

CAPTIVE IN FREEDOM OR, *LIFE ON THE RUN* BY MIRELA ROZNOVEANU

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ABSTRACT. Mirela Roznoveanu writes from exile, managing to recall existential aspects attributed to a character displaced from communist Romania, as she traces the soul tribulations marked by realism, truthfulness and feminine candour. Angela Kaminsky – the female character in the novel *Life on the Run* experiences the burden of freedom after, constrained by communist ideology, she resorts to a reconstruction of existence on America, the “promised land”. I will here follow her as she leaves behind, though improperly said, a communist Romania, incompatible from an ideological point of view but so spiritually compatible through people and affiliates. Bathed in the benevolent rays of freedom, Angela feels imprisoned on the new continent where she lives self-exiled, since her conscience and soul were shaped at “home”, in Romania, even if she obsessively remembers elements attached to it, such as: frustration, the evil of totalitarianism, and another, fundamental evil. Nevertheless, the woman finds herself by sensing the artistic pattern nestled in her soul, which gives her “a crazy lust for life” when she realizes that the security of her existence and the completion of her own projects is the true “home”.

KEY WORDS: communism, freedom, captivity, memory, identity, run, trauma

Introduction

Among the values associated with Romanian spirituality there are numerous contributions belonging to the literature of exile, productions generated in different realms, inhabited willingly or unwillingly by Romanian writers. It is known that exile is a phenomenon with a long history on the time axis. In the XXth century, when the totalitarian regime consolidates its position in Romania, exile will remain the only possibility to get out of the discomfort leading to personal or collective trauma. Whether forced or voluntary, going into exile is followed by a period, often painful, of adaptation and integration into the foreign space.

It is interesting the fact that the experience of exile does not destroy the exiles, on the contrary, the state of affairs is a good pretext and, at the same time, a source of inspiration. Memory is activated, words find their form, meaning and place, and personal salvation and identity recovery will be achieved through writing. Literary creations that acquire their expressive

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valences in exile, on foreign soil and in a new cultural space, preserve the local matrix through which the unique and indissoluble connection with the country is achieved. Language, in which one thinks and writes, will become the instrument that acquires deep valences. The process to which creation is subjected is the anamnesis - the remembrance of the past through an active memory and marked by experiences that cannot be forgotten, so in the realm of creation a war of memories is going on.

In the mosaic of Romanian literature from exile a special nuance is marked by the novel by Mirela Roznoveanu, a writer who chooses post-December exile, motivated by the reality that the "light at the end of the tunnel" brought by the 1989 Revolution will soon darken, and the eyes hungry for the brilliance of a new era liberated from the straps of communism, will not resist and will continue to long for that holy light of freedom. For this reason, awakened from the long night of communism, the young woman will find a way to escape and find her identity on American soil.

Exile and the Constraints of Freedom

Voluntary exile is a solution to a crisis situation, whether it is a political, economic or social crisis, it is, after all, a punishment by which a person is forced to give up his home, his relatives, his own country to take an existence away from the factor that causes that crisis. An important page in Romanian literature is represented by the literature of exile. We refer here to two temporal coordinates regarding the creative act: the literature produced after the Second World War and the literature produced until today, a period that proved to be extremely bidding in the landscape of Romanian literary creation outside the borders of the country, inscribing itself in two distinct epochs:

- a. the coercive and terrorizing communist regime until the Revolution;
- b. the post-December era of regaining freedom and triumphant exit from "the terror of history" (Eliade 1999: 135), a history overshadowed by communist ideology.

The reality of the Romanian literary exile is confirmed and analyzed, repeatedly, defined as "a literary phenomenon concluded from a historical point of view" (Behring 2001: 9) which, however, can be considered as such, only in the extent that we look at the phenomenon of expatriation from an exclusively political point of view. As Monica Lovinescu stated, "exile does not exist in the singular" (Lovinescu 1997: 171), therefore the number of exiles is significant, regardless of the period in which they belong, and the feeling or frustration of this state of affairs is also felt by the families or relatives of the one who acquires the status of "exiled, upcountryed, nostalgic" (Anghelescu 2002: 23), considered, quite rightly, as belonging to a category such as "the

uprooted of fate and exiles to whom history is hostile... and the uprooted of the spirit" (Anghelescu 2002: 23).

The main motivation, in general, in the case of exile, is the constraints of freedoms of any kind, constraints that will generate physical, mental or intellectual trauma, the individual gradually experiences several states that will lead to exile: discomfort, anxiety, disagreement and trauma. The restrictions and constraints imposed by the communist regime will lead to the onset of a trauma, both individual and collective, a trauma which will prove to be of the whole society. We are witnessing, therefore, the confirmation and affirmation of broken destinies, destroyed by the totalitarian regime, we can even talk about an alienation of the Self and then, a possible rediscovery of it, resorting to the variant of exile. Violented, aggressed and constrained conscience must defend or regain its freedom, dignity, integrity and must redefine its values.

The post-communist period represents both for Romanian literature and for the entire Romanian cultural space an opportunity to escape from the straps and canons imposed by the totalitarian regime. Now not only the escape is manifested intensely, but also a redefinition of the identity by denial, discrediting, destruction or rejection the past by running away, by physically detaching oneself from the hostile environment. The metaphor of running is harnessed by passing from historical experience to techniques or variants of its interpretation. The journey can be captured in three distinct time sequences: the running from a past, which is going to be semantically revalued, interpreted and, implicitly, relived; the running as a projection into the future which, in hope of something better, is marked by the reconstruction of the Self; and the running of the present seen as an unchaining, a release, a positive and beneficial manifestation.

The running from the past and from the memories of traumatic experiences will mark the end in free countries in Europe or in the faraway America, perceived as a magnet that exerts a permanent attraction for individuals who, for political, economic or artistic reasons, wanted to improve, somewhat, their destiny within its perimeter. It is seen as a true "Realm of Promise" or "Promise Land", a space of the maximum chance of existential fulfillment. In this topos, we catch the presence of the writer Mirela Roznoveanu, the young journalist who perfects her measures with her own destiny and, disappointed by the impossibility of professional fulfillment by affirming the truth, by honor and justice, will decide to step on this promised land, where she will find freedom of expression, but she will experience a kind of captivity generated by the memory of a "Romanian past" through which she maintains the nostalgic connection with everything that was and represented her country, that is the land called "Romania".

This feeling, which has become a permanent state of captivity, is softly and carefully captured, analyzed and described in the novel *Life on the Run*, a

psychological novel through the obvious interest in exploring the darkness of the soul and defining states of failure and total disgust calibrated by painful, sad experiences. It is a novel that betrays the quality of a fine analyst of the female soul with the mutations of the soul, the turmoil, the desires, the illusions and the goals of the woman. It also draws the attention the writer's interest in aspects cut from social life, depicting characters placed in a hostile environment, which is why the exteriorization of soul experiences becomes a constant in writing, and the outstanding experiences represented are emotional, philosophical or existential.

Therefore, we here capture an attitude of reinventing the writer in the post-communist era, found in the American space using a safe tool to remember the past, namely, the writing. The experience in a communist country and the restrictions imposed by communism reverberate strongly in its consciousness and determine it to look retrospectively, for the purpose of a deep analysis, an analysis of the geography of memory, imitating certain experiences from the past. Thus, the past is relived, revisited, felt and revitalized through a filter of memory, building a post-December female epic discourse characterized by reflexivity and authenticity, characteristics that give value to writing. The authenticity of writing lies in the recording of facts of life, recalled, relived and resemanticized, in the remarkable capacity of confession and conversion of reality into fiction, in the dominance of reflection and inner tension that consumes the spirit.

The Twofold Character of Experience

In the geography of the writer's memory we find two distinct topos: an external topos of traumatic experiences and an internal topos of reliving and resemanticizing lived facts. Both are sources of fear, of struggle and lead to a passage, a shift of trauma in literary discourse. The past is not subjected to reinvention, but is a disturbing and natural testimony of fear, of trauma, a testimony placed in the present, proving the liberating role of writing or through writing. The trauma is exposed and is transposed from the consciousness disturbed by the past in the literary text by recording some biographical episodes that have painfully left a deep impression on the writer's identity.

The main character of the novel *Life on the Run*, Angela Kaminsky, an emigrant from Romania is placed on the border between past and present, on the border between the past of communist Romania and the New World, the Promised Land, America, more precisely in New York. The protagonist's life is, in fact, a labyrinthic escape in certain or assumed circumstances, which can be correlated with the musical piece Bach's *Fugue* in which the main theme is repeated in different voices and with additions that increase the complexity of the meanings.

The young journalist, preoccupied with the post-December Romanian reality, on a social, political, philosophical and cultural level, repeatedly manifests her intention to elude the data of reality, in order to present in the press as they were, true, correct and painful, but faces threats and situations designed to endanger his life. Specifically, we emphasize the young journalist's insistence on shedding light on the events in the University Square in 1990. It does not resonate with the position of some colleagues in the newsroom, it even manifests itself openly against imposture and censorship in her country, which recently shouted in the streets the illusion of freedom and the fall of communism. The tensions in the newsroom will determine her to analyze the situation and find a way out, a solution to the lie, to the imposture and to the falsehood that reigned around her, without seeing any change. He could no longer bear the tensions in the newsroom, the pressures on her, or the imposture in the country:

The newspaper is getting softer, more concessive, he published a whole page about "Mr." President. Which the government press didn't do either! As compensation, I inserted on the last page a material about how bad the course of democracy in Romanian society is rated in the West. T. boils too. We ended up arguing with W. for every article. Y. is soft, he inflames, it passes quickly, forgets to implement his decisions, but I don't know why I suspect him of compromising W., precisely because he is perhaps the real traitor. (Roznoveanu 1998: 57)

The situation worsens and leaving the country becomes imminent under the rule of threats, fear gradually sets in, and terror is found in almost all situations. The threatening letters convince her more and more that her disappearance is wanted, that her detention is being prepared, the phones during the night warn her, somehow, that the danger is imminent, and she is in a position to increase her security measures:

I receive more and more letters that prophesy my physical disappearance, imprisonment, etc... I sleep with barricaded doors and windows, and on the street I feel an acute sense of insecurity. And the phones ring hysterically during the night, voices that make incomprehensible sounds, or ask me if I'm still alive... (Roznoveanu 1998: 44)

In an unstable and threatening climate, manifested in the newsroom, in the country and in her own soul, Angela Kaminsky decides to leave, all the more so as she is insistently proposed a project of collaboration with the Security through "Comrade Floru", a security guard who insists on recruiting her for the external propaganda section of the secret services. The non-acceptance will bring her the non-publication of the articles and, possibly, the dismissal, a situation that will make her existence in a free and liberated country from communism even more difficult. The freedom that will cause her trauma is

not really freedom, from Angela's perspective, which is why she chooses exile, calmly accepting that "coming to America had been a kind of death, after which he had to be reborn again, piece by piece" (Roznoveanu 1998: 18) and even more "it was the price of freedom that not everyone is able to pay, but only the despair ones" (Roznoveanu 1998: 79), and regarding these despairs Mircea Eliade considers that "thanks to them, Romania exists today, in many countries as a spiritual presence" (Roznoveanu 1998: 79).

A long series of reflections and variants leads her to make the decision, convinced, more and more, that the dark decades of communism had replaced the Romanian people, her people, with the new man. Becoming a "collective character", he lacks memory, landmarks anchored in the past, but he also lacks possible models projected into the future, illiterate religiously and politically, whose speech had been replaced by patterns, and patriotism by hatred towards the other one. At night she barricaded himself in the house, out of fear: "It was no longer safe to mention the job, and the threats intensified" (Roznoveanu 1998: 42).

Therefore upon arriving in the United States, Angela is caught, in the first pages of the novel, in a law firm on "Broadway number 295", where she works hard, is oftentimes exhausted, offended, envied and humiliated, the divine protection being her only support and source of energy, hope, faith: "The only thing that still gave her the strength to stand up was the image of her squatting body, resting in the arms of God" (Roznoveanu 1998: 9). It was a July afternoon, a Friday, "before the great weekend of July 4th", America's birthday. It seems that it is no coincidence that this day of America's birth coincides with Angela's rebirth in a free country, in a country that allows her, in an initial stage, unsuspected opportunities for soul regeneration and professional fulfillment. But the comprehensive, retrospective light of her own experience watches over her conscience, still violated and traumatized by the experiences of her homeland, favoring flashbacks located in the country to which he feels so attached, Romania. Resting in the office, after a tiring Friday, she feels her blood gradually subside, and her heartbeat slows down, so that in the following moments, suddenly, it shakes again "like a whip". She experienced a "polyphony of the senses" (Bachelard 2005: 28), quite contradictory and disturbing sensations and feelings, because

it was about her country and the year 1990. Almost two years had passed since then, it had been an early winter night, and although it was late, she was still in the newspaper's office — the demonstration in the middle of the city had grown unusually large — in the center, thousands of students occupying the University Square chanting slogans against those who had taken power. (Roznoveanu 1998: 11).

We find that the freedom of expression acquired in America will often be overshadowed by these memories that alternate with the state of peace inside the office, transferring it into the captivity of their own experiences brought back to the present by the technique of involuntary memory. She is upset by the image of the Police who "hit wildly in the mass of demonstrators", and the military "began to shoot", thus reliving, second by second, the horror and terror of those days, reaching the bitter realization that she is still dominated by the fear of the past.

An aspect of captivity in freedom is also captured in the feeling of loss that affects the mother tongue that she feels "as a precious organ whose loss was not only a biological damage, but also a profound form of frustration" (Roznoveanu 1998: 48). The adopted language causes her fatigue, especially since it is the language of the "other personality", desperately wanting a time of rest in her mother tongue. She lives bilingualism as a tragedy of American life, especially because the Romanian language had been her working tool. Her own Self is violated by the strange feeling by which she felt that in American society, in shops, in public places she wore an artificial heart, and at home, in her home, in her environment, she regained her true heart, which she felt and manifested in sweet and swaying mother tongue. The intensity of the desire to hear and speak the mother tongue often creates the impression and hallucination that she hears Romanian being spoken in the streets.

The reality of exile creates a status of the eternal guest who often faces tiring questions such as "When did you get here?", "What is the history of your life?" Angela feels upset, embarrassed and tired, thus she answers monosyllabically. The anonymization from the beginning phase proves to be beneficial, but, over time, the loss of identity "had thrown her into completely new depressions compared to what she had experienced before." Naturally, the depressive state is determined by the absence of friends, admirers, family, telephone conversations and the newspaper, fresh out of print, ready to be read with the author's fear and curiosity. Through the mechanism of involuntary memory, the dictatorial attitude of the head of the law firm, Jonathan, Angela is instantly transposed, in the hot day in the University Square, besieged by the armed troops through ample insertions from the pages of the diary:

Many intellectuals leave the country, thinking that someone has an interest in driving them away, but things will not remain that way, there is a huge release of negative energies. Intellectuals are divided: women want to leave the country, but men show patriotic feelings. My friends want to convince me that there is no state here anymore (Saturday, June 23, 7 am). (Roznoveanu 1998: 46)

Placed between the two realms, Angela presents visible and certain contradictions, which give her a special charm: on the one hand, we are dealing

with a woman burdened with work in a law firm that creates her: "The feeling of a laboratory in which the defenders of justice were diligently researching the formulas by which the application of the law brought maximum profits" (Roznoveanu 1998: 28); on the other hand, the same woman is caught in individual and secret actions in the pursuit of Corbu, who was moving to different locations and places. This Corbu is the strange character K, former "Comrade Corbu" who had hit and arrested her father in "collectivization", the double agent suspected of being an impostor under a false identity on the American soil. Angela refuses to cooperate with the Security, she will become convincing when she undertakes, on her own account and with her own resources, the action of a stubborn observer, and having as the main motivation the revenge. Even if she does not have the necessary material support for this action and she believes to be defenseless, she counts on the conviction and promise that the American Embassy in Romania had provided her with support in this courageous endeavor.

The author of the novel is aware of the need for authenticity, so she will create a character who will imitate her portrait with elements visible in her biographical file: Angela's identity is the author's identity – a self-employed secret agent, an investigative journalist, a well-educated white emigrant and polyglot – knows Italian, Spanish, French, Russian – defenseless in a completely New World. And from the point of view of the physical portrait, we can speak of an overlap of the author's data with those of the character:

a still young and attractive woman, to whom you could have given any age between thirty and thirty-eight years [...] Her shoulder-length wavy hair hid part of her face and neck like a thick, brown veil with reddish tints. The long, matte white limbs showed not only grace but also the innate vigor of a purebred animal. (Roznoveanu 1998: 10)

So, Angela is a complex character, but she does not seem complicated, having a strong personality, whose construction requires strength, courage, science and talent from the author – in fact, their common attributes. The weapons of Angela's character are the unbeatable weapons of creative femininity: her intuition and her sensitivity. It is the female character constructed by a female author who knows how to convince her readers that she has inoculated the advantage of the divine mystery of creation in front of any man who creates literature: "It was no secret to her that a woman could express her feelings better than a man" (Stanca 2000: 4), using this privilege in the sensitive act of the creation of life and people, being convinced that "Only authenticity gives value. Books that start from the particular lived element and not from precious generalities manage to rise to the level of universal impact" (Stanca 2000: 4).

The Three Dimensions of Existence

From the structural and method of creation point of view, we distinguish in the structure of the novel three creative plans:

- A. the experience lived in the America of absolute freedom - opportunity to re-live, to copy, to transcribe, to rewrite, to interpret the data of the past;
- B. the experience lived in post-communist Romania, which keeps the character captive in the past - a time of constraints, of traumas and of self-distancing;
- C. the experience recorded in Angela's diary - occasion for preserving "in the diary's memory" the lived and stored experiences.

The three plans work by determination: once in America, the new experiences favor those flashbacks through which she is brought back to Romania, giving her the opportunity to reread the diary notes. For example, the riddle in books that Nicoletta will use reminds her of "Aunt Gena", a resident of the Rarău Mountains, where her parents still had relatives. Also, Nicoletta's image triggers the memory of "Comrade Floru" who had harassed her in Romania and even tried to push her under the wheels of a car, after which she disappeared forever. At the same time, the ships, the waves and the smell of the water will remind her of her childhood village, reliving the moments dominated by the charm and beauty of the native.

By recording the experiences in the pages of an intimate diary, Mirela Roznoveanu's novel is a work of documentary value, building an era through the truthful content of the facts described in the book. Angela's conviction was, in fact, that the diary was of highly importance, which is why, when she traveled to various meetings with Romanians of the diaspora, especially in the process of confronting Corbu, she hid among her things the diary from which she never parted: "Experience had taught her that many of the precious ideas of the moment perish if they are not formulated in the atmosphere that gave birth to them" (Roznoveanu 1998: 45).

In the pages of the diary we catch the inability of the character to adapt to the opulence and luxury of America and will even show a cultural shock of adaptation, oscillating between "here" and "there", stating with pain and nostalgia: "I didn't sleep all night because of the nervous tension and of the exaggerated luxury of the room I live in... Carpets, curtains, sheets, blankets, even hotel letterheads humiliate me. I am a poor woman coming from a barbaric world of deprivation and fratricidal wars. Half of my country terrorizes the other half" (Roznoveanu 1998: 8). Here that the reality of freedom, in whatever form, is accompanied by the reality of captivity in the past, in a world that still, paradoxically, belongs to her, even though she had left it. She could not enjoy the brilliance and freedom that New York offered her, being

obsessed with the thoughts and plans that drew her back, even though she knew it was time to forget, to look ahead, to start a new life. But she still blamed herself for not resisting, for not trying her best in her country, and this feeling of guilt made her feel like a deserter in a war prepared, long dreamed of and lost for reasons that were not related to her will, but to something metaphysical, a kind of conspiracy of evil that had to be theoretically destroyed, because nothing could last indefinitely, not even evil. (Roznoveanu 1998: 38)

The oscillating existence between here and there ensures a state of contemplation, by comparison, on the two continents, old Europe and the mysterious America, emitting contradictory sensations and thoughts: "The white clouds running across a painful blue sky, the green leaves that sting her eyes reminded her, in contrast to the softness of Europe's earth, of its dry air with hay aromas" (Roznoveanu 1998: 18). She falls into the melancholy of a past that definitely contains a piece of beauty, goodness, culture and aesthetic sense, finding, sincerely, that she longs for the "sweet slowness of the old continent" (Roznoveanu 1998: 18), where time flowed in slow cadences, sensations of good and beautiful, of past sorrows and joys, suddenly revealed. All these immerses her being in mysterious and sweet cultural dreams. America, on the other hand, offers her a different rhythm, another existence, as if subjected to an exchange of energies, she receives, violently, new and aggressive forces, meant to ensure his chance to adapt to the new rhythm and to the new life built on foreign patterns, cold and sterile, emotionally and sensorial.

Paradise and the myth of Paradise, corresponding to the New World, create a state of confusion by comparison with the country left behind, far away, mentally inducing the idea of Hell and Paradise: America is developing the general theory of living life with intensity, as deep and hedonistic as possible under the impetus of *Carpe diem*, while "beyond", "at home" had received the offer of years lived in despair, fear, hunger and darkness. We are therefore witnessing an unreserved expression of the guilt of not having done everything, to be gone. The heroine fails to cross the threshold of the two social environments - the one from which she comes and the one in which destiny had led her and where she is now trying to find a place under the sun. However, in other circumstances she displays an attitude of superiority and a calm air, of justified satisfaction, considering that she is responsible for the best choice, by which, choosing exile, she condemns those who remain in the country to a static position in the hostile environment of the country of origin:

"Why are you in New York?"

"I left my country."

"You mean they sentenced you to exile?"

"I prefer to believe I sentenced them to stay there." (Roznoveanu 1998: 49)

Although she had been close to death in Romania, the ultimate motivation for American exile remains the unbridled thirst for life, she loves life and tends to live it in other dimensions, far from the world from which she came, felt as "a huge concentration camp" (Roznoveanu 1998: 16). When she feels chased, in America, by a mysterious person, she realizes that in the depths of her being, that hunting animal instinct, manifested and practiced in the fight for survival in her country, was still active, alive and knew how to defend herself, skillfully walking through the crowd and through buildings.

In the geography of memory, a simultaneity of feelings is constructed in two different temporal registers, and in the external geography, on two different planets. The young self-exiled woman can be considered, from a metaphorical perspective, "an ineffable bridge... and a burdened carrier", assumed, who carries the burden of thoughts, frustrations and aspirations, crossing a heavy and intense traffic between Europe and America, crossed "by her mortal body, through her fragile and perishable flesh." It seems that her homeland was neither the one left over the ocean, nor the one in which she now lives as an eternal guest. Her homeland was truly that of her spirit that burned with the desire for rebirth, "a personal homeland called ANGELIDA, in her language called ANGELICA, with her history, her present and maybe her future" (Roznoveanu 1998: 282).

America, it seems, is not the solution for absolute good, Angela's life is a continuous running between here and there, between America and Romania, it is a sample of what it means "captive in freedom", captive in the assumed past from her country subjugated by the sinuosities of the communist dictatorship.

Conclusions

Man's confrontation with the evils of history drives him away from his country, makes him resort to exile. Angela Kaminsky, the female character created by Mirela Roznoveanu with an obvious writing talent and aesthetic strength, leaves a world surrounded by the sprawling atmosphere of communism and maybe even neo-communism, dominated by the intense desire to live in freedom, harmony and perfection. Relocated to the New World, she experiences a kind of "harassment of memory", because the abandoned world is returned to her like an ordeal that she climbs burdened by the past, by the memory of a dark age, relived mentally and sensorially. The escape through the assumed labyrinths will not prove a solution for the experience of freedom, the flight between "here" and "there" is a long opportunity to relive traumatic experiences for the woman revolted and determined to build a personal and authentic homeland, a homeland of her own self, predestined to live under the imprint of the past that she would neither want to forget, nor relive with joy. The burden of freedom will be lived with assumption, with hope and with

pain and the weight of experiences that were waiting to be told, shared and relived. In the context of dissident prose and exile, the novel *Life on the Run* claimed a well-defined and stable place, through probed and metamorphosed literary experiences, testimony and confession proving the aesthetic vocation of the author Mirela Roznoveanu.

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