



# Between the Freedom of the Imaginary and the Limitations of the Writer's Self-Imposed Exile<sup>1</sup>

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*Between the Freedom of the Imaginary and the Limitations of the Writer's Self-Imposed Exile<sup>1</sup>*

The present paper sets out to analyse the mental and emotional impact that exile has on writers – especially when this exile is self-imposed. In this case the destructive impact of exile is counterbalanced by the artistic freedom and the liberty of the imaginary which the author makes use of. Exile and the imaginary are therefore the major coordinates along which most postcolonial and postmodern literary texts are structured. Rootlessness, the feeling of not belonging, and even a certain type of ascetism of the postmodern individual are the ideological backbone of contemporary writing. We have thus attempted to show that the search for identity and the simultaneous existence in two binary opposite spaces are what give birth to exile literature.

Keywords: exile, imaginary, limitation, literature, freedom



Exile, whether seen as an external reality or a self-imposed state, and the imaginary freedom of the author, are the two major axes along which a significant percentage of present-day postmodern and postcolonial literature unfolds. Rootless authors and narrative voices, caught up in a perpetual feeling of homelessness, alienation, and escape from a world impossible to grasp, the postmodern individual's ascetism and the re-invention of the self in the realm of the imaginary, form the main ideological directions of contemporary writing. The existence of exiled individuals has been a historical continuum, especially among writers – but never as overwhelming and hard to overlook as nowadays.

The act of being forcefully dislocated, of abandoning one country and settling in another, acquires a new set of connotations and bears specific spiritual

significations once associated with the term 'exile'. The term itself requires a certain reaction, a certain taking on of responsibility on part of the speaker, the listener and the reader. Exile takes up a distinct position in literature and literary criticism, as well as in the direct experience of the millions of individuals affected by this phenomenon. Paul Tabori, in his *The Anatomy of Exile*, offers the following comprehensive definition:

The exiled is a person forced to remain outside his own country of origin due to fear of persecution or for reasons related to race, religion, nationality or political views; a person who considers his exile temporary (even if it will in fact last for a lifetime), hoping to be able to return home when circumstances will allow it – but incapable or unwilling to do this as long as the factors that have turned him into an exiled person persist.<sup>2</sup>

Involuntary exiles include those who apparently

leave out of their own will but actually do so because of circumstances which they cannot control. The exiled does not wish to leave and does so only when to leave becomes preferable to the act of staying. The involuntary and individual nature of the notion of exile is radically different from the one of the expatriate or the refugee. The expatriate leaves his country of origin of his own accord without desiring to be reunited with it. The expatriate has been defined as the opposite of the exiled: "his main scope is to never return to his country of origin, or if this is not possible, to stay away from it for as long a time as possible"<sup>3</sup>. Even though there are some similarities between the exiled and the refugee, in that neither has any control over his departure, the exiled is perceived as more individualized, less passive, and more capable of creativity and decision making.

The chronological and psychological aspect of the situation underlines the geographical and physical dimension, or, as Tabori puts it, "spatial distance underlines temporal distance"<sup>4</sup>. The exiled is bereft of his home, of the space harbouring reminiscences of times long gone. This leads to the development of certain mental structures and to different coping mechanisms for overcoming the distance. The exiled experiences moments of nostalgia, when memories of the past are richer and more meaningful than the immediate present. The loss of home gives rise to the all-encompassing desire of regaining it either by returning or by remembering. The concept of 'home' becomes more precious because it is tied to a loss, and it is all the more precious because the loss is irreversible.

The exiled's condition has both permanent and temporary characteristics. It is tinged by permanence's lack of hope but at the same time it is dynamic and subjected to change. This change is not only due to a fluctuation in the conditions that caused the exile, but can also originate in the exiled himself. The exile period cannot end by returning home, but only through a change of perspective on the exiled's part regarding the true meaning of 'home' as a concept. Once the exiled stops thinking about returning home and starts developing new roots, the exiled status ends. It is at that point that the exiled can be referred to as an immigrant.

As compared to exiled individuals, immigrants move to another country with the explicit purpose of settling down there. If exile means a separation from one's home and an inherent lack of permanence, immigration transforms the notion of 'home' and of 'belonging'. The immigrant's main preoccupation is getting accustomed to the new setting, not returning home. The problems and processes related to integrating into a new space and transforming this space into a new home are the immigrant's main scopes. In reality the two notions are often not sufficiently separated. The initial stages of immigration can be perceived as

a variation of exile. Immigrants can remember their previous homes with melancholy and occasionally they can experience the desire of going back there. The exiled can adapt in time – as little or involuntary as it might be – to their new homes. To be an immigrant or an exiled individual depends on the personal perception of one's situation more than on the situation itself. The condition of the exiled, a discontinuity of being, brings about an identity crisis. Changing places naturally leads to changing identities.

In trying to adapt to the new context the exiled can experience an estrangement from his own self. The lack of external continuity is but a reflection of the lack of internal continuity. Robert Edwards traces the coordinates of self-alienation based on the medieval and classicist concept of exile. The exiled do not perceive themselves as the same individuals they were in the past, and they also cannot adapt to the present. "The exiled is always alienated at some point in his existence"<sup>5</sup>, Edwards notes. The exiled is always on the outside, looking inside, either critically or with nostalgia.

To a certain extent, the search for identity and the dual character of living simultaneously 'here' and 'there' is what gives birth to exile literature. Exile is considered at the same time a defining and an exclusive feature of the author. The vision according to which "every true artist and any creative spirit is a stranger in his own lands"<sup>6</sup> presents the artist as an eternal exiled spirit. Ovid is probably the classic example of the connection between exile and poetic creation. In the modern era an impressive number of writers have experienced exile. In the words of Maria Ines Lagos Pope, "it is significant and not at all a coincidence that among the most recent Nobel Prize laureates in literature one can count many exile writers"<sup>7</sup>. The present-day authors' exiled status has become normality. On the other hand, David Williams places the exiled outside the community and outside social interaction (the exchange of words, he suggests, is a metaphor of community) and argues that the exiled is "an individual without the opportunity for dialogue, a man without language"<sup>8</sup>. If literature is communication then the one who finds himself outside the community is incapable of creation. These two visions are not necessarily irreconcilable, because through the very nature of writing the exiled can attempt to overcome their exiled condition and to join their newly found communities. The literature of exile – the narratives of the exiled about exile – is the result of this endeavour.

The writer exiled in a linguistic space which is foreign to him can choose to remain faithful to the familiar or to venture into the unknown of a foreign language. There are examples of authors who continue writing in their mother tongue due to the (real or imaginary) perception of the impossibility of learning



a new language. Others still feel that it is the foreign language which chooses them. Writers who consciously choose the language they will write in face a series of decisive factors. In his critical study *Transcending Exile* Milbauer asks:

„Why would a foreigner choose such a difficult and tiresome path as choosing a foreign language in order to transform it into a mode of expression for his art, into an instrument with the help of which to emotionally touch the reader, an instrument of intellectual survival?“<sup>9</sup>

Some choose not to walk along this strenuous and tiresome path. These are the ones who keep their mother tongue in order to avoid these difficulties. Other reasons include maintaining one's relationship with the past, making a contribution to national culture, or avoiding the status one perceives as being the one of the linguistically exiled. Continuing to write in one's mother tongue while you are out of its natural habitat does not necessarily lead to linguistic stagnation. Ewa Thompson talks about the possibility of “cross linguistic fertilization” and the enrichment of literary language. According to exile writer Czesław Miłosz:

A writer living among people who speak a language different than his own discovers after a while that he perceives his mother tongue in a different manner ... new aspects and tonalities of the mother tongue are discovered, because they are distinct from the language spoken in the new context. In this manner the shortcomings in certain areas (idiomatic discourse, jargon, etc) are made up for by an enrichment in other areas (purity of the vocabulary, rhythmic expression, syntactic equilibrium).<sup>10</sup>

Those who learn and use a new language are often conscious of the difficulties implied by the process of adaptation. Nabokov describes the switch from Russian to English as extremely painful – as if one had to re-learn how to do things after losing six or eight fingers in an explosion.

The disadvantages of writing in a foreign language can be often partially made up for by means of a heightened sensitivity to the signification and sound profile of the words which foreign speakers include in their writings. A type of compensation can be identified also in the perceived advantages of the foreign language over the mother tongue. Joseph Conrad preferred English to his mother tongue, Polish, due to its greater linguistic variety. Nabokov chose English in order to gain a wider readership. The reasons for writing in one language or another are as diverse as the specific

situations of writers. Irrespective of the motivation, the linguistic medium has a major impact on the creation and the reception of exile literature.

Exile literature has been alternatively defined as a literature that uses the experience of exile as a subject and theme, or as literature written in exile. The latter category sees the artistic expression of the writer as a reaction to the exile situation, resulting in the artistic grandeur in which suffering and pain are transformed and sublimed. Claudio Guillen makes a distinction between exile literature where “exile becomes its own subject”<sup>11</sup> and what he terms counter-exile literature. This literature is inspired by the changing realities of exile and by its transformation into the universal. In other words, the literature of counter-exile has as a source of inspiration the author's personal experience, but is not limited to this experience. In the modern era the exile experience is also generalized as a metaphor of individual alienation.

At the centre of the exiled condition is homelessness, which implies both home's loss and the need to regain it. The exiled author can try to mediate this loss by means of the creation process – or in other words by means of recreating a home through art.

A great part of exile literature is autobiographic, anchored in the experience of the alienated individual. Literature is the expression of the exiled status, and simultaneously a strategy for coming to terms with this status. Seidel defines the exiled's mission as transforming the loss back into connection, as a tactic: “Exile is the least odd of the three strategies; even if its end remains unclear, it can, at least, be located as a tactic”<sup>12</sup>. Through art the writer mediates between the past and the present. In her autobiographical work *Lost in Translation*, Eva Hoffmann discusses some of the aspects related to the act of creating equilibrium:

The traditionalists in this domain believe that regaining their own forgotten history is an antidote to superficiality. The ideologists of the future see the attachment to one's own past as the most terrible of monsters ... Only a few Eastern European writers, forced to march towards the future too often, know the reactionary dangers of both forgetfulness and the obsession with the past. But they are also among the global experts on suffering, because they have lost not only an archaeological history, but a living one. Thus they hail the virtues of authentic memory. Milan Kundera knows that the one who easily forgets is a Don Juan of experience, promiscuous and repetitive, suffering from the unbearable lightness of being. Czesław Miłosz remembers the figures and places of his youth with a tenderness reserved only for beloved objects which are no longer appreciated by others.<sup>13</sup>

The ideal therapeutic process through which the exiled writer ceases to be exiled is communicative writing. Through an acceptance of the present and the act of memorizing the past, the author manages to integrate the experience of transition, and by communicating this experience he joins the community without being rejected by it. The communication process takes place through literature and narration, even if the latter has a fictional nature. Gérard Genette discusses in his *Introduction to the Architext* the notions of factual and fictional narration. What sets the two apart is the different modality of the event they “report”<sup>14</sup>, the event being either real or fictional, created by the story-teller. Another distinction between fiction and non-fiction is the manner in which it depicts chronology. The comparison between the order of events and the one of narration can only be established when the author has a source of information regarding the temporal succession of the „narrated”<sup>15</sup>.

When the order of events is unknown, the narratologist notes the anachronic character of the narration. Thus, the factual narration where the order of events is established by external sources, cannot be opposed to fictional narration where anachronic elements are pointed at by the narration itself. In what the speed of narration is concerned, certain accelerations or moments of slowing down appear both in the fictional narration and the factual one, and are established by the narrator with regard to the significance conferred to them by the author. A distinctive feature of the difference between the two types of narrations is the subjectivity of the characters which is obvious in the fictional narration, as compared to the usual attitude of factual narration, which can also have psychological explanations but for which one must indicate the source. Drawing on Käte Hamburger’s remarks, Gérard Genette argues that „by borrowing the fictionality indicators, non-fiction fictionalizes itself and by abandoning them fiction defictionalizes itself.”<sup>16</sup>

The beginning of Genesis offers three prototypes of the exile experience: the narration of the exile of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden, the forced pilgrimage of Cain, and the dispersion of those working on the Tower of Babel. Furthermore, these biblical myths reflect the progression towards non-communicability in exile, starting out from the inter-species communication between Eve and the serpent up to the creation of different languages in Babel. Exile is, in the latter case, of a universal nature: a forced separation from home, continuous rootlessness and the impossibility of communication.

The effect of the individual’s displacement – forced migration, deportation, conscious emigration, the relocation to new and unknown territories where man becomes master of other men, or becomes himself a

slave of the ones inhabiting the new home – all these have marked the past centuries and their effects are largely felt even today. The historical violence of the colonial century has profound echoes in the literature written by those who have been displaced forcefully and in the exiles resulting from these realities. The victims’ voices are powerful in postcolonial literature. Even though the very term ‘postcolonial’ is insufficient in order to capture the complexity of the authors to whom the term applies (the term itself is a colonial instrument, placing writers who do not write in English in a ghetto area of literature, on ethnic grounds) there is a common bond between the works of these novelists who understand the exile process and perceive themselves as exiles – exiled from both their homes and themselves.

To conclude, we might state that exile literature is connected to a dialectic within the mimetic process, which results from the multitude of roles the author has to take on, and the impossibility of these roles – we can however also note a second type of dialectic – the one between the individual (as constructor and construction) and the geographical space (projection of and home to the individual). The geographical space, its social customs, its roles, and its image of a home, contribute to the construction of the self. The exiled, by situating himself always between two spaces, is simultaneously a part of and distinct from the creative processes of the geographical space. Consequently, the exiled invalidates the concept of a stable and static identity. Exile is the prime example of subjectivity which invades the very core of the concept. Similarly, the individual, through the projection of his imaginary space, through his dreams and aspirations regarding home, creates a notion of nation, culture, and country.

Note:

1. The article is an adaptation of the chapter entitled “Între libertatea imaginarului și limitarea impusă de autoexilul autorului” from the author’s doctoral thesis
2. Paul Tabori, *The Anatomy of Exile*. Harrap & Co., 1972, 45. (translated by Maria Miruna Ciocoi-Pop)
3. Ibidem (translated by Maria Miruna Ciocoi-Pop)
4. Ibidem (translated by Maria Miruna Ciocoi-Pop)
5. Robert Edwards, quoted in Katherine Keen, “The Language of Exile in Dante”, Reading University, [https://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/GCMS/RMS-2001-03\\_C\\_Keen\\_The\\_Language\\_of\\_Exile\\_in\\_Dante.pdf](https://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/GCMS/RMS-2001-03_C_Keen_The_Language_of_Exile_in_Dante.pdf)
6. ibidem
7. Maria Ines Lagos Pope, *Exile in Literature*, Bucknell University Press, 1988, 31.
8. Garreth D. Williams, *Banished Voices: Readings in Ovid’s Exile Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, 20 oct. 1994. (translated by Maria Miruna Ciocoi-Pop)



9. Asher Milbauer, *Transcending Exile: Conrad, Nabokov, Singer*. University Press of Florida, 1985, 78-79. (translated by Maria Miruna Ciocoi-Pop)
10. Czesław Miłosz, Notes on Exile, Books Abroad, volume 50, no 2, 1976, 281-284. (translated by Maria Miruna Ciocoi-Pop)
11. Claudio Guillen quoted in Sophia A. McClennen, *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language and Space, in Hispanic Literatures*, West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2004, 31.
12. Michael Seidel, Exile and the Narrative Imagination, London: Yale University Press, 1986, 71.
13. Ewa Hoffman, *Lost in Translation*. Penguin Books, 1990: 20-23. (translated by Maria Miruna Ciocoi-Pop)
14. Genette, *Introducere în arbitext. Ficțiune și dicțiune*. Editura Univers, București, 1994, 136. (translated by Maria Miruna Ciocoi-Pop)
15. idem, 139 (translated by Maria Miruna Ciocoi-Pop)
16. idem, 159 (translated by Maria Miruna Ciocoi-Pop)

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