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Articles

“Ewoclem” – The Word on the Doormat

Abstract

This approach to Ewoclem sau Întortochiatele cărări (Ewoclem or the Entangled Paths), the Romanian-Canadian Eugene Giurgiu's novel published in 1996, has been inspired first of all by Gaston Bachelard's La poétique de l'espace – which marks the passage from psychoanalysis to phenomenology in the French philosopher's development, a “topo-analysis” that is connected to his “topophilia” – because it is very much like Canadians' obsession with representations of space. Another source would be Jean Baudrillard's Figures d'Altérité which brought about the train of thought connected to the relationship between changes of place and the “spectral” component of the immigrant's identity. While becoming “another”, the immigrant is permanently “haunted” and “inhabited” by his former selves generated by the connection with the space of origin. The same author's book on the system of objects has engendered the idea of the importance of possession in appropriating a new place. But most helpful for the exploration of the text beyond its surface structure have been Jacques Derrida's reflections on hospitality. I added to it the sub-theme of “conviviality” in which, instead of “giving” and “receiving”, the stress falls on “sharing”.

Résumé

L'analyse d'Ewoclem sau Întortochiatele cărări (Ewoclem ou Chemins enchevêtrés), roman de l'auteur roumain-canadien Eugene Giurgiu publié en 1996, est inspirée par Poétique de l'espace de Gaston Bachelard qui marque le passage de la psychanalyse à la phénoménologie dans le développement de ce philosophe. Une autre source serait Figures d'Altérité de Jean Baudrillard qui a introduit le mode de pensée lié à la relation entre le changement de place et la composante « spectrale » de l'identité immigrante. En devenant l'autre, l'immigrant est constamment hanté et possédé par ses propres moi liés à son espace d'origine. Les plus utiles pour l'exploration du texte derrière sa structure de surface ont été les réflexions de Jacques Derrida sur l'hospitalité. Le sous-thème de la « convivialité » y a été ajouté par l'auteure.

Eugene Giurgiu, born in Arad, Romania, left his country of origin in 1969, when he was already in his mid forties and his reason for this decision is not difficult to guess. Though Ceaușescu's regime had started with a “thaw” after the grim Stalinist period, the invasion of Prague was a sign of the future consolidation of the Soviet influence

in the region. Nevertheless, his settling in a new country, followed by his successful integration in a new society and culture, did not sever Giurgiu's connections with his former country. As his articles in the multilingual electronic literary journal *Litterae.net* (whose editor he is) show, he has remained a permanent observer and a severe judge of political developments in his country of birth but also a promoter of its culture.

Giurgiu's first literary successes had been obtained in his early youth, before the imposition of communism during which he still published three books of fiction but not in the officially supported style of "socialist realism". He returned to writing after a successful career as a musical expert in his new homeland, Canada, probably challenged by the fall of communism and the new wave of migrations westward. The changes suggested a re-writing of history and therefore the immigrants' story promised to be successful with both the reading public in his native country – as a "cautionary" story— as well as with the members of the Diaspora who had shared similar experiences. The continuity between Eugene Giurgiu's earlier fiction and his new is preserved by his use of similar formulae and techniques of writing, the latter successfully combining the Romanian tradition of fantastic prose with that of the Canadian gothic.

Ewoctem appeared in 1996, in Montreal, printed by "Humanitas", the Romanian Cultural Foundation's publishing house but on a subsidy offered by the Canada Council for the Arts in the multicultural program of the Ministry of Canadian Heritage. The title of the collection in which the book was published, "Memoria", warns the reader that the story inside the covers will refer to events preserved in the writer's memory, which are in the same time part of a common cultural heritage.

The first question that arises in the reader's mind concerns the language in which the book is written. Why did Eugene Giurgiu write his book in his mother tongue instead of using one of the two official languages of this host country that has received him so well and has treated him much better than his country of birth? According to Derrida, displaced persons: exiles, expatriates, deportees, nomads or rootless persons have two great grievances and nostalgias: their dead and their language. Their so-called mother-tongue is their ultimate country and ultimate home though it has already become "the language of the other", a language that has been disowned (91). This is what Giurgiu's hero thinks too, but not without confessing the frustration for the fact that the Romanian language has a restricted circulation in comparison with English or other languages with an international circulation (91). Eugene Giurgiu writes his book about the immigrant's experiences for those who share the same linguistic background. Quoting Levinas, Derrida shows that language means also hospitality (137). When he writes about his new country in the language of the old one, Eugene Giurgiu means to be hospitable towards the would-be immigrants and the other hyphenated members of the Diaspora.

The novel starts with a foreword "written at the editor's request" by a secondary character, as a frame to the main character's story entitled *Ewoctem*, the only clue in

an unsuccessful quest to find out the “author’s” identity. The narrator in the story that begins, like an allegory, with a dream, is called Timotei/Timothy Dumbravă, a Romanian immigrant to the Toronto of the early seventies. Though his real identity remains a mystery till the end, Timotei’s family name, “Dumbravă”, translated into English is “Grove”. This would recall in the bi-lingual and bi-cultural (Romanian-Canadian) reader’s mind the figure of a much discussed hyphenated Canadian writer with an “intriguing dual biography” (Divay 111): Frederick Philip Grove alias Felix Paul Greve and his books in English: *In Search of America* (1927) and *In Search of Myself* (1946). This “search of the self” may be considered the central drive of Timotei/Timothy’s existence, too, since he is dominated by the desire to leave his home in order to explore other places, typical for the young heroes of the adventure stories. But “grove” would remind one also of a different drive which could be identified in the final episode of the Oedipus myth, quoted also by Derrida, when the old and blind king searches a place where he could finally rest in peace.

On his arrival in Toronto, Timothy has an idealised vision of the new country that he explores in a “from sea to sea” tour (87) and perceives it as a land of all opportunities where money is easy to earn but also to spend. Chapter 5 begins with a pathetic eulogy of the country that could bear the title “O Canada” but actually echoes the pathetic tone of some 19th century Romanian author’s *descriptio* of the Romanian provinces:

Canada is the country where, when it rains, it seems as if all the angels in heaven were crying and, when it snows, you have the impression that the sky has broken and pours in splinters over the world. Nature is nowhere more full of grandeur. The sky is nowhere larger. The fields are nowhere greener and vaster. The people are nowhere merrier and more carefree. They do not worry for the future and even if they complain, they do it as a kind of game they do not really believe. (40)
(Translation A. O.)

Timothy’s experiences in the new country go hand in hand with the recollections of his homeland before World War II, generated by the bunch of letters written by a former childhood friend, Denise, imprisoned by the communist regime. The recollection series triggered by the dream is the evocation of the Timotei’s adolescence spent in a small Transylvanian town of Romania. The presence of the other ethnic groups in the space of this province is suggested first in the episode with Trude, the German girl who fascinates the boys with her otherness, then by the references to the Jewish chemist and, in a later chapter, to the Hungarian Catholic minority. Timotei lives with his widow mother in a simple and poor house. Falling in love, he accepts to tutor a rich family’s daughter. Invited by her, he becomes the family’s guest and spends the nights as the rich girl’s lover and plaything. His temporary integration in the rich family ends when the girl’s fiancé, a pilot, comes on a leave from the front in Tiraspol, a Romanian province lost to the Russians, whose

name evokes in the conscience of Giurgiu's reader a space of present-day political tensions as well.

Contrary to the reader's expectations, the time and space of adolescence was not a happy haven. The "other" house where Timotei had been apparently so well-received by the rich engineer's family proved to be a place of betrayal, a place where he did not belong. Timotei's adolescence with his erotic initiation ended at the outbreak of the war. He had to flee when the combat between the German-Hungarian troops and the Russians and Romanian troops reached the town.

The process of Timotei's integration in the new country is favoured by the communication skills acquired at home in the multicultural province of Transylvania. This enables him to find a convenient job in the Canadian city, first as a teacher of French. Timothy finds friends and succeeds to gain his students' appreciation. But in order to avoid a conflict with the other teacher of French, less liked by the students, Timothy prefers to take up the teaching of the universal language of music.

Though at the beginning everything seems to go well in the new and hospitable country, the effects of the Cold War are felt also in the school where he teaches and produce a short episode of restlessness. Some of the teachers and students, either influenced by the Quiet Revolution in Quebec and the ideas of Left, or just accepting as true Romania's official propaganda, make Timothy's position as a political émigré quite awkward. Instead of a dissident, he could be considered a "traitor" of his country and a "criminal". At a meeting organised in a moment of crises provoked by communist agitators in the school where he works he is able to convince his audience of the legitimacy of his defecting and thus contribute to the reinstatement of order. But he will regain his friends' full trust only when they go to see for themselves the real face of communism.

One of his students, Roberta, together with her family, has a substantial contribution in making Timothy feel at home in Canada. Roberta's father, Alec St. George, is an "immigrant" from one of Giurgiu's earlier "more or less fantastic" short stories, "Thanatology", published in the volume *Biserica arsă (The Burnt down Church)*. Alec earned his fortune practising a strange profession, "thanatology", being able to predict the day of his clients' death using a mathematical formula invented by him. Alec St. George and his family live near Mount Pleasant cemetery and the park that surrounds the house seems to have been previously a "grove". The Romanian word for "grove" this time is "crlng", a synonym of the noun used as Timothy's family name. (84) This could also hint at the Oedipus at Colonnos theme. The Romanian reader cannot but remember that the great musician George Enescu (also buried in a foreign land) composed an opera inspired by this myth of homelessness.

To have his own place in Toronto, Timothy buys an apartment. But it is Roberta who, together with her friends, transforms the place into a hospitable home for him. Some pieces of furniture come from Roberta's own family. This transfer of objects that had belonged formerly to a Canadian family to Timothy's place could be interpreted as a symbolic act of creating a hospitable environment for the newcomer.

The presence of their ethnic community is unavoidable in the immigrants' stories. The meeting place of the Romanian Diaspora is the house of Constantin Ieremia. This is another character coming from Giurgiu's short stories. Ieremia was the main character in "Kriptoscopie" where he was endowed with the special gift of detecting hidden treasures. Ieremia came also from Transylvania and his story generates another series of remembrances of the prosecutions under the communist regime. Ieremia's gift made him important for the representatives of the Romanian secret police who wanted to recruit him as an agent. His refusal to collaborate as well as his belonging to the prosecuted Greek-Catholic church and his marriage to a Catholic wife whose brother was a Franciscan monk, led to his imprisonment.

In the new country Ieremia works on a mysterious project. He and his wife are the hosts of the heterogeneous group of Romanian intellectual immigrants: a doctor, a journalist, an engineer, a sculptor, an actress, etc., each of them with a past that has to be clarified. On seeing them Timothy concludes that the Diaspora reflects and reproduces the religious, social and political divisions from the home country.

Timothy realises that the under-cover agents of the Romanian secret police have infiltrated the immigrants' community hunting down the political émigrés. He learns soon enough that the agents do not refrain from murdering them in the country whose democratic regime and constitution guarantees its citizens' freedom and safety. Timothy, who becomes unwillingly the keeper of the manuscript about the regime of terror in the prisons of Ceaușescu's Romania, has to leave his new home in Toronto in order to escape from the agents determined to kill him, too. With the help of his friends he finds refuge in a log house in the romantic wilderness of northern Ontario. This is an opportunity for Timothy to explore another kind of space, that of the aboriginal culture. The house is haunted by the ghost of an Iroquois princess who was drowned in the lake near his house and Timothy learns about the sad story of her people. It is there he sees the Indian doormat with the word "Ewoclem" on it. But besides the legend of the Indian princess, there is the story about an American girl, Mary-Lou, who drowned in the same lake. The name evokes an American love song but the theme of drowning, and the mysterious environment, seem to hint at the atmosphere in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*.

In the meantime, Roberta and her mother Alison visit Romania and succeed, with the help of the Canadian consul, in obtaining the release from prison and emigration to France of Timothy's childhood friend Denise. Reading the transcripts of Denise's interview with the Canadian consul, Timothy realises that he misinterpreted the significance of the letters he had received apparently from Denise and that she was not in love with him anymore. Consequently, he is freed from his love fantasy connecting him to the old country and finally becomes aware of his love for Roberta who also loves him. The translation of the manuscript about the abuses of the communist regime in his home country – that is also an act of cultural transfer – brings him the prosperity he needs in order to buy a house, marry, and integrate into his new homeland. This would suggest a happy end that not all immigrants can reach as the fate of other characters in Giurgiu's book demonstrates.

Though not an autobiographical novel, the book incorporates the author's experience as an émigré as well as his meditation on the condition of being an immigrant.

Even if at his arrival Giurgiu's hero as a refugee receives – to use Derrida's term – “an absolute” (unconditional) hospitality, when suspicions arise as concerns his past and legal status, it becomes clear that this hospitality is not unconditional. Canada becomes a happy haven for Eugene Giurgiu's hero only after he has clarified his status as an immigrant, regaining his friends' full trust. It is the way to his becoming a citizen of the country that offered him its hospitality. The manuscript he translates is a precious testimony in proving that his claim to receive hospitality in Canada is justified. “Ewoclem”, the Iroquois word for *welcome* that is the title of the manuscript as well as the word seen on the mat in front of door at the log house, is actually the anagram of the English word “welcome”, showing – as hinted at by the subtitle of the novel: *The Entangled Paths* – that the process of integration is tortuous and difficult. There is more than one threshold to pass. The immigrants not only have to clarify (“dis-entangle”) their relationships with the old country and let the past go, but they have to learn about the new land and its people, adopt its values and acquire a new code of conduct. Attachment to people – especially friendship and love – play an important part in appropriating the new place.

The doormat marks the threshold before entering the house as a warning. It is a symbol of the passage from the outside into the inside, from the public into the private, at times meaning transgression accompanied by violence. As a symbol of passage it is similar to a bridge, implying danger. But the main function of the doormat is related to cleansing before entering the house, as a sign of respect for the people and the house that will offer shelter and warmth. Referring more explicitly to the immigrants, it would mean to leave behind everything from the past that could stay in the way of their integration. Presented as an Iroquois word, “ewoclem” may hint at the fact that the colonists had also misinterpreted the Aboriginal people's word of welcome. According to the well-known allegorical representation of a country by a woman, the haunting Indian princess and Roberta could be viewed as personifications of Canada's past and present.

Derrida, in his considerations on hospitality, remembers a novel he had read, *Roberta Tonight*, a book in which the narrator's uncle has fixed on the wall, over the guests' beds “The laws of hospitality” meant to teach them how to behave (87). Maybe Eugene Giurgiu read the same book and the name Roberta has not appeared in his book unintentionally. Even if Derrida does not quote those “laws”, for the immigrant to Canada they are contained in the country's Constitution and in Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Only knowing them and living by them allows the immigrant to become a citizen of the country.

The houses, whether in the old country or the new one, some of them described in detail, like the one in northern Ontario which Timothy finally buys, are spaces of hospitality and intimacy. But these are also places of “conviviality”. The dinners in the engineer's family in Timothy's hometown are animated by discussions referring

to the war, to communism and fascism. The discussions at the party in Jeremia's house are more ambiguous, for the members of the Romanian Diaspora prefer to talk separately to each other and their talk is more like gossip echoing rumours. The table talk in the houses of Canadian hosts are exchanges of ideas concerning politics and culture in both countries and allow Timothy to learn about Canada but also inform his hosts about the realities in Romania. It is a funny coincidence that the first party to which Timothy has been invited in his new country is the one organised by his boss, Larry, a name that recalls the title of the Canadian Carol Shields's novel *Larry's Party*, published a year after Giurgiu's book. In the Canadian writer's book the party is interpreted as the host's "paying off his social debts, inviting his friends not to a restaurant but into his own space for an evening of conviviality" (288). It is about *receiving* or *dispensing* hospitality. And as the chapter "Before the Party" in Shield's book states at its beginning: "Unless your life is going well you don't dream of giving a party" (287). A conclusion to this, even if it might seem far-fetched, would be that the passage from one place to another, from one country to another, can end only when from a "guest", i. e. a stranger, one becomes a "host", offering instead of just receiving hospitality.

It is also true that conviviality has a religious connotation as well which is suggested in Giurgiu's book not only by the presence of Jeremia who had intended to become a priest and his Franciscan brother-in-law. Alec's name hints at the patron saint of Transylvania, St. George, who is also the patron saint of Britain. And though due to the idea of pluralism there is no official religion in Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms bears a motto showing that Canada is founded upon principles that recognise the supremacy of God and the rule of Law. Thus, Timothy, whose name is also a Biblical name, regains his faith he was forced to abandon under communism. Alone in the log house during the storm (that might evoke the Jesuit Loyola's "dark night of the soul" and his rules for spiritual exercises), Timothy has a moment of communion with the bread and the wine found there. The place names, Georgian Bay, Balm Beach and the references to Augustine's *De beata vita*, the resemblance of the house to the capital letter A, determine Timothy to name his new place after St. Jerome, the translator of the Bible, and he decides to change his own name into Augustine, Agustin so as to make it sound more French-like to his neighbours. But St. Augustine was the one who Christianised Britain.

At the end of the entangled paths, when he can properly read the word of welcome, Timothy has regained in the new country all the values that the communist regime made him lose: freedom and human dignity, faith, family, home, and above, all, the capacity to trust and love. This would make the reader see *Ewoctem* as Eugene Giurgiu's *Paradise Regained*, but a regaining of an earthly paradise in which the Augustinian "Vita beata" that Alec recommends Timothy to read becomes the equivalent of the much spoken of "good life", the common citizen's ideal. At the same time Timothy's story could be read as an initiation rite in which his countryman Jeremia (Jerome!) and his Canadian friend Alec act as his guides. Both Jeremia and Alec have the capacity to transcend everyday reality and penetrate the mystery

because they are already less connected to contingent. Besides helping Timothy to pass over the threshold as his protectors, they show Timothy the two faces of death: the grim and the pleasant one as rest. At the end of the rite, when his former self is dead and revived in a new identity, Timothy can take up the role of the young king Theseus and offer himself as a the place of rest, the grove, to his former hosts. But it would be rather dangerous to go on with such speculations that would take one to identify in Roberta a later Medea.

Eugene Giurgiu's book is extremely rich in ideas and details, each of them worth exploring. The circular structure of the book invites re-reading and re-thinking and the readers could find other "entangled paths" to lead their fantasy and challenge their capacity to associate and dissociate. The end of the book could suggest that fiction is itself a "doormat" that marks the passage from everyday reality to a dream world.

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