

NICHOLAS CATANOY: Romanian Exilic Writer to Be Reclaimed as One of Our Own

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Romanian literary criticism of recent years has been challenged by the increasing number of studies taking up the unresolved issue of whether to consider Romanian exilic writers alongside those in the national canon. This paper aims at highlighting the personality, the richness, and value of the work of Nicholas Catanoy, with a view to bridging the gap between the level of consideration given to exilic Romanian writers versus the autochthonous ones. This is considered necessary since exilic work has been unfairly judged by critics in the process of rehabilitation, and, this being a sensitive situation, it requires reflection and consideration before it is resolved. Probably it will still take a long time until a final decision is reached, but steps forward can be taken by examining the complex personality of Nicholas Catanoy, the exilic writer, who deserves to be given a place among local and national writers following his overseas literary recognition.

Key words: Nicholas Catanoy, exile, national canon, Romanian literary and cultural heritage, literary history.

Defining 'exile' has proved to be difficult for researchers because its meaning has changed over time in relation to determining circumstances² and authors, various typologies resulting. Exile is generally defined as a voluntary departure or a departure due to political or judicial sanctions or constraints,³ understood as 'liminal' circumstances (Ion 2013).

In a brief overview, the idea of sorrow and pain is often associated with exile during different periods of time. Thus, the twentieth century European exile was generally perceived as more painful and widespread compared to the previous century (given the two world wars and the fascism context). The only positive presentation of the exile experience belongs to Seneca, who not only rationalises or omits sorrow and pain, but also presents exile as desirable and as a state of

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² An ample study on exile is the 2007 Leiden-Boston edition of *Writing Exile –The Discourse of Displacement in Greco-Roman Antiquity and Beyond*, Edited by Jan Felix and Gaertner Brill, pp. 2-12.

³ Idem, p.2.

becoming the 'sapiens' (Gaertner 2007, 2). From Nietzsche onward, exile has become the common metaphor for the alienation of intellectuals⁴ (to be discussed), and central to postcolonial discourse. In post-Revolutionary Romania, exile has been of high interest in our literary field, many studies focusing on this issue in the context of postcolonial and post-communist global politics.

Romanian researchers have tended to reflect on the origins of exile, its manifestations, and its effect on individuals, trying to clarify the concepts and terms. Their work provides a proper framework for discussing the situation of exilic writers who, even though supposed to be preservers of our common spiritual matrix, are left outside the Romanian literary history and canon. This paper aims to contribute to the process of (re)considering from a pragmatic point of view the exilic work of the Romanian writer Nicholas Catanoy as belonging to the national literature.

Clearly, exilic writers have made efforts to preserve the Romanian national heritage, language, and origin while being abroad, by promoting their own or their fellow writers' works from inside or outside the country, and Catanoy is no exception. In his volume *Modern Romanian Poetry*, published in Oakville, Ontario, Canada, "Mosaic" Press, 1977 with a foreword signed by Irvyng Layton. Catanoy critically reviewed the literary work of Tristan Tzara, Eugen Ionescu, Gherasim Luca (based in France), Vintilă Horea (in Spain), Alexandru Busuioceanu (in the USA), Aron Cotruș, (in Mexico), Ștefan Baciu and Mira Simian (in Hawaii); his comments have made these works available worldwide.

They faced acculturation and harsh competition when entering foreign cultures, but gained freedom and autonomy which they lacked home where they had to deal with the harsh censorship and constraints under the communist era. The positive aspects of exile are new opportunities, as they can cross borders and break barriers of thought and experience (Gaertner 2007, 96-97).

After the Revolution, the Romanian society was feeling weak in the 'war' against consumerism, and therefore substantial efforts were made to promote quality reading, efforts which were occasionally sponsored generously. From both inside or outside the national borders, writers shared common difficulties and problems to promote good literature and preserve the spiritual heritage. Labels such as 'within borders' or 'diaspora' were used to characterise writers.

The idea promoted in this paper is that if exilic writers were accepted in the national literature, their 'return' could only enrich the national ideological patrimony, as exile conditions bring about profound changes of perspectives and offer greater literary insights and knowledge.

⁴ Mihai Ion, *Liminalitate și exil. Literatura diasporei românești în spațiul american*, Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca, 2013.

Until this is achieved, many studies and articles (Boldea 2016) will continue the debate. Mihai Ion's volume (2013) is one example of extended work on exile, his contribution highlighting this issue.

He is of the view that the process of inclusion needs to be completed soon, so that exilic writers will cease to be suspended in a grey zone, between cultures and countries. Apparently, the most complicated issue in this process is rewriting the national canon, as Mihai Ion states (2013, 43): 'A possible reintegration would inevitably imply reconsidering the national literary canon as a whole'. Theoretically, the standpoint from which Mihai Ion (2013, 18) makes his analysis should be that the exilic authors still consider themselves to be Romanian nationals, they have written works in their mother tongue, and they undoubtedly display traces of unaltered Romanian culture and tradition. His practice of re-evaluation (writers such as Constantin Eretescu, Ștefan Baciu, Bogdan Suceavă, Andrei Codrescu, Petru Popescu and Gabriel Pleșea) should be continued with other cases, as is the present case of Nicholas Catanoy.

Nicholas Catanoy's departure into voluntary exile took place in the 1960s. He took the opportunity given by a political decree to re-join his wife's family abroad and settled in Montreal, Canada. It is interesting that Catanoy never describes himself as a politically persecuted writer (though he had been imprisoned and sentenced to death three times following a rebellion against authorities in communism - though, how voluntary can exile be when residence at home would have unpleasant, possibly fatal consequences?). His exile gave him the opportunity to take advantage of freely expressing his inner voice and his spiritual matrix while acquainting himself with the new central culture.

A source for documenting the life and personality of Nicholas Catanoy is the monographic volume of Ion Cristofor. He indirectly argues the need to reconsider Catanoy's work under the Romanian symbolic patrimony without which our national heritage is incomplete. Reading Catanoy's biography in his early years in Brașov provides the opportunity of shedding light on the cultural symbols of Catanoy's hometown.

The information retrieved from Catanoy's biography presented in Ion Cristofor's monograph shows that, apart from being brought up in a mixed culture family, he was introduced as a child to the works of lyrical poets such as Kleist, Nerval, Holderlin, and Baudelaire in the original, and that his early education in Brașov took place in an open, stimulating and tolerant environment, which greatly influenced him intellectually and artistically, and contributed to his future exile acculturation process.

In his youth, Catanoy became a regular participant in the Gherghinescu-Vania's literary circle in Brașov, meeting great personalities such as Blaga and

Arghezi. It was there that he honed his critical thinking skills, which he used years later when he became a literary critic and visiting professor at American universities (Cristofor 2008).

A possible explanation for his life-long constant travelling (even while still in Romania) for study and professional reasons is the premature death of his mother when he was very young, an event that obviously caused him great distress and seemed to have resulted in the disconnection from his own home and in his urge to flee. It is easy to understand how his travels enriched his creative imagination while he preserved and continued to treasure his native language and culture. Indeed, exile involves not only leaving one's homeland but also the 'advantage' of accessing different cultural sources and different perspectives (Gaertner 2007, 52).

Mihai Ion (20013, 63) states that "whatever an exile would do with their life, the original and adopted culture will always coexist in their mental structure".

Catanoy's entire work is an interface of human dignity, an example of high moral profile also called individuation (using an old term taken from religious literature and thought) (Vancu 2014).

Catanoy's profession was that of a radiologist (practiced until retirement), but he maintained his passion for literature, reading extensively on different topics and acquiring encyclopaedic knowledge that was later transposed into his poetic writing, fiction and non-fiction works, literary criticism and diaries, everything written with an enormous passion.

It is worth mentioning that he had long term contributions to different magazines from Romania – "Steaua", "Lucaefărul", "Astra", Canada – "Wascana Review", "Canadian Forum", "Prism International", USA, France – "Jalons", "Jointures", "Froissart", "Cahiers de Poesie", Belgium – "Marginales", Luxemburg- "New Europe", Switzerland – "Correspondance", Greece – "Kastalis", India – "Poetry", New Zealand – "Mentalities", and many others.

His delayed editorial debut in 1968 was a quadrilingual volume of poems entitled "Hic et nunc", in English, French, Spanish and Romanian) followed by an impressive list of important works such as "Flux alb" 1970, "Circumstances" 1971, "The Fiddlehead Republic" 1979, "Walum Olum. Songs and Proverbs of Northern American Indians" 1981 "Around the World in Eighty Days" 1983, "Ni debout, niassis" 1984, "Thursday of July" in 1985, "Tu pourrais reveiller la lumiere qui separe" in 1986, "L'Ancre et le Cyclone" in 1987 (in collaboration with J.P. Mestas), "Woher, Wohin, Warum" in 1988, "L'Autre versant de la nuit" in 1989, "Ein Schritt aus dem Schatten" in 1989, "Flustern und Schrein" in 1990, "Amarante (followed by "L'Orchidee carnassiere" and "The Lightning Snake") in 1992, "Notes on a Prison Wall" in 1994, "Pandora's Smile" in 1996, "Debuturi netimbrate " in 1997,

“Oglinzile lui Narcis”, “Orfeu și Mașina”, ‘Cârja lui Sisif’, “Indian Summer” in 1999, (published in Romania in the Romanian language), and “Avenue Teutonia” in 1999.

His name appeared in lyrical anthologies such as “Volvox” (Port Clemens, Canada, 1971), “Arzte Lyrik Heute” (Marquarstein Germany in 1975), “Înțelegând zăpada” (Bucharest, 1977), “Voices International” (Madras, India, 1982), “Jalons” (Paris, 1983), “Das Mitteinander Leben” (Frankfurt, Germany, 1995). In 1992 he received the Robert-Lucien Geeraert award for his volume “Requiem pour Sandy”.

From his journey to Latin America he gathered interviews with Jorge Luis Borges, Ernesto Cardenal, Octavio Paz, and Carlos Fuentes; some of these are presented in his later writing entitled ‘*Oglinzile lui Narcis*’, published in Romanian in 2008. He joined the avant-garde poets from L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, discovered American poetry, and admired Ezra Pound and his followers Robert Duncan, Charles Olson, Louis Zukovsky. His appreciation of the programme and the linguistic discoveries and theories of Jakobson and Barthes also influenced his work. He enjoyed international recognition, being granted memberships of Canadian „PEN-Club” and Indian “International Poets Academy” and receiving the international award for poetry at “1967 Montreal Expo”.

His unique features, interrogative mind, search for absolute freedom and perfection make Catanoy a phenomenon impossible to describe from one perspective only - for example from the literary criticism point of view. He is both a writer and a philosopher, a radiologist and a pilot, a globetrotter with several citizenships. Although he published in many languages, his symbolic return to Romania after 1990s proves his wish to publish his work in his native language, to meet his Romanian readers in his voyage, to welcome the *Other*. This Other could be the ordinary or extraordinary person, the humble or the great person, irrespective of nationality or religion, interestingly generally categorised as ‘humane’ or ‘inhumane’. In the *Other* he looks for qualities such as modesty, simplicity and humility, as Mother Theresa once declared these being the most important values of humanity.

Catanoy never lost track of his country and fellow citizens, keeping in touch with other exiles, mentioning and portraying in his works personalities like Dumitru Țepeneag, Virgil Tănase, Georges Astaloș, Eugen Ionesco, Sanda Stolojan, Matei Vișniec, Basarab Nicolescu or Horea Vintilă, whom he greatly admired for his ‘ascetic intellectuality’ and the refinement of his lyrical work due to the sublimation of ‘the pain of exile’.

Generally speaking, the complex phenomenon of exile that many Romanian writers have experienced has resulted in valuable literary works that have to become part of the national spiritual values. Exiles are universal spirits who transcend home borders and culture, acquiring the adoptive culture and enhancing their homeland culture. They could be regarded as ‘elements of the ancient spiritual matrix’ who cannot be left out of the ‘Romanian literature which cannot meet the criterion of

unity` without their presence. Worldwide creators as Catanoy reaffirm in poetry the tradition and culture passed over to them through education. To these, they added their own world-wide perspectives, thus having the chance to contemplate national and world literature in a Goethean perspective as a whole (Boldea 2016).

Catanoy's later citizenships and hybridization would not make him feel a stranger outside his home country or perceive himself as an outcast. As he would later conclude, he would feel more like a European preserving Romanian roots, which in fact is neither a denial of his Romanian identity, nor a reason of pride for a continental one. Estrangement implies that the exile no longer identifies himself as a member of his own community (Boldea 2016).

After 1990, he tried to make himself known to, and reconnect with the Romanian public, to reveal his treasured Romanian core under his multiple cultural identities. Although he is known for his reputation, and for a while as `a leading figure in Canada's literary avant-garde`, he thinks of himself as a Romanian writer.

Essentially Catanoy is a Romanian writer with a powerful personality, capable to reject 'inauthentic grandeur'. Maria Pal's epistolary volume includes letters sent to Catanoy by Ion Caraion, who speaks highly of his modest, generous, and friendly nature.

Nicholas Catanoy has succeeded in gaining the attention and appreciation of international elites for his work, and this proves that such exile personalities should not be overlooked by national literary critics, and indeed, that the works of exceptional exilic personalities should be included in the national canon, evaluated by the same standards as the ones used for the national writers.

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