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VINTILĂ HORIA AND THE METAPHYSICAL DIMENSIONS OF
EXILE AND DIASPORA

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Review of Cristian Radu, *Vintilă Horia or the Vocation of Wholeness* (Vintilă Horia sau vocația totalității), (Cluj-Napoca: Accent Press, 2011).

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Motto: “The drama of uprootedness brings about, perhaps, the most acute pain because the individual is deprived, all of a sudden, of everything he used to hold dear and familiar. He is left completely alone and without any support to face an unknown and more often than not hostile territory” (Cristian Radu, *Vintilă Horia sau vocația totalității*)

Twenty two years after the events of 1989, within the Romanian culture there are still gaps to be bridged over by various acts of justice and restoration.¹ This is precisely what Cristian Radu does in his book entitled *Vintilă Horia sau vocația totalității / Vintilă Horia or the Vocation of Wholeness*, which was published in Cluj-Napoca, in 2011 by Accent Press. In the summary, the author explains that his monographic and comparative study “starts with the premise that, two decades after being (re)discovered by Romanian literature, Vintilă Horia is still insufficiently valorized and integrated within its context.”²

Although Ion Vlad, Marian Papahagi, Mircea Muthu, Corin Braga, Florin Manolescu, Gheorghe Glodeanu, Cornel Ungureanu, Gheorghe Grigurcu and Ion Simuț reviewed his exemplary novel *Dieu est né en exil* or wrote insightful articles and studies about his writings, Horia failed to be assimilated by Romanian culture for rather obscure reasons. Cristian Radu points out that this deference expressed by various scholars with regard to Horia’s work was the very cause which impinged upon institutions responsible for the visibility of Romanian culture to eventually admit that justice should be done to Horia’s memory. In January 2007, the Romanian Ministry of Culture stated the necessity that Horia should finally be assimilated by the culture which had previously denied the writer’s access to its circuit. Radu argues that despite the Ministry’s official declarations there have been no obvious consequences meaning that up to this point “there is no substantial and systematic institutional initiative of total valorization and integration of Vintilă Horia’s work; moreover, individual initiatives are rather isolated.”³

Radu’s main thesis is that Vintilă Horia’s personality, reflected by his writings, yearned for fulfillment and completion through art. However, completion was an ideal which may have been rendered problematic by the writer’s separation from home. As Radu and other critics suggest, Vintilă Horia should be approached in the context of his generation along with other Diaspora writers like Emil Cioran, Mircea Eliade and Constantin Noica. All these writers had a relatively brief period when they had been attracted by fascist ideas, although, later on in his life, Horia declined any affiliations to fascist movements. No matter how firmly he subsequently denied his pro-fascist ideas, the writer could not rid himself, not even in exile, of their haunting specter. While in Spain, he wrote *Dieu est né en exil* for which he received a Goncourt prize. The book enjoyed excellent reviews in Western countries, but soon after Horia was declared winner of the prize, the Romanian authorities of the time and the French

communists fabricated a file which portrayed the author as a fierce fascist with anti-Semitic convictions. Under the impact of those surprising disclosures, the very critics who had praised the novel changed their mind. Horia refused the prize, but the scandal drew attention to the book, which was translated into fifteen languages. Thus, the aesthetic value of the book came first despite the ethical issues which had thrown it into question.⁴ Horia's political bias, followed by his denial, and then by the fabricated file, which cast its shadow not only upon him as a person, but, rather sadly, upon his worthy novel, turned him into a political "case". The shadow of suspicion and resentment still hangs both over the man and his writing. Cristian Radu does not neglect this shadow, yet, he presents it by arguing that, to his mind, Horia's "political options are not of primary importance", admitting although that by this view, he does not attempt to "minimize their seriousness." What Radu invokes in support of this attitude is the unanimous acceptance of the fact that "biographical sins of all kinds have little to do with the [writer's] work and its worth."⁵

Horia belongs to a generation of intellectuals and writers who deliberately chose exile, in order to preserve the integrity of their spirit and to pursue their creative vocation. Mircea Eliade, who may be considered the epitome of the Diaspora writer during the Romanian communist regime, confessed in the interview taken by Claude-Henri Roquet⁶ that although his exile was a break with the past, the rupture was not total. Remembering those times, Eliade argued that for him exile felt "exactly like a Jew from Alexandria felt in Diaspora. The Diaspora from Alexandria and from Rome was in a kind of dialectical relationship with their homeland, Palestine. For me, exile was part of the Romanian destiny."⁷ In the same context, Eliade sees exile as a series of experiences of initiation, of symbolic deaths and resurrections, and, as such, exile defines the human condition. As Mihaela Paraschivescu argues, "to Eliade, the relationship with his homeland as well as his diasporic identity take on religious significance." When she points out that Eliade "urges members of the Romanian Diaspora to hold the native country sacred as a "Jerusalem in the Sky,"⁸ the author of "Mircea Eliade – Exile and Diasporic Identity" harps on the notes Eliade himself struck, when he distinguished between the pre-modern religious individual who lived in "*a Cosmos which he deemed sacred*," where everything had a meaning, on the one hand, and the modern individual, "*who lives in a Cosmos devoid of any sacred dimensions*,"⁹ where there is no meaning to anything, on the other. In the same interview taken by Roquet and published as a book entitled *Încercarea labirintului / Ordeal by Labyrinth*, Mircea Eliade expressed the propensity of their whole generation towards what Cristian Radu calls "the vocation of wholeness." Although he admits that one generally lives her/his life in fragments, there are moments when "everything connects and all of a sudden we see that a goal has led us there – an *orientatio*." Eliade argues that there are writers who fulfill their talent in one great poem or one

great novel. As far as he is concerned, the historian of religions believed there was no book to represent him, but “the meaning of my life and of everything I have achieved cannot be made out but by judging it as a whole.”¹⁰

Echoing Eliade, Cristian Radu accounts for exile and its essentially deep meaning in Horia’s life and work by starting from Nicolae Balotă’s remark made in *Exil linguistique et exil métaphysique* that “the experience of exile is (might be) eventually a benefic one because it facilitates access to an authentic existence and to redemption.”¹¹ Always bearing the idea of Horia’s holistic view in mind, Radu puts the writer’s comprehension of exile, interpretation shared also by Eliade, Cioran, Ionesco, Balotă and others, into a much larger perspective. Quoting Balotă’s argument that “they understood, each in his own way, that exile means being the very grounds of it,” Radu explains that “the painful nostalgia for the country of origin turns gradually into a deeper nostalgia, that for the *realm* we all parted with and towards which we all, either consciously or unconsciously, aspire.”¹²

When he overviews Horia’s life and writing, Radu speaks about the drama of exile in archetypal terms, which may lead us further back in time, namely *ab origine* to Adam and Eve, who were expelled from Eden by divine anger. Radu relates it to the Gnostic legend mentioned by Cioran in *Sfârtecare / Tearing Apart*¹³: “In the wake of the battle that took place in heaven between the angels devoted to Michael and those of the dragon, those angels who remained neutral to the battle, complacently watching it, were thrown down by God onto the Earth and sentenced to action, to option.” Therefore, the conclusion would be Balotă’s idea, to which Radu adds that “those who live exile (in the most common sense of the word) through in the real world are, in the deep order of things, privileged, like the Jews who, only during their exile in Babylon, had the revelation of God.”¹⁴ The critic places Horia’s thinking in a Christian line of thought where introspection and meditation, which open the path towards knowledge of the self, are possible only under the spur of suffering. This essentially Christian approach associates both Horia’s propensity towards suffering and his belief in art’s power of transfiguring this sufferance with Dostoevsky’s inclinations, which determined the latter’s description as “the unsurpassed poet of purifying sufferance.”¹⁵

Radu argues that Horia’s work bears a close resemblance to Eliade’s. Both works are underpinned by their writers’ experience of exile in which they found a path towards an essential sense of being in the world, and, ultimately towards knowledge. Arguing that the focus of Eliade’s work is “the existence of *meaning* in the Universe and in the human existence,”¹⁶ Radu relates Horia’s ideas and ideals, as they are reflected within his work and by his destiny, both to Eliade’s kindred spirit and to the whole European context. In order to give his readers a depiction of this context, the author of the monographic study comments upon the works of Camus,

Kafka and Ionesco, interpreting them from the point of view of the essential theme of exile. Radu's conclusions are that the characters of Camus (Mersault in particular) and the protagonists of Kafka's *The Castle* and *The Trial* are "prototypes of the individual exiled in a world which remains, to the very end, completely alien to them."¹⁷ They either assume the status of *strangers* or they desperately try to graft some sense, thus bridging the gap between themselves and the world; yet, that effort fails pathetically and they always end up in a universe which is essentially absurd. In other words, what Horia's European contemporaries emphatically expressed in their writings was the modern individual's underlying sense of alienation. Ionesco's vision is different, but essentially pessimistic: "his characters can no longer be deemed to be *exiled*, for there is no distance left between themselves and reality: the nothingness around them has taken hold of them, thus emptying their very beings, turning them into fetishes whose gestures and words are symptoms of their inner void, of a disused subjectivity."¹⁸ By contrast, the novels written by Horia and Eliade project the issue of exile onto metaphysical coordinates, thus charging it with meaning.

The third chapter of Radu's book focuses on Horia's "novels of knowledge" in which exile is treated as a purifying experience. Horia's uprooted characters transform their longing for their past and for their homeland into a reiteration of the original fall and expulsion; they also gradually metamorphose their nostalgia for their lost space into "metaphysical longing."¹⁹ The critic distinguishes two categories of exiled characters. Radu-Negru²⁰ and El Greco epitomize the characters exiled in a hostile space, no matter how attractive it may seem to be. However tough, exile is a supreme experience that reveals to those characters sides of their inner selves of which they had not been aware before. The other category of characters epitomized by Ovid, Della Porta or Matteo Muriano find themselves in a space which is only apparently hostile and which gradually reveals itself to them as a space of wisdom suited for their spiritual needs. These characters are radically transformed by an exile which rids them of their false values and offers them the authentic values of their adoptive country. Since exile stirs the writer's spiritual evaluation of his own country's origins, "Dacia is described as the archetype of the blessed space, an authentic heaven breathing the air of eternity."²¹

In *Dieu est né en exil*, Dacia is the land where God should have been born. However, the Redeemer's sufferance would not have been complete in the space of a culture where people lived their lives in the awareness that death meant freedom from the clay of earthly existence. Radu argues that "He was born *in exile*, so that his destiny should be accomplished also by reminding people that, when assumed, exile and sufferance necessarily entail a resurrection."²² The critic shows that in Horia's work, Dacia becomes "the ideal model of humanity, a land of the few whose destiny is redemption."²³ Romanian thinkers like Vulcănescu, Noica, Eliade, Blaga,

Rădulescu-Motru, D. Stăniloaie, Ov. Papadima looked into the *spiritus loci* for a metaphysical dimension. All these thinkers, and Horia among them, tried to account for the ways in which the essentially Romanian spirit, which originated in Dacia, can be defined by being related to transcendental coordinates. In order to capture the Romanian spirit, they went deep down and far back in time, *illo tempore*, i.e. to a temporal dimension in which history becomes irrelevant, to reveal essential truths through creation. To Radu's mind, Horia's delving into the deep layers of the Romanian spirit ranks this writer with authors like Sadoveanu. They are, the critic assesses, "the Romanian fiction writers who get very close, in their literature, to the 'idea' of a Romanian spirit (if we accept its existence), trying to capture its profile and to disclose it through their characters. Each of them, in his own style, from slightly different perspectives (with a lot more consistency or even obstinacy on Vintilă Horia's part) expresses those unchanging aspects generically called by the Romanian thinkers who glossed on our spirituality 'the stylistic pattern' or 'the Romanian dimension of existence'."²⁴

The note on which the critic ends his book about a writer whose memory and work still await recognition in the culture to which he felt attached all his life reinforces Horia's holistic vision. Horia perceives the homeland exactly as Mircea Eliade described the term, i.e. as a sacred space to which the writer connected spiritually, and which defined him and his humanity. Radu remarks that throughout Horia's letters, the word "homeland" is uppercased. His unfaltering love for his country after almost fifty years of living in exile made him declare, along with his Irish contemporary James Joyce, who also spent most of his lifetime in exile, that he felt like he had actually never left home. How far from that untarnished idealism are we now? The book's author glosses: "In an era of globalization, of cosmopolitanism, and especially in a Romania where... more and more people 'are sick and tired of Romania', this detail and the feelings behind it are likely to be regarded with condescendence or maybe with surprise. Ignoring such reactions (which are contemptible, after all), one may say that Vintila Horia's essential attachment to his native land, his authentic patriotism need no further comments."²⁵

Starting from the thesis of Horia's propensity towards a holistic vision and endeavour, Radu argues that this essential aspect, along with the writer's "unique style and narrative technique, perfectly tuned to the themes" justify "the work's literary and cultural relevance, which employs an approach less commonly used by Romanian novelists: the artistic meditation upon the destiny of European civilization, and implicitly upon the destiny of the Romanian spirit."²⁶ Aware of the elusive nature of what could be hypothetically called a "Romanian cultural pattern", the author of this monographic study starts from the premise that Horia's holistic vision relates the author to the modern European novel. This approach turns Horia and his writing into an emblematic model of how a literary

project whose source is an essentially Romanian spirit (though that may be hard to define) can be European at the same time.

Notes:

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² Cristian Radu, *Vintilă Horia and the Vocation of Wholeness (Vintilă Horia sau vocația totalității)*, (Cluj Napoca: Accent, 2011), 275. All passages quoted from this book are my translation.

³ Radu, *Vintilă Horia and the Vocation of Wholeness*, 11.

⁴ “Vintilă Horia între ‘dacomanie’ și Goncourt” – review to *Dumnezeu s-a născut în exil*, Art, București, 2007. Available at http://www.observatorcultural.ro/Vintila-Horia-intre-dacomanie-si-Goncourt*articleID_21063-articles_details.html

⁵ Radu, 37.

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Încercarea labirintului*. Convorbiri cu Claude-Henri Roquet. Traducere de Doina Cornea (București: Editura Humanitas, 2007).

⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Încercarea labirintului* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1990), 81.

⁸ Mihaela Paraschivescu, “Mircea Eliade – Exile and Diasporic Identity”, *Journal for the Study of Ideologies and Religions*, vol. 5 issue 15 (Winter 2006). See also Mihaela Paraschivescu, “Joseph Campbell and the Jungian Reading of Myth”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 10, issue 28 (Spring 2011): 216-227.

⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Sacral și profanul*, Translated from the French by Brândușa Prelipceanu, 3rd Edition, (București: Humanitas, 2005), 17.

¹⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Încercarea labirintului*, 158.

¹¹ Radu, 75.

¹² Radu, 75.

¹³ Emil Cioran, *Sfârtecare*, (București: Editura Humanitas, 1995).

¹⁴ Radu, 76.

¹⁵ Radu, 121.

¹⁶ Radu, 92.

¹⁷ Radu, 282.

¹⁸ Radu, 283.

¹⁹ Radu, 284.

²⁰ Cf. *Le chevalier de la résignation (Cavalerul resemnării)* (Paris: A. Fayard, 1961). Radu Negru is the main character of the second novel of Vintilă Horia’s trilogy which comprises the following novels *Dieu est né en exil (Dumnezeu s-a născut în exil)*, *Le chevalier de la résignation (Cavalerul resemnării)*, dating from 1961) and *Persécutez Boèce!* In the above mentioned novel, Radu Negru leaves his homeland, wandering among strangers in order to save his own family.

²¹ Radu, 285.

²² Radu, 272.

²³ Radu, 124.

²⁴ Radu, 261-262.

²⁵ Radu, 273-274.

²⁶ Radu, 22-23.