



Empowering The Self: The Authority of Identity in Matei Călinescu's *Un Fel De Jurnal*

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"Un fel de jurnal", written by Matei Călinescu, takes the reader on a journey of insecurities, social instability and inaccuracy, as well as a confluence of fear and metaphysical despair. Having fled Communist Romania in a fraudulent manner, Călinescu begins chronicling the perks of exile and the anxiety of a future as bleak as his existential being, had he continued to stay in his native country. The political discourse of the Communist regime has persecuted the author through its instances of oppression and censorship, which Călinescu has fought to overwrite by escaping to the United States of America. In making this particular bold move, Călinescu manages to counteract the regime and its system of control by way of self-empowerment. However, the foundation of appurtenance remains undefined, which leaves the author in a state of unrooted limbo, with a package of limited initiatives. Nonetheless, the attempt of writing a personal journal adds to the effect of the newly discovered (actually, recovered) force of individual faculty, thus showcasing the autonomy that rupture provides. The main goal of this paper is to counterbalance the power-to-person relations of the two political spaces, Communist Romania and the US, and the author's affective response to the cultural dis/embodiment through the use of a narrative of selfhood. In terms of methodological inputs, I shall form my analysis stemming from the perspective of affect theory, exile and autobiographical studies.

Keywords: empowerment, exile, identity, autonomy, affect



In the 1970s, in Romania, the Communist regime had started to expand its area of influence and control, taking it a step forward and paving its way into the private sphere of the country's citizens. A Big Brother-like system had been implemented in order to survey every movement that might have had a political turnout, thus invoking censorship laws as a means of stability and continuation of a dictatorial rulership. For many, rebellion and a defiance of the "norm" was met with imprisonment, labor encampment or straightforward torture, and ultimately a certain demise. Moreover, as Cristina and Dragoș Petrescu

argue, "enemies of the people' were detected in any political or social group and turned into victims [...]. The victims were men and women, young and old, all innocent individuals, whose guilt was never properly proven by a regime that disregarded completely the rule of law" (49). This was the particular context that drove Matei Călinescu, the author enosen for the upcoming analysis, into exile in the United States, as his first published journalistic attempt announces.

Un fel de jurnal (1973-1981) takes the reader on a journey of emotionally charged implications, derivative of actions such as his self-imposed extraction

out of Communist Romania and consequently his auto-forced shift of ideology and social status on stepping ashore US territory. The autobiographical work gravitates around feelings of despair, fear, doubt, confusion, alienation while chronicling the stages of escape from totalitarianism and adjustment to the democratic values of being and expression. All inflictions and dispositions have put a toll on the author's understanding of personal identity and appurtenance to a cultural, social and political, as well as metaphysical body, thus constructing a life narrative of affective dissemination for a closer introspection of selfhood. The most pregnant aspects that this paper will focus on are those of empowerment and authority of identity that stem out of Matei Călinescu's transcending psychological and external boundaries, by following four directions of critical investigation: the first foregrounds the moments of physical detachment from the native country and its immediate effects; the second rests on a regrouping of identity pieces, reshuffled through the example of authorial exercise; the third highlights some of the drawbacks of forging a new identity, among them finding signs of past and post traumatic experiences, inevitably being transposed into the undefined design of personhood; the fourth and last direction brings into play the changes of self-empowerment, namely the different reactions unearthed by the author's own rebranding.

When it comes to living in a dictatorship, power is unlawfully gathered under the command of one ruler, one figure in relation to which everyone else is recognised and acknowledged. The citizens of the country are expected to offer their full compliance and admiration for the decisions being brought upon them. Thus, free will transforms into obligation and endurance of what is put forth. For Matei Călinescu, and a few before him and after, the infringement of personal agency resulted in the decision to permanently leave the country. In so doing, the author confesses: "Nu-i mai puțin adevărat că acesta este primul meu gest politicește liber" (19)¹. With this specific line, the author presents himself anew, overturning the system of oppression and acquiring a position of power. Călinescu manages to cut the strings of control and, to some extent, beat the regime at its own frivolous game. However, the effects of empowerment revert to instances of gain and also loss. Among the affective responses representative of loss, we are introduced to the notion of guilt: "Ba chiar nu pot să nu mă simt și puțin vinovat - ca după o evaziune dintr-o închisoare din care știi că ai scăpat doar tu, lăsându-i în urmă pe toți ceilalți, cu posibilitatea ca unii din ei să fie trași la răspundere pentru fuga ta" (19)². Călinescu's achievement comes with clauses that continue to be manoeuvred by the totalitarian state, in so that consequences are drawn on either side of the power-play spectrum.

In the same register of breakage as a result of the

"free political gesture," Călinescu is seen hovering in an existential loop of paralysis, which bombarde the already altered identity shell:

Cum voi suporta noua viață care începe - se putea oare altfel? - sub semnul tuturor incertitudinilor? [...] În ce mă privește, decizia nu e bună, nici rea; sau, mai degrabă, e și bună (căci exprimă o dorință sănătoasă de normalitate), și rea (trauma dezrădăcinării, conștiința că întoarcerea a devenit brusc imposibilă, regretul despărțirii: de familie, de prieteni, de locuri și de limbă, și în ultimă instanță de propria mea identitate). (19)³

The realm of self-exile in which the author has entered advances proponents of indecisiveness, as well as a fractured image of being that can no longer adhere to a single frame of manifestation. Călinescu finds himself stuck in between advancing into the unknown and coexisting with the life left behind. Therefore, power is once again brought in sight, but as a mechanism this time, of stepping into an arena of "uncertainties."

The new beginning for Călinescu lies in the confines of anonymity, because "pierzându-mi nu numai țara, ci și numele, am câștigat o indiferență față de mine însumi care e poate o formă de înțelepciune" (22)⁴. Being a person in exile, a structure without a foundation, offers quite an advantage to our author of study by simply empowering him to sketch and redefine his identity in personal and intimate undertones, bereft of censorship and subversion. Nevertheless, having been compelled turn to recur to such an action due to political aggressions deems Călinescu's "indifference" toward one's self as an act of hopelessness and exhaustion. Worth mentioning in this situation is that the author has chosen to go into exile at the age of 34, leaving in his trace an academic profession and an established poetic persona. Thus, all the more difficult to start fresh and make amends with an internal, psychological disruption, affected by external factors.

Authority of identity becomes centre stage for Matei Călinescu's narrative and the journal, as object of confession and exploration, presents its pages as a canvas onto which being comes to life. In other words, faced with an unfamiliar context, the author turns to self-writing as an attempt to rediscover the nuances of identity through the lenses of non-being. Here, power receives the connotation of strength, a determination in picking up the pieces of being and rearranging their order so as to recreate a body of meaning. The primary need explained by Călinescu is the following: "Scopul imediat e pur practic: să scriu ca să țin cât mai departe de mine obsesiile care-mi dau târcoale, croncănind ca niște corbi gata să mă atace; să-mi pun mintea în mișcare, să arăt că sunt încă viu. Scriul îmi apare ca un mod de a mă apăra" (15)⁵. Practising the craft of writing enables the author to dive in a pool of consciousness, reasserting his livelihood, which is



under constant threat, a feeling that has impregnated the psyche (“obsessions,” “defence”). Taking after Brian Massumi and his contention of threat:

We can never be done with it. Even if a clear and present danger materializes in the present, it is still not over. There is always the nagging potential of the next after being even worse, and of a still worse next again after that. The uncertainty of the potential next is never consumed in any given event. There is always a remainder of uncertainty, an unconsummated surplus of danger. The present is shadowed by a remaindered surplus of indeterminate potential for a next event running forward back to the future, self-renewing. (53)

For Călinescu, the threat of insecurity is very much alive, which maintains his alertness even in the written form. By going into exile, the author remains aware of the repercussions of his act that can be put in motion at any given moment. In terms of authority, identity here struggles to prevail, but it is still handcuffed, metaphorically speaking, by the totalitarian machine. As danger lurks in the background of Călinescu’s existence, “fiecare literă e un semn de viață” (15)⁶, thus empowering him to overtop the crevices of oppression.

Caught in a whirlpool of non-belonging and non-denomination, Călinescu makes use of his canvas in the style of Jackson Pollock. The surface is splattered with words that represent a meaning of self (or, better said, an exercise at creating meaning), not easily identifiable. The author words his dissipated being as the only true process of (getting to)/know(ing) thy self through emotional discharge, thus authoring a work of existence where writing pours content into restoring an identity: “Scriu: folosesc timpul pentru a construi o ‘catedrală,’ o imagine a lumii, o lume în afara lumii, un loc de reculegere și regăsire de sine. Scrișul e o asceză, dar o asceză constructivă” (17).⁷

This “spiritual exercise” has a twist instilled, in that it maintains a thrill of secrecy: “Generalizând, seducția pe care-o exercită jurnalul intim ca gen e legată de dialectica secretului și-a divulgării” (32)⁸. Călinescu, while reassembling the shards of selfhood, predicated a mannerism of precaution in “divulging” specific experiences, and not only as an artistic artifice that the journal usually implies. The author had written journals in Communist Romania under the fear of being discovered and having his work taken away for investigation and, to some extent, for use in constraining procedures. Therefore, censorship remains hidden, but active in the incipient years of exile and identity shapes its form around the guises of conspicuousness. Then again, this very affective reaction promotes a carrying on of trials (of trying to be, to become) as “fear is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the nonexistent, loomingly present as the *affective fact* of the matter” (Massumi

53). Secrecy is also representative of moments to come that cannot be anticipated. It is for this reason that “în astfel de situații, un jurnal poate fi o cărjă cu ajutorul căreia înaintezi încet-încet, cu atenția concentrată asupra fiecărui pas ne semnificativ, în golul timpului. Tot e ceva” (Călinescu, 33)⁹.

The journal as a “clutch” is thus the portrait of Călinescu’s core existence. As we move into the drawbacks of initiating an identity, we cross paths with instances of the past and the oblique future that leave the author limping throughout. Reverting to the idea of censorship, Călinescu contemplates on the frail position of power recently acquired as he cannot fully speak his mind to those at home: “România e altă lume. Cei de-acolo nu pot simți un îndemn real de a scrie cuiva care se află aici. Și eu, bineînțeles, mă cenzurez când le scriu, dar acolo e altceva: nimic din ceea ce ar vrea în mod normal să-mi spună nu mi pot spune” (9)¹⁰. Daniel Bar-Tal indicates that the reasoning behind self-censorship is “based on the assumption that the information may hurt the group and/or its cause and, therefore, its should not be revealed” (9). However, what is interesting to note is that there is a paradigmatic contrast at play: Călinescu transforms into the Other. Living in the United States, the author begins to compare the two cultural spaces, as he continues to instantiate his status as an outsider of both realms. The there-here dichotomy dawns on the wrinkled cape of authoring selfhood as it finds itself suspended in between ideologies. Being the Other in the American perception concludes in frail communication, difference of time and interactions, and a collusion of judgements. For example:

Pe planul ideilor însă nu putem comunica. Interesantă disjuncția între nivelul relației personale și ideologie. Amicii mei înțeleg faptul că eu am vrut să rămân în America (țară de imigranți), că, pentru mine, e probabil mai bine să mă găsesc în America decât în România, dar asta nu-i împiedică, în idealismul lor superficial, să fie ‘antiamericani’ și să aibă admirație, între alte țări comuniste, și pentru România lui Ceaușescu. (21)¹¹

The author’s decision of going into exile in the US is both appreciated and scolded by the American counterparts who look toward the Communist regime with a certain “admiration” without grasping its horrendous nature. Somewhat advantageous for Călinescu is the capacity to crisscross the many folds of experiences for a better understanding and positioning of social standing, which again consolidates his empowerment. In Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir’s critical evaluation of life-writing authors, “their ‘long geographical perspective’ and their displacement from their reference points force them to live with what Eva Hoffman calls ‘double vision’” (141). However, when it comes to identity, this juxtaposition of principles

does not truly coalesce into a defined being.

Among the differences of spaces, Călinescu reacts to the disconnection of various human interactions: "Foarte americană, în schimb, e disocierea dintre lumea profesiei ... și conversația 'socială' [...] Foarte americane, de asemenea, sporovăiala turistică ... și curioasa superficialitate a percepției psihologice, relevantă în bârfă" (46)¹². Coming from a culture of silence to one of resounding voices is another factor of internal perturbation. Regarding time, "unul din lucrurile remarcabile în America este calitatea diferită a timpului social [...] Timpul e totodată mai coroziv, mai distrugător și mai violent: mai propice schimbării, deci" (26-27)¹³. Thus, time in the US can be both intimidating and "proper for change," allowing the author to assess his condition. And this procedure takes place at the intersection that best describes Communist Romania and the United States, as well as Călinescu's own psychological entrapment: "Modernitatea: libertate și vid. Cealaltă față a modernității, invizibilă de aici, inimaginabilă pentru cei care n-o cunosc din experiență: totalitarismul comunist, care suprimă libertatea și adâncește vidul" (40)¹⁴. Having escaped from the "deepening void" and the "suppression of freedom," the author falls into the arms of both liberation and meaningless, as the two concepts coexist at opposite poles in Călinescu's definition of self. He too is baffled by the extremes at which he operates: "Oricum, pe mine însumi, cu toate că sunt un om în mod natural atras de animația socială și de conversație, sărăcia imaginației mele ... mă împinge spre izolare și solitudine" (47)¹⁵. Nonetheless, the valid explanation for the conundrum of attitude is the prominence of exile: "E clar că exilul ... a contribuit la accentuarea semicetății despre care vorbesc, dacă nu chiar a creat-o" (47)¹⁶.

With this thought in mind, we pass to the last critical observation of Călinescu's self-empowerment, namely the effects and changes brought to the fore of appurtenance and apprehension of the rhetorical being, which determine the foundation of a revamped identity. One step is made in the direction of not missing the native country, "de fapt nu mi-e deloc *dor de țară*" (55)¹⁷, even though "această absență a dorului, acest gol, această formă vidă care nu se lasă umplută de nimic e poate la fel de greu de suportat ca dorul care, zice-se, îl chinuie pe exilat" (55)¹⁸. Călinescu's identity is thus developed on "absence," a feeling missing from the presupposed affective contour of a person in exile. To some extent, in the guise of power, the depiction that Călinescu remarks is essential to his adapting to a new environment and the challenges that it brings along. Furthermore, the author qualifies his existence as being separated into two identities:

Orice aș face, din orice unghi m-aș privi, eu am două identități: una vizibilă aici (profesorul de literatură comparată,

venit de undeva din Europa de Est, vorbind englezește cu un accent de care nu va scăpa niciodată, mai puternic când e obosit, mai șters când e binedispus etc.), cealaltă invizibilă, bănuită vag de colegii și amicii mei americani, dar știută de mine, de Uca și de câțiva prieteni vechi de la București, de sora mea. (57)¹⁹

This qualification makes it easier for Călinescu to pinpoint two ways of describing being, one that is tied to the professional and academic cove, which falls into the meaningless described earlier on in the paper, and the other that veils under the mask of secrecy, which necessitates further exploration, for it is not yet concise. "Separația între aceste două identități mi-a fost dictată de instict și facilitată de logica internă a limbii și culturii în care trăiesc acum" (Călinescu 57)²⁰. Thus, the country of adoption manifests its own authority, by which Călinescu profits and lets his existence be affected so as to distinguish between his Romanian and American attachments and associations. More so, a feeling of estrangement takes place, directed at his native country, as another effect of personal authority, this time around: "Sunt, față de România, într-o poziție mai rea decât a unui străin: sunt un străin care nu-și dă seama că e străin" (78)²¹. Then again, what is also detached in this process is the perpetual doubt: "De la un timp îmi explic expatrierea prin dificultatea mea crescândă de a suporta *îndoiala*, o îndoială impusă în lumea comunistă cu toate mijloacele, brutale și subtile, directe și indirecte" (90)²². Having no clear vision of belonging is somewhat resolved, but "singurătatea rămâne experiența fundamentală a exilului. Să vorbești, chiar și despre nimicuri, cu tine însuși" (150)²³. At the very heart of Călinescu's identity and being there is a continuous flow of affective intricacies that will remain, sometimes dormant, other times wide awake, convoluted, and yet prominent of the author's organic system.

In conclusion, throughout the paper we have looked at the troublesome years of Matei Călinescu's fraudulent escape from Communist Romania and exile to the United States of America, bearing on the implications of such actions at a physiological and psychological level. The main frame of analysis has been that of power and empowerment of being, and the gain or loss of authority with regard to the construction of identity. Starting from the moment of exile as power of personal decision, then sliding into an auto-investigation of selfhood and a rewriting of being, with its drawbacks and a/effective changes, the proposed critical assessment has concentrated on the associations and disconnections of Călinescu's ontological schemata in relation to both outward and inward agents.



Note:

1. It's not less true that this is my very first free political gesture.
2. It's hard not feel a little guilty - as after an escape from prison where you were the only one that escaped, leaving all the rest behind, with the possibility of them being held accountable for your fugitive act.
3. How will I cope with the new life that begins - was there any other way? - under the sign of all uncertainties? [...] As far as I'm concerned, the decision is neither good, nor bad; or, rather, it's also good (as it expresses a healthy desire of normality) and bad (the trauma of uprootedness, realising that going back is nearly impossible, the regret of separation: from family, friends, places and language, and ultimately my own identity).
4. Losing not only my country, but my name as well, I have gained an indifference toward my own self that is perhaps a type of wisdom.
5. The immediate purpose is purely practical: to write so as to keep the hovering obsessions far away from me, cawing as crows ready to attack me; to put my mind in motion, to show that I am still alive. Writing seems to me like a mechanism of defence.
6. Every letter is a sign of life.
7. I write: I use time to build a 'cathedral,' an image of the world, a world outside of this world, a place of silence and self-recovery. Writing is a spiritual exercise, but a constructive spiritual exercise.
8. Generalising, the seduction that a personal journal excites is tied to the dialectics of secrecy and truthfulness.
9. In these specific situations, a journal can be a crutch that slowly helps you move forward, concentrating on every insignificant step in the voidness of time. It's still something.
10. Romania is *another* world. Those who are there cannot feel a true urge of writing someone who is here. And I, of course, censor myself when I write them, but there it's something else: they can't tell me anything of what they would usually say.
11. In terms of ideas we cannot communicate. It's interesting, this disjunction between the level of personal relationship and ideology. My friends understand the facet that I wanted to stay in America (country of immigrants), that, for me, it's probably best that I'm in America and not in Romania, but that doesn't stop them, in their superficial idealism, to act as 'anti-American' and display admiration for Ceaușescu's Romania, among other Communist countries.
12. Very American, though, is the dissociation between the professional ... and the social conversation [...] Very American, also, are the touristic blabbing ... and the curiously superficial psychological perception, revealed in gossip.
13. One of the remarkable things in America is the different quality of social time. [...] Time is more corrosive, more harmful and more violent: thus, proper for change.
14. Modernity: freedom and void. The other face of modernity, invisible here, unimaginable for those who do not know it from experience: Communist totalitarianism, which suppresses freedom and deepens the void.
15. In any case, although I am a person attracted to

- social animation and to conversation, the poverty of my imagination ... pushes me toward isolation and solitude.
16. It's clear that exile ... has contributed in accentuating the semi-haziness of which I speak, if it hasn't actually created it.
 17. Actually, I do not *miss* my country at all.
 18. This absence of missing [the country], this emptiness, this void shape that does not let itself be filled with anything is as unbearable as the feeling of missing [the country], which is said to torture the one in exile.
 19. No matter what I do, from what angle I look at myself, I have two identities: one that is visible here (the comparative literature professor, who is from somewhere in Eastern Europe, speaking English with an accent that he will never get rid of, more pronounced when he is tired, less so when he is cheerful etc.), the other invisible, vaguely hunched by my American colleagues and friends, but known to me, to Uca and some old friends from Bucharest, and to my sister.
 20. The separation between these two identities has been dictated to me by instinct and facilitated by the internal logic of the language and culture in which I now live.
 21. Toward Romania, I am in a position far worse than that of a stranger: I am a stranger that does not realise he is a stranger.
 22. For some time now I find myself explaining my exile through the difficulty of hardly standing *doubt*, one that is imposed in the Communist world by any means, brutal and subtle, directly and indirectly.
 23. Loneliness remains the fundamental experience of exile. To talk nonsense to your own self.

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