300. “[...] dincolo de aria de circulație a limbii materne înstrăinarea e resimțită și mai puternic”.

more objective presentation of the role of the migrant author in our contemporary society is to assume that identity with its multiplicity is not to be overcome by force but simply understood and appreciated.