OUR EUROPE: THREE POST-COMMUNIST WRITERS ON CENTRAL EUROPE AND THE DENIAL OF HISTORY

Ramona HĂRȘAN*

* Department of Fundamental Sciences, Faculty of Air Security Systems, "Henri Coanda" Air Force Academy, Brasov, Romania

Abstract: *The paper focuses on Central Europe's problematic philosophical relationship with history by bringing together three different post-communist viewpoints on Central Europeanism which seem to spotlight a certain distrust in history as a key element in any relevant understanding of its cultural specificity. The primary sources proposed for analysis consist of three authoritative Central European writers' essayistic approaches to the said relationship – namely, Andrzej Stasiuk, Mircea Nedelciu and Gheorghe Crăciun's – as each of them provides a different paradigmatic standpoint on Central Europe's "historic pudency" and this attitude's role in re-defining Europeanism in the zone. The investigation's main purpose is to determine the way in which these discourses articulate around a distinct conceptual apparatus and build emblematic contemporary perspectives, adding up to pre-communist and late, 1980s (anti-)communist philosophical debates concerning Central European identity.*

Keywords*: alternative cultural identity; Central Europe; history; otherness; community*

1. ON CENTRAL EUROPE AND THE DENIAL OF HISTORICIST IDENTITY DEFINITIONS

1.1 Back to the 1990s: on Central Europe as an alternative community model. On their way to European integration, the struggling countries in the former "Eastern Bloc" had to re-examine their Europeanism closely after the fall of communism. But even with political and economic geography (now) on their side, analysts still had to quickly admit that historically generated cultural distances between East and West were bound to represent a considerable and enduring challenge.

In the 1990s, a good number of public intellectuals and communist dissidents in different countries tried to deal with this issue. The relevant viewpoints revolved (implicitly or explicitly) around three main paradigmatic visions: György Konrád's cultural perspective on a possible Central European community, exposed in *Is the Dream of Central Europe Still Alive*? (1984); Milan Kundera's "tragic" acknowledgement of an intra-European border, dramatically separating East and West after the Second World War, vehemently argued for in *The Tragedy of Central Europe* (published first in French in 1983, then in English in 1984); and Czesław Miłosz's analysis of *Central European Attitudes* (1986). Debated intensely by numerous reputed progressive, left-wing or right-wing anti-

communist or dissident intellectuals in the former socialist bloc, as well as by certain French scholars (Jacques Le Rider, Frédéric Mittérand)[1], the prototype of an alternative, Central-European identity captured the imagination of many.

In Romania, the "Third Europe" cultural foundation[2], intellectually headquartered around the West University of Timișoara and headed by reputed post-communist academics and/or writers such as Cornel Ungureanu and Adriana Babeți coagulated most of the relevant debates on the topic around a homonymous academic journal (as well as later projects) in the last decades of the 1990s. Prestigious international participation, mainly from France and central European countries, made the emergent foundation into a phenomenon at the time.

However, such discussions predictably faded (in Romania and elsewhere) with the advent of the new century – that is, with the gradual EU integration of the countries participating in the rather "dilemmatic" (Babeți, Ungureanu, 1997) re-assessment of this regional model. As the official online information page on the Schengen visa shows today,

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[1] For references, see the "Bibliography" section.
[2] "A Treia Europă", my translation. The cultural foundation's title evokes a 1930s geopolitical federative project centered upon Poland, Romania and Hungary.

[t]he political divisions, during the 2000s, between the east and west Europe finally heal and 10 more new countries join the EU in 2004, followed by Bulgaria and Romania joining in 2007[3].

An indeed, in recent bestsellers on world geopolitics, such as Tim Marshall's *Prisoners of Geography* (Marshall, 2016:91-116), central European countries are plainly included (and actually mentioned, analyzed, in one word, "integrated") under (the chapter entitled) "Western Europe". Moreover, significantly enough, there is no mention of any "other" Europe, while Russia is treated separately. Thus, it seems that seen from the west – at least as far as theory goes – Europe is now both a geopolitical whole and a predominantly Western cultural space.

1.2 Synapses: on an intellectual tradition of *anti-historicism* in Central Europe. Nevertheless, the above mentioned 1980s and 1990s debates are still relevant to the day, but perhaps in a different sense. Beyond countless indisputably productive ideas, one could notice that many of the discourses produced by public intellectuals on the topic were marked by a rather intense negativism concerning history as a key to identity definition, an rather influential additional distress-causing factor to the dilemmas surrounding the already problematic and "vulnerable" projections of self-identity within the Central European space (Babeți, 1998:65-83). The first to identify and emphasize, among the main "attitudes" specific for the archetypal Central European identity model, a certain sense of history as threat, of *historic frustration*, combined with a "tinge of nostalgia, of utopianism, and of hope" was Czesław Miłosz (Miłosz, 1986:105-107).

On the other hand, a different, but relevant intellectual "vein" had been initiated earlier by Emil Cioran and his rather aggressive vision of historical minority as cultural insignificance in *The Transfiguration of Romania* (Cioran, 1936/1990). Re-published and mildly revised by its author in 1990, the book probably played a decisive role in the determining later Romanian psychologies of self-perception. Cioran's authoritative, nearly fascistoid definition of relevant cultural identity as heroically (i.e., belligerently) historical, and conversely, of destiny as "tragedy" or "fatality" with "small cultures", as well as his desperation with the Romanian "historical void" converged towards a specific type of *historical shaming*. This

violent and rather absolutistic cultural criticism plausibly articulated, in its turn, a durable syndrome of what I will call here *historic pudency*, i.e. a sense of shame about one's own historical insignificance – which was bound to durably affect later self-perceptions of identity[4].

Of course, all anti-historicist standpoints (based on the idea of historical time as threat) are based upon a definition of history with a capital "h", of history as *longue durée* (Braudel, 1958), but they refer to slightly different historical experiences of political / cultural domination, also reflected in the distinct corresponding "metanarratives" of Central Europeanism (Lyotard, 1979). However, the narratives differ to some extent. *Historic frustration* – of which perhaps an arch-illustration could be Milan Kundera's judgmental *Tragedy of Central Europe* – is mainly connected to Central Europe's unfortunate 20th century political experiences – to communism, in principal, but may extend to both fascism and communism, and implicitly to the two World Wars (as it frequently does in Polish or Czech consciousness), or to the ensuing disappointment with Western policies such as the in/famous 1944 "Percentages agreement" between Stalin and Churchill. On the other hand, *historic pudency* originates mainly in a long-term historical experience of colonial exploitation – under which the socialist ordeal is often subsumed – and the relatively late achievement of political independence at national level, generating an oversized self-awareness regarding one's own nation's historical minority or even collective culpability (e.g., for not having properly resisted against the instauration of communism in 1945, or for not having generated outstanding/heroic intellectual dissidence etc.). According to another criterion (that of the direct object of denial), *historic frustration* is a metanarrative founded on the outwards-orientation of major historical guilt, while *historic pudency* is inwards-oriented; or, in other words: one blames an external factor (e.g. the world and its corruption or other, more concrete forces, such as Western superpowers), the other is an instance of self-blame (and self-abasement); one is

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[3] See https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/eu-countries/, section "Brief History of the European Union". Accessed on March 30th, 2020.

[4] According to various researches conducted over time (see Webster, 1986:28; Sepi, 2013:12) Romanians can still be described as irrationally lacking in self-esteem; also, several researchers support the opinion that Romanians were "fed" with ideas able to generate a "national inferiority complex" during the Legionary period (see Webster, 1986:28; Nagy-Talavera, 1970:247 Barbu,1968:147; Bobango, 1981:68f), an ideology to which Cioran's ideas in *The Transfiguration of Romania* are, unfortunately, surprisingly akin.

critical/judgmental, the other – auto-critical/self-shaming.

A third attitude that should be considered in connection with the idea of anti-historicism is what could be termed *nihilistic ahistoric contemplativeness / passivity* or, to simplify, *ahistoricism*. This is in fact a variant combining historic frustration and pudency, in the sense that it is the expression of an expanded, chronic philosophical disbelief or disappointment in history as adverse (i.e., in history still perceived as a "threat"). But in this case, *la longue durée* is passively understood as an ontological limitation; frustration is replaced by a fatalistic (simulated or authentic) disinterest in the mechanics of history altogether. The *ahistoric* outlook could therefore be defined as a compensatory de-valorization of history (interpreted as an adverse and incontrollable continuum) and the complementary valorization of historical minority. The latter is in this case understood as a resultant of a type of metaphysical awareness based on a deep(er) understanding of the vanity of all human actions in time. Hence, the denial of history is legitimated as a result of a wise, willful passivity, based on a nihilistic perception of heroic historical act.

In this sense, *ahistoric contemplativeness* is the reverse of (and sometimes, a reaction to) *historic pudency* or *historical shaming*. In Romania, ahistoric passivity was praised by national-socialists as a solution to the sense of historic shame generated by nationalist extremists and Legionary theorists, but the intellectual roots of ahistoricism actually extend further than that, into the first metanarratives of the nation as a homogenous entity (e.g. the mythopoetic interpretations of the folk ballad *Miorița* by Lucian Blaga and George Călinescu), popularized as such mostly during the interwar period. In terms of its conceptualization, let us bear in mind Constantin Noica's theory in *The Romanian Sense of Being* (Noica, 1978/1996) as one of the classical examples to fit this category.

1.3 Nedelciu, Crăciun and Stasiuk: a choice of illustrations. Based on the theoretical distinctions proposed above, the choice of primary resources was one based both on similarities between the texts selected for analysis, and the nature of the differences between them.

To begin with, all three authors are well-praised post-communist fiction writers. Even if the two Romanians write a consistent part of their fictional and theoretical works during the 1980s (that is, under Ceaușescu's regime), all three authors are

born around the 1950s, are Western-European (or Euroatlantic) jusdging by their sources of self-education having shaped their intellectual profiles, and do not correspond (or comply) to socialist-approved aesthetic (or aesth-ethic) paradigms. On the contrary, all three are, in this same sense, somewhat counter-cultural (Hărșan, 2016) – in an eastern definition of the term.

The selected texts themselves are also similar in form, in the sense that they are either proper essays (Stasiuk's text in *My Europe* and Crăciun's *Us and the West*) or highly essayistic in nature (the series of letters published by Nedelciu and Crăciun). The same goes for their content, for they feature analogous *topoi* of Central Europe's problematic relationship with Europeanism and somewhat symmetrical attitudes towards them. As a parenthesis, a corpus of essayistic writing seemed, at the same time, more resourceful and relevant as a choice for the present analysis than sheer theoretical material (where discourse is typically artificially moderated), but more conceptually explicit than proper fiction.

As for the said differences, their nature is such that they turn the selected texts into exponential illustrations of the (today, commonly shared) anti-historicist attitudes described under section 1.2, attitudes presumed representative, as a premise of the present study, for the most popular, nearly archetypical Central European standpoints on Europeanism; this is why the exploration of these divergences is going to constitute the main focus of the present approach in the sections to come.

A last remark before proceeding to the said investigation of specific distinctive traits is the fact that the intellectual effervescence of the 1980s and 1990s concerning Central Europe (as opposed to Eastern Europe, i.e. the Eastern Block, as well as to the Prussian belligerent concept of *Mitteleuropa*, but rather indebted to Franz Joseph's federalist dream) is the actual context in which the texts we are about to discuss were produced, and from which they stem.

Among perhaps the most notable epiphenomena of the debates fueled by the "Third Europe" group is the dialogue regarding Romanian Europeanism between Mircea Nedelciu and Gheorghe Crăciun. The exchange actually started as a debate on the enduring cultural differences between the three major former Romanian Principalities – more precisely, on the contrasts between Transylvania, on the one hand, and the old Kingdom (Moldavia and Vallachia), on the other. But as a reflection on Romanian cultural homogeneity, the epistolary dialogue unavoidably

turns into a polemic discussion on what Europeanism should mean in post-communist Romania, since Transylvania (along with Banat) is initially consensually assigned to a "more European" cultural paradigm than the other provinces, while the two Danubian principalities are thought to belong to an Oriental, Slavic cultural area, the so-called "Balkanic" model. Even if neither Nedelciu nor Crăciun directly contributed to *The Third Europe* project directly, the initiator of the exchange was the former, who had just written and published a "collective" experimental novel touching upon the theme of central Europeanism with Adriana Babeți and Mircea Mihăieș[5]. So it is only natural to assume that the correspondence he and his close friend, fellow writer and Brașov university academic Gheorghe Crăciun, primed in 1991, was actually prompted by the preoccupations of the Timișoara group. Most of the resulting texts, dated 1991, were published first in the Bucharest headquartered literary journal *Contrapunct*[6], under the title *Provençal Letters – Late Returns*[7]; then, the dialogue was later integrated by Gheorghe Crăciun in his tome of collected works *The Reduction Scale Factor* (Crăciun, 1999), along with his last, unsent reply and his complementary essay *Us and the West*[8].

In his turn, Andrzej Stasiuk's *Logbook* (Andrukhovych, Stasiuk, 2003:9-98) is part of a two-fold post-communist definition of Central Europe published as a self-standing booklet entitled *My Europe: Two essays on the Europe called "Central"*, where it constitutes a counterpart to Ukrainian fiction writer Yurii Andrukhovych's *Central-Oriental Revisions* (Andrukhovych, Stasiuk, 2003:99-185). *My Europe...* originally appeared in 2000 and was translated into Romanian with the support of *The Third Europe Foundation* (Andrukhovych, Stasiuk, 2003).

If we deliberately omitted here Andrukhovych's contribution to the theme, it is in principal out of (textual) space concerns, but also a consequence of the possibility of paralleling different or similar views on symmetrically distributed themes with the other three writers. The selection was in this case more structural and functional than a qualitative choice. In a nutshell, his take on Central-"Oriental" Europe is a pessimistic point of view on the terrible separation signaled by Kundera in *The Tragedy....* Central Europe is depicted by Andrukhovych as a desolate cultural landscape with no historical escape routes, both the historical past and the historical future of which seem to be lost indefinitely.

2. THEIR EUROPE: CRĂCIUN, NEDELCIU, STASIUK, ANTI-HISTORICISM AND THE GEOGRAPHICAL ALTERNATIVE

As far as the three more assertive (if some are still rather pessimistic) alternative visions of Europeanism are concerned, the following overview of their specificities and particular solutions will be structured according to two major coordinates: 1) the distinct representations of Western Europe as an ideal cultural design (or, with some, as an anti-model or an impracticable form); 2) the nature of anti-historicist identity definitions, and the original solutions they suggest.

2.1 Perspectives on the Western European model. Based on its desirability, the Western world-model is perceived differently by the three writers. "I am a Romanian intellectual who first got out of the country at age 40, in 1990. I am – I say this openly – a pro-occidental", Gheorghe Crăciun writes at the very beginning of his essay *Us and the West* (1999:126). And indeed, he is the only one to unconditionally and fully embrace the Western ideal, who truly ultimately believes that "our Europe" (ideally) has to become one with the West, to learn the western ways and in the end, become the West. "If I am to favor anything, I favor civilization. I truly believe that *ex occidente lux*", he asserts in his third letter (1999:124), evoking Eugen Lovinescu's example as a prototype for profitable pro-western Romanian intellectual attitudes. In other words, for Crăciun, the West equals civilization – and this is no long division. In fact, in this sense, his reasoning – even though sensibly moderate, follows in Cioran's footsteps, for culture is the result of civilization and must come as a consequence of historical experience and extroversion:

> I am under the impression that the Western world learned to play with metaphysics and the Truth only after having secured a pragmatics of existence that defies any provisory arrangement and reduces the

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[5] I am referring to the novel *Femeia în Roșu* [The Woman in Red, my translation], authored collectively by the three writers mentioned above. The novel was first published by Cartea Românească publishing, in 1990.

[6] Original version of the title: *Scrisori provensale – Răspunsuri tardive*.

[7] All English title and citation translations from Romanian or languages other than English are my own, for all bibliographic reference cited in Romanian in the "Bibliography" section.

[8] Original version of the title: *Noi și Occidentul.*

uncertainties of everyday life to a minimum (Crăciun, 1999:131).

Moreover,

the apparent ruptures [in the Western way of life, R.H.] (wars, diseases, the various forms of state fragmentation etc.) are proper, *sui generis* means to secure the survival, the crystallization, the fine-tuning of the same unique idea. An idea that concerns, first of all, the organization of human life in controllable, precise patterns, based on the principles of rationality and efficiency (Crăciun, 1999:127).

Much in the same line, he argues – with an untranslatable pun – that "The weak component" in Eastern identity "is the Slavic component" (Crăciun, 1999:107)[9], seen as prone to corruption and devoid of a coherent vision of *la longue durée*, which ultimately makes it insignificant ("a *cirlilai* world"[10], as he irritably calls it). To sum up, the Transylvanian writer sees European integration as a necessity that cannot be compromised or negotiated with: in his view, we should copy the West – "to me, Balcanism seems neither funny nor heroic" (Crăciun, 1999:124), "I really believe in those forms devoid of substance[11]" (Crăciun, 1999:124) – and the model we apply should be absolute. This is why, for Crăciun, the idea of Central Europe is an insufficient half-model: "Our chance to rejoin Europe is the *Mittel* [Mitteleuropean, R.H.] way (a half-portion, then), a *Bitter* chance." (Crăciun, 1999:109). The irony in the pun is obvious: Central Europe is a half-European model, a bitter pill signifying the East's inability in the accomplishment of proper Europeanism, in fully meeting the high standards of the West. In the end, the pun *Mittel-Bitter* is a sore conclusion: the East will never be the West, and this cultural fact does not do the Easterners any favors.

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[9] Original Romanian statement: "Partea slabă a lucrurilor e partea slavă."
[10] In original: "o lume de *cirlilai*". The word "cirlilai" is a lexical invention, suggesting a mass of insignificant, inconsequential entities, of cheerful nullities.
[11] This is a reference to Titu Maiorescu's ideas in *În contra directiei de astazi în cultura romană* [Against the contemporary trend in Romanian Culture] (published in 1868). Maiorescu was a major critic of any (socio-cultural) forms that simply copied what he thought to be the surface of the Western model, while the essence of it remained inapplicable. This theory is remembered as "the theory of forms without substance".

The other two writers here in question are of a different opinion. Mircea Nedelciu is also pro-occidental, but his solution when it comes to the practical application of the Western model is more relativistic, in the sense that he prefers a middle ground to the duplication of an absolute model. He therefore favors a combination of Western and local frameworks:

(…) the work methods used by the French or the Austrians should be copied by Romanians, the same way that the Polish, the Czechs, Hungarians or Serbians are able to replicate them. (…) But for us to be able to accomplish anything in this direction, with our own specific means, it is insufficient to simply have the will to do it, we need to get to know ourselves better and distribute tasks in accordance to this knowledge,

Nedelciu states in his inaugural letter (Crăciun, 1999:104). Later on, he becomes more categorical on the matter: in his last (fourth) letter to Crăciun, as the polemic exchange had started to heat up, he refers to unadjusted cultural replicas (illustrated by using an optimistic parallel drawn by Crăciun between Cluj-Napoca and Wien against its initial purpose) in rather harsh terms:

The cities in the margins of empires are nothing but pale copies of the metropolis, representing ultimately nothing but *forms* (which resemble the metropolis, but are, of course, reduced by a scale factor), *devoid of the imperial substance* (power). (…) Today, you are forced to look for them [the similarities between the metropolitan center and the replicas, R.H.] insistently, to wish to find them with all your heart, to use all your historic knowledge in this sense, and in the end, to rather conclude on the fact that they remain a mere caricature. The nature of this resemblance remains that of a copy trying to mimic a model that cannot be reproduced. From the very beginning, a copy knows that it is nothing but a simplified portrayal of the model and therefore does not have the right to compete with its uniqueness, so it really has to stop before it becomes a carbon copy (Crăciun, 1999:120).

Instead, what he proposes as a solution is an alternative based on Fernand Braudel's ideas concerning the "science of governing the margins" (Crăciun, 1999:118), and sides with the idea of an acculturation able to bridge Western and Slavic "components", highlighting the fact that the Romanians' first cultural accomplishments were facilitated by means of the influence of Slavic writing and models. Of course, the risk is, he argues, considering a statement by Cioran in this sense (Crăciun, 1999:111), to replicate the worst of the two

worlds instead of finding the right measure on this middle ground. But even though this "science of the governance of margins" might be more complex and subtle than what one would imagine, in his perspective, acculturation remains the most valid possible answer of all. Needless to say that ultimately, for Nedelciu, there has always been more than meets the eye about the insubordination of margins, i.e. their potential as an emancipatory force, as well as their openness to tolerance and alterity.

As for Stasiuk, he is probably the least pro-occidental of the three. Fascinated by the images and narratives of an ideal West as a child and throughout young adulthood, the Polish author claims that with the possibility of free (physical) travel (after 1990) came his utter disenchantment with the West:

The real geography is the way that leads South [towards South-Eastern Europe, the Danube Basin, R.H.], because the East and the West have been dominated by these two illegitimate sisters [political and economic geographies, R.H.], and my hungry soul will never be able to find anything there (Andrukhovych, Stasiuk, 2003:158).

For him, it is the universality of the center that brings about its lack of (sufficient) substance, the Centre becomes its own simulacrum:

(…) I am not a great supporter of life in the Center. To live in the Center is to live nowhere. When any direction is equally close or equally far, the human being becomes repulsed by the idea of travel, for the entire world starts to resemble an immense province (Andrukhovych, Stasiuk, 2003:111).

An opposite valorization of fragmentariness as an effect of acculturation than in Gheorghe Crăciun's view (for whom it represents orientalism, much to the likeness of Turkish bazars) is also apparent with Stasiuk, who seems to be, unlike the Transylvanian writer, fascinated by the exploratory potential of heteroclite juxtapositions, reunited, however, by the commonness of mental / cultural representation:

[…] it is out of such things that my Europe is made up of: details, a few seconds-long episodes, reminding me about this or that movie scene […], and beyond this whirlpool of episodes there are glimpses of scenery, furtive glimpses at the map behind (Andrukhovych, Stasiuk, 2003:158).

The lively colorfulness of petty detail thus becomes a definition of the Central European space – as with Crăciun – but the connotation essentially

differs: such detail doesn't represent the annoying, shallow "Balkanic frivolities" (Crăciun, 1999:113), but the very core of a living, breathing, resourceful multicultural space. In this sense, Stasiuk feels much more attached to the federalist Hapsburg utopia envisaged by Franz Joseph – but that is, he claims, only because the center (and its power) dwells further away from the actual geography around it than in Western republicanism:

This is why I side with the idea of monarchy, all over the world, everywhere (…). The more land the Emperor owns, the better it is for the commoners. (…) The further away the Master, the better (Andrukhovych, Stasiuk, 2003:162).

Thus, his understanding of the margin as a liberal space, based on a historically-induced fear of political structures of power such as the center, is extremely similar to the perspective on peripheries as spaces of relative freedom under totalitarianism Mircea Nedelciu constructs throughout his fictional writings.

However, there are a few paradoxes in the two Romanian writers' thinking that might be worth discussing here. On the one hand, Mircea Nedelciu evokes the discourses of the major intellectual critics of Romanian interwar Francophilia (such as Maiorescu) against the absolutism of Crăciun's adherence to the Western model, while still calling upon postmodern French thinking (e.g. Braudel) to legitimate his relativistic attachment to the same model. In fact, he is a Francophile himself, by education (postmodern French theoretical schools of thought played an important role in his intellectual self-formation, see Hărşan, 2016).

On the other hand, Gheorghe Crăciun's confessed perception of the real, physical West differs greatly in relation to his idealistic image of Western Europe. At first (i.e., in his first reply to Nedelciu's inaugural letter), he willingly admits to an anxiety produced by the excessively orderly occidental cultural space, much in the same way as Andrzej Stasiuk does:

Last year, I spent a day in Munich, as I was transiting back home. I was returning from France, Belgium, where I had had the extremely definite feeling of being an *ausländer*. In fact, I believe that France is still practicable as a living environment; Paris is more intimate than Bucharest. But a modern German city, like Munich, where I had the distinct impression that every person is nothing but a clockwork mechanism? All to the nines, extra-proper, freshly out of the box, and over-preoccupied by very-very important – if petty, everyday – matters (Crăciun, 1999:109).

On the contrary, his later appreciation of punctuality and quantified time (that will be referred to in more detail in the next section) seems to contrast oddly with the cited description of Munich.

Nevertheless, the inconsistencies mentioned above may have their explanations. As far as Nedelciu's Francophilia is concerned, he actually never disavowed his attachment to Western (and especially, French) critical thinking. In fact, in his view, Central European space must be organized based on to-the-day Western theories of culture such as Fernand Braudel's – as long as they are not mindlessly transplanted, with no regard to the heteroclite and rather specific local background. In fact, for him, it is not necessarily the "form", but the "substance" of Western thinking (and to be more precise, of the Western philosophies regarding the pragmatics of existence, such as socio-political organization and means of production, historical spontaneity), that should be replicated and adjusted to native needs.

As for Crăciun, the distance in time between the text of his first letter – in which he provides the cited description of Munich – dated 1991, and the much more categorical attachment to the Western matrix in his last "late return", otherwise coherent with the essay (dated 1997) apparently counts for an experiential evolution towards a deeper understanding and growing attachment in relation to the "mechanical" dimension of occidental Europe.

2.2 The denial of history and geographical alternative(s). To begin with, a first remark that needs to be made when it comes to their perception of Central European history is that all three writers basically agree upon its irrelevance in relation to *la longue durée*. Historical unpredictability and sinuosity are understood both as a fatal and permanent threat to the greatness of (any) civilization (so their perspectives are, at least to some degree, anti-historicist) and as a vacuum, a void in what concerns Central-European civilizational achievement. Unlike Konrád, none of them considers the Hapsburg alternative as an exponent of historical magnitude, even if they are all inclined to validate it as a somewhat valuable tentative to reach towards the West. However, since the central-oriental European space seems to be culturally incompatible with the aspiration to historical greatness, Mircea Nedelciu and Andrzej Stasiuk turn to an original, favorable investment with identity-related meaning of space and geography, over time and history, while Gheorghe Crăciun remains mainly pessimistic about the potential of both coordinates as far as non-western areas are concerned.

Perhaps the most open (when it comes to discussing ideal, rather than feasible solutions) to the idea of the necessity of historically meaningful (heroic) enterprises as "The" (only) way to European integration is Gheorghe Crăciun. His very description of the authentic (i.e., occidental) European "spirit" is related to the historicity and potential for (long) duration of human actions:

> The very first thing about the Western man – the one who created this enviable type of civilization – is the bravery and self-confidence with which he has decided to oppose nature (…). But this is not just about market economy and civil society. This structuring basis is much more than that. It is historical, logical, anthropological. In the case of the Occident, the very basis of life is essentially connected to the medium and long duration of historical time, they become one with the very idea of history. There are peoples for whom the consciousness of their involvement in historical time is actually a guarantee of their existence. (…) History as a linear memory of the metamorphoses and advancements of an ethnic collectivity is bound to the idea of time and its exact quantification, down to the level of minimal human acts. Civilization is impossible without the normativity of time and the conventional definition of exact time in any activity (Crăciun, 1999:127).

However, in his view, this hopelessly contrasts with the Eastern perception of history and actions meant to endure:

> But there are peoples for whom – due to their mythical and "feral" nostalgia for a collective consciousness – historical time is an insufficiency, an implacable and tragic transcendence. But (…) we, Romanians, didn't invent the mechanical clock. The orientation in time of the Romanian peasant is still essentially meteorological to this day. (…) At most, we have invented agrarian economy, agrarian civilization, and Man's integration in nature, his symbiosis with nature, the *mioritic*[12] spirit, and resignation (Crăciun, 1999:129).

Now, there is an obvious similarity between Crăciun's and Cioran's disgusted perceptions of the Romanian peasant and his "nature-friendly" universe; Crăciun's distaste for what Ernest Gellner would call "agrarian society" (Gellner, 1983/1997) is openly exhibited on various occasions, among which the most evident manifestations of his dislike of the agrarian landscape are, perhaps, related to his description of the personal experience of

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[12] As defined by the mythical ballad *Miorița*; imbued in fatalism and passivity.

Wallachian floorless peasant homes, perceived as an utter culture shock: "The first time I saw such a clay-floored room, at Nereju, I was terrified. No, I actually burst into laughter for being so terrified" (Crăciun, 1999:108). The same incompatibility transpires as he cites an exasperate description of Romanian ruralism by Tudor Vianu (Crăciun, 1999:125-126), and in various other instances. However, a remainder of indulgence in this respect (since he was, himself, the son of a peasant and regularly returned to the village of Poiana Mărului, to work the land) is his attitude towards Transylvanian (Saxon) villages – featuring houses with proper floors and foundations, i.e. homes that demonstrate a Western (Saxon) minimal concern for historical durability; still, even this opinion is bound to evolve towards the more negative impressions on Transylvanian decay, expressed towards the end of his 1997 essay on Romanians and Europe. Nevertheless, space as seen by Crăciun never overcomes its status of mere visual expression of the historical void, of this "Secondary Europe's" (Crăciun, 1999:134) vocational historic insignificance, as long as it remains unwilling to heroically (i.e., constructively and durably) oppose the vicissitudes of natural time. Thus, one could conclude that for Crăciun, the West can be defined as a space able (or at least, willing) to "fight back" against the irrationality of nature and time, while conversely, Central Europe is nothing more than the expression of historical fatality – or impossibility.

In the case of Mircea Nedelciu and Andrzej Stasiuk, the relationship between significance and time is defined in quite different terms. With Nedelciu, the impression of historical durability is a mere *fata morgana*, a nonsensically oversized representation of Man's capacity to change the world. History is thus dismissed as irrelevant for any definition of identity, on the basis of an implicit, unspoken awareness with respect to Central Europe's historical minority. Thus, a subtle indication of a refused/denied sense of historic pudency becomes apparent. For Nedelciu, just like for Stasiuk, a more sensible understanding of history is that of fragmentary, individual stories and gestures, of spontaneous adaptations to external conditions – in a word, of much shorter durations and permanently changing surroundings, as opposed to the ultimately destructive, vanity-revealing *longue durée*. This is why both Nedelciu and Stasiuk favor a rather spatial, geographical perception of time. While natural geography is durable, political and economic geography are interpreted as whimsical and unstable resultants of historical intrusion. What is in the "now" and

(especially) in the "here" is, along with nature and geography themselves, the only authentic, available certainty.

For Nedelciu, this is the "raw resource" to be used in order to achieve any plausible articulation of meaning and durable significance. In his defense of the Wallachian spirit, exposed rather pungently in letter number IV – as a reaction to Crăciun's slight complex of Transylvanian superiority, there is a fascinating exegesis of the Romanian idiomatic expression "to build a stairway to Heaven" – which refers to the meaninglessness of heroic pragmatic effort (grandiose or not). The analysis is illustrated via a reinterpretation of the essential works of Constantin Brânşiu th rough which this perspective on vanity ends up being described as a "perspective of the stars":

> The so-called 'writers of the [Bărăgan] plain' are people who first opened their eyes on a scenery with no terrestrial landmarks: the fields are desolately flat, their borders meet the sky by day and by night become mere passages between the starry and the starless parts of the universe. The houses are nothing but huts or hovels […], not offering any impression of solidity or durability whatsoever. The plants are annual, not perennial. When you grow up in such a space […], your mind remains forever impregnated by a certain 'perspective of the stars'. From this perspective, no building is strong enough to withstand the forces of nature […], no power can escape its own vanity, all is in vain and can be […] looked down upon, one can count on nothing and nobody on the long run. (…) The terminal point of any grandiose construction, this old Kingdom saying seems to suggest, is necessarily the void. (Crăciun, 1999: 121-122).

For Stasiuk, space is, similarly, an escape from the diabolical clutches of history: a space without territory, a nearly abstract reality is what determinately defines "his [Central] Europe":

> My obsession has always been geography, not history on who's immense, half dead body we have been feasting for such a long time in this part of the world. Geography, on the contrary, was given to us [Central-Europeans, R.H.] as a revelation and is one of the very few things we haven't yet managed to destroy. Political and economic geography are nothing but its bastard progenies. […] They resemble the shadows on a dirty window pane and never manage to last longer than them, either (Andruhovîci, Stasiuk, 2003: 158).

On the other hand, there are a few tinges of historic frustration-type discourse in the fashion of

Kundera that can be easily identified here, as he refers to Poland's eastern and western borders (namely, to Germany, Russia and their ill-fated respective historical roles), in the sense that his rhetoric suddenly gains in judgmental tones and the discursive pitch visibly raises. However, a certain measure of sensibility manages to harness these sudden, brief but bad-tempered emotional side-slips.

Now, since I have detailed Nedelciu and Stasiuk's perspectives in a study specifically dedicated to the relationship between time, space and identity as represented in their writing (Hărșan, 2014), I will only state here that they are both exponents of a rather postmodern ahistoric contemplativeness the main feature of which is a highly aesthetic sense of the vanity of material entities, which results, in both cases, in a valorization of the ephemeral as tragic/ironic beauty as well as tragic/ironic narrativity, and therefore, essentially, as a source of (humanly-constructed) significance. But in their case, immaterial, imponderable structures are understood as the most viable, and thus, the most reasonable.

3. CONCLUSIONS: ON COMMON POINTS AND AUTHENTIC DIALOGUES

In spite of the ensuing polemics and decisive differences between the three perspectives briefly showcased here, a few essential points of confluence also become apparent which may represent a positive and workable compromise.

To begin with, a common perception of Central European "otherness" constitutes the premise of all three points of view. Either perceived as confusing and negative, or as enriching and positive, our part of Europe definitely possesses a specific charisma, confirmed both by Nedelciu's intuition of "a new fascination for the *cirlilai* world" being born (Crăciun 1999:123) and by Andrzej Stasiuk's success in Western Europe. Intrinsically related to an acute sense of the vanity of things, acknowledged again by all three writers, this charisma is an implicit postmodern, secular revitalization of ancestral Christian worldviews (the Ecclesiast). Nonetheless, both its illustrations and final significance differ greatly. The two Romanian writers discover the agreement of Wallachian and Transylvanian elements by analyzing a folkloric scatological joke told by Crăciun, in which the world is basically defined, in its essence, as the overbearing presence of excrement/defecation (see Crăciun 1999:113-115,123); for Stasiuk, it is the wisdom of the gipsy nomads (with which he overtly identifies), never

inclined to settle down, that stands as a symbol of awareness, a "momentum of the ephemeron" (Andrukhovych, Stasiuk, 2003:168). But for Western Europe, the allure of such (usually) tragic-sarcastic visions of vanity is, in fact (as Stasiuk openly points out in the sequence cited above), the temptation of a reverse, heterotopic (Foucault, 1967/1986) image of oneself (i.e., of the West), an inverted portrait able to bring about a (much appreciated in Western thinking) constructive critical perspective.

But criticism, constructive or sometimes, (self) destructive is also a feature of these three discourses when it comes to self-analysis: historic pudency, whether turned into a rhetoric closing up on historic shaming (Crăciun), frustration (by spots, Stasiuk) or indifference (Nedelciu and Stasiuk) is proof of such self-analytical, rational reflexes, part of a generalized effort meant to compensate for all and any counter-illuminist (Berlin, 1997/2001), totalitarian nationalist mythopoetics having scarred Central Europe all along the 20th century.

Finally, another common point is a shared conviction that reasonable human constructive activity is key, it is the necessary and defining element in any meaningful enterprise against the arbitrariness of nature and history. Deemed either inaccessible (without the proper dose of effort, self-confidence and bravery to stand against it), as with Crăciun, or irrelevant (because it privileges the powerful and belligerent), as with Nedelciu and Stasiuk, a historicist definition of Central Europe is rejected as impracticable either out of sheer pessimism (Crăciun) or disbelief in its constructive value (Nedelciu, Stasiuk). Of course, the definitions as of to what "reasonable (i.e., durable) constructive activity" refers to vary (Crăciun bets on pragmatism, while Nedelciu and Stasiuk value a dynamic contemplativeness that could be re-termed as creativity, or more precisely, a type of narrativity).

But in fact, the beauty and richness of such dialogue, polemical as it may be, reside precisely in the differences of opinion, as well as in the acknowledgement of various, sometimes contrasting cultural specificity traits, or in the mere reflectivity of one's irrational blind spots, more than in its potential for definitive conclusiveness. Such an exchange, allowing for critical openness and mutual reflection, is in fact an authentically occidental approach to one's cultural identity. The tendency towards creative – and critical – cooperation/association (two of the discourses analyzed here articulate an epistolary exchange,

the other was published in association with a text produced by a writer of different nationality and worldviews) demonstrate in themselves a dialogic sensibility that renders them simply (as) European (as) Plato's or an entire tradition of colloquia and debates that shaped the Europe of today. And judging by the Western (welcoming) reactions to Stasiuk's standpoint, the dialogue can be declared – as it has always been – open, a dialogue to which our Central European alterity, defined by our specific historical experience of totalitarianism, by an older, particular understanding of multiculturalism and difference, and a distinct philosophical interpretation of the world and its significance, might abundantly contribute.

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