

Reading, Writing, Being: Persians, Parisians, and the Scandal of Identity

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Abstract:

Moraru discusses the impact of Matei Calinescu's writings to all his readers. Calinescu's work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without the book, he would perhaps have never perceived himself. Calinescu suggests that meaning-making in the margins of an other's work is self-making, a self-centering identity protocol complete with its rewards and illusions--with identitarian illusion itself as the ultimate and vital reward. In Calinescu's view, identity is conquest, asserts itself with the virility of a conqueror via an historical rhetoric of competition, confrontation, and contradictions.

Keywords: Matei Calinescu | Literary Theory | Reading | Identity

Article:

You—that is, I—that is, you—I am you....

—Matei Calinescu (2004)

In Romania, I learned nothing about Romania.

—Ioan Petru Culianu, qtd. in Matei Calinescu (2002)

One cannot read a book, Matei Calinescu echoes Nabokov in the epilogue to *Rereading* (1993); one can only *reread* it (277). But then, of course, the paradox—Barthes formulates it best apropos of his periodical returns to *A la recherche du temps perdu*—is that one does not, and practically speaking one cannot, reread the same book either. Proust, on whose novel Calinescu taught a whole course at Indiana in the fall of 1993, is here a case in point because reader after reader, Barthes included, have never gone back to the same passages of *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–1927), or to the same passages with the same intellectual fervor, emotional

intensity, or motivation. This goes to show how fundamentally subjective, *self-directed* rereading and reading generally are. For, indeed, rereading is neither “objective,” applied to an external “object” proper, nor iterative. We reread what we have already read not to read it again, to merely reenact a past, mainly text-oriented routine and thus recover a meaning past—the text’s—but to discover a meaning present, ours; in an other’s work we are essentially looking for ourselves. Rereading is self-reading and helps us see that so is reading overall. As Calinescu reminds us in *Rereading*, in *Le Temps retrouvé* (1927) Proust himself suspects that “In reality, every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self. The writer’s work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without the book, he would perhaps have never perceived himself” (qtd. in Calinescu 1993, 25).

If all reading is rereading—Calinescu demonstrates that it is—and, further, if reading is performance (275), then reading’s twin, iterative-performative thrust is ultimately identity-fashioning in the precise sense that, across a geography otherness, we search for ourselves. Needless to say, this search makes, unmakes, and remakes us, as the case may be. Meaning-making in the margins of an other’s work is self-making, a self-centering identity protocol complete with its rewards and illusions—with identitarian illusion itself as the ultimate and vital reward, Calinescu suggests.

This illusion, a “realistic one,” as the same Barthes would probably call it, stands at the core of the various arguments Calinescu built throughout his career from his early 1960s Romanian books and articles to his last, revealingly titled monograph, *Ionesco. Recherches identitaires* (2005). What rereading does is this: it forefronts with superior clarity what reading at large—first, second, or last—does to and for readers, that is, how it provides them with an occasion to invent themselves. This opportunity is real, not an invention, but what this identity poetics brings about is a fiction. And yet, this fiction is necessary. For it makes life more meaningful, more bearable, whether the reader lives in a police state such as Calinescu’s Romania—where, back in the 1950s, people were sent to prison for circulating banned books, let alone for actually reading them—or in the U.S., where the critic defected in 1973. The identity we cobble together as we peruse others’ “inventions” is, to be sure, just another invention, a lie we tell ourselves with a straight face so we can go on and carry the burden of the truths life saddles us with. Reading-originated, the identity spawned by the encounter with an other’s literary musings is undoubtedly an “illusion,” but a “fertile” one, is fiction prompting self-fictionalization, unlocking as it does creativity and its corollary, self-creativity.

As Calinescu writes in his 1994 memoir *Amintiri în dialog (A Memoir in Dialogue)*, whatever we make of the world and ourselves, it happens, semiotically and existentially, in dialogue. The “I,” he recapitulates an entire philosophical tradition (or traditions, rather), is a dialogical formation. If it comes along, it does so across or through (*diá*, in Greek) an other and his or her fabrications (“inventions”); the logos or “logic” of the dialog is quintessentially “diagonal.” But the reader’s identity and identity at large are more than simply fictitious, for they dramatize something quite real—that which Calinescu defines as the “miracle of the dialogue.” This miracle, he specifies, is

“inscribed” in the “I”’s dialogue partner, the “you” (*tu*), and in this you’s own literary inscription, the text being read (Calinescu and Vianu 1994, 61). Reading just sets the miracle off. As such, reading does not “clear the deck” for the constitution of identity. To the contrary: reading *mediates* this process and this process’s outcome, “marginalizes” him, her, it, whatever the reader becomes by reading an other, in that the obtaining readerly identity is always marginal rather than “original,” marginalia or footnotes to others’ thoughts and representations. To be a reader and, *tout court*, to be presuppose this humbling mediation, this dependence on and indebtedness to an other, an other time, and an elsewhere, this constitutive and by the same token *authentic* (if seemingly aporetic) lack of “originality” around which we nevertheless “pull ourselves together.” Thus, being is not a given but a gift of an other, “*de l’Autre*.”¹ If, as one of Kundera’s novels assures us, “life is elsewhere,” the reason is that the “elsewhere” and its “otherwise” are crucial to us, over “here.” Being and thinking feed off the less conspicuous proximity and seemingly less consequential immediacy of the distant, the strange, and the different. These provide a *sortie de soi*, the “release from self-sameness,” from the inherited ways and clichés liable to make our lives and thoughts into rehearsals of previous lives and thoughts.² We are and understand *with* others and their writings; self-identity presupposes them, Mark Taylor insists.³ “Being elsewhere,” *être ailleurs*, can point to “distraction” and “absence of thought” (“my mind is elsewhere”) but also to the very place, the home (“away from home”) of being and thinking, for we come to terms with ourselves and our world *ailleurs*, “elsewhere,” as Montaigne says in his *Essays*.⁴

In the topology of understanding, then, the existential, the epistemological, and the ethical intertwine. It is here that comprehension, self-comprehension, and the self itself ultimately eventuate, in relation, and thus as debt, to an other. It is here that we learn about our own here and now (and their past), from others’ “out there” and their “far-out” geographies and histories. This is one of Montaigne’s basic lessons and, after him, perhaps the lesson (meaning, method, as well as goal) of the essay as genre—the hard look at the unfamiliar that defamiliarizes the familiar and the familial, a way of asking about others that eventually leads to radical self-questioning. Montaigne’s primary concern is not exotic cannibalism but the “outlandish” institutional violence of sixteenth-century France. He is not asking, how can one be a cannibal, or how can cannibals be so inhumane? What he wants to know is, how can we, the French, be so cruel? How can we treat people so brutally, so “cannibalistically,” and still deem ourselves so “civilized,” so “French”? How can one be like that or, more simply, just that, French? In brief: how can one be French? Frenchness: what a “scandal”!

In their more classical, blunt form, the troubling questions are raised again by Montesquieu’s Rica in 1721. What Rica actually wonders is, “How can one be Persian?” (1993, 83). However, as Paul Valéry comments in his preface to *Lettres Persannes*, behind the odd interrogation lies another: “How can one be what one is?” (1930, 66). Ever since the Enlightenment, writers from Oliver Goldsmith (*The Citizen of the World*, 1760) to the latter-day Kierkegaardian moralist E. M. Cioran (*La Tentation d’exister* [*The Temptation to Exist*], 1956) have put the broader question

repeatedly. But what Montesquieu asked about, and in the first place, was not Persia but France, not the other but the self, yet he *had to* ask about the former in order to query the latter for the protocol of such inquiry is seldom straightforward. The *philosophe*, and anybody seriously mulling over being, identity, and the self for that matter, is bound to start out with the other. “Philosophy begins and ends with the question of the other,” writes Mark Taylor echoing Blanchot’s hunch that the most “profound” question does not concern the “One” (the self) but that which is only subsequently brought into play whenever we inquire into the One, namely, the other.⁵ The question about being is, one might say, always the *other* one: the question of the other. “We” begs *that* question first, and this is the philosophical scandal of “we,” of identity, or, more basically still, identity as scandal, as perennial question about the places and people affording *our* self-descriptions. “We” must uphold that scrutiny, for our sake. For, no doubt, others too are “scandalous,” “stumbling blocks” (see Gk. *skándalon*) of our anthropological cocksureness in the world, tests and, once more, questions—Who are they? What do they mean?—that prompt the self-examining “Who are *we*?” and “What do *we* mean?”

This is as much as saying that we speak of ourselves insofar as we speak of others—*comparatively speaking*. The analytic of selfhood is always a comparative project whose “findings” are not only relational—we “find ourselves,” make sense in relation to others and their own relations or, stories—but always relative, when they are not flat-out deceptive. Hardly a fan of cultural studies, Calinescu did share the field’s healthy skepticism of ethno-cultural discrete essences while acknowledging the powerful spell such fictions cast on us. In the 1994 book and then in a number of volumes and articles on Romania’s generation of writers, thinkers, and exiles of the 1930s (Cioran, Ionesco, and Mircea Eliade, among many others), Calinescu wrestles repeatedly with a conundrum Valéry (and, more famously, Nietzsche before him) helped us see that it is typical of all cultures, not only of “small” cultures, as Cioran and his friends thought back in their pre-World War II Romania.⁶ The issue Cioran more than anybody else agonized over ever since *Schimbarea la față a României* (*Romania’s Transfiguration*, 1936) was “Persian,” so to speak: How can one be Romanian given that Romanianness itself, to begin with, was nothing, not even a non-sense, for the nonsensical involves a contradiction, a “no” said to a sense or meaning, a negation formulated with a modicum of clarity, consistency, and originality, whereas the several centuries of modern Romanian culture tell, time and again, of aborted meanings, ever-imitative, never completed projects, misguided *élans*, pitiful abdications, and the like. “[U]ltimately, when all is said and done,” Calinescu comments, “being a Romanian makes no sense, Cioran seems to suggest, which is both laughable and tragic (if we accept the notion of the ‘tragedy of small cultures,’ which at the time of *The Temptation to Exist* Cioran didn’t appear to have renounced).” Yet the critic hastens to add: “But does anything else make more sense? With Paul Valéry, I would ask: Is not every particular existence—looked at from the point of view of ideal entities—ridiculous, foolish, carnivalesque? Does, from this perspective, the distinction between big and small count in any fashion? Or, to put it differently, is a larger particular existence less comical than a smaller one? The real question is, as Valéry translates Montesquieu philosophically, ‘How can one be what one is?’” (Calinescu 1996, 216).

“Vivre véritablement, c’est refuser les autres,” Cioran reminisces about his radical youth in *Histoire et utopie* (1960): living authentically is rejecting others, more exactly, rejecting others and their otherness as onto-philosophical possibility, as life form (981). Lived out genuinely, without “altruistic” illusions, the young, Nietzschean Cioran thought—and what a dangerous thought that surely was back in his far-right twenties—life (ours) is clear-cut, uncompromising, exclusive of half-measures, unstructured selves, and (their) half-baked notions and germane identities. Whatever “I” am, I am opposed to “them.” The problem was, of course, that Cioran’s Romania itself embodied, to his mind, this kind of (pseudo)identity as a country inferior not only to “major” cultures like France (*the* Romanian obsession and painful inferiority complex until recently) but also to surrounding cultures, which, while they did not enjoy France’s status, were better articulated into their particular profiles. Embedded in the book’s title, the whole point of *Romania’s Transfiguration* was the desperate effort to endow Cioran’s native land with a recognizable type and meaning, and thus overcome the country’s cultural fuzziness, its meaninglessness. Not to have a meaning and more specifically not to count for anything of consequence in Europe’s cultural and political history entailed a position of “shameful” otherness. It is not that the young Cioran says most unflattering things about other countries and ethnic groups (he certainly does); he is not so much rejecting them, but, “ashamed of belonging to an insignificant [*quelconque*] nation” (1995, 850), he is rejecting, as Calinescu remarks, Romania’s own “ridiculousness” (*Amintiri în dialog* 1994, 224), its cultural implausibility. So, as Cioran will recall his earlier interrogations later in *La Tentation d’exister*, “How can one be Romanian”? How can one take up such a position on the map of being? (851). It is, we are told, pointless to ponder Frenchness (*être Français*). Its meaning is too “evident” to lose sleep over it any more (830); it just makes sense, and monumentally—arrogantly—so. Romanianness, however, does not. It is a scandal. Therefore, the Romanian question has to be posed, no matter how humiliating the answer could be.

Increasingly drawn as he may have felt, with the passing of time, to the philosophical “conceivability” of the other (984)—and hence of himself—Cioran will never abandon his view of Romania’s subaltern station in the world, nor will he revisit substantially his cultural typologies, hierarchies, and disjunctions. A “minor” people, all that Romanians can ever accomplish is bask in their defeats and mediocrity (853). Less able to shed their “otherness” under Soviet rule than ever before, they may as well cash in on this failure, as it were. Romania’s “destiny,” it appears to Cioran, is just not to have one, “savagely” victimized as the country has been by Europe’s great powers, old and new. By virtue of this anti-destiny, though, something like “Romania” has become “conceivable,” he decrees cynically, and Romanians should revel in their newly found “possibility” of sorts. At long last, a heading, an identifiable type, dismal as it may seem, has become available for the culture, what with the overly repressive Stalinist 1950s. In few other places has the “plenitude of disaster” (853) found a more vivid expression, and the natives would be well advised to use their predicament to define themselves. Where others are “dilettantes” of collective misery, Romanians can by comparison boast, courtesy of their counter-history, a unique expertise, a “competency of pain” (830).

But Cioran is not a comparatist. More accurately, he is not one of Calinescu's stripe. The philosopher's view of cultures is largely romantic in the Hegel-Herder line that makes neat and, over the long run, politically troubling distinctions among various *Volksgeister*. Benign in Valéry, the outrage of difference—the “shock” or “bafflement of difference,” as Calinescu glosses on Cioran's cultural analysis (Calinescu and Vianu 1994, 224)—translates in *Romania's Transfiguration* into the outright suppression of difference and of those who, bodying it forth, presumably stand in the way of Romania's fulfilling of its destiny. As we learn, Romanians' relations to others are, or, if they are not, should be, adversarial. “They” are in “our” way. In its first chapter, the history “we” must write in order to have a destiny should clear this way—the fascist ring of the imperative is as loud today as it was in the late 1930s. Cioran needed “them” before World War II, when his “imperial” dream seemed (to him) within reach, and he still needs them later, essentially for the same philosophical reasons, declarations to the contrary notwithstanding. In his view, identity is conquest, asserts itself with the “virility” of a conqueror via an historical rhetoric of competition, confrontation, and contradiction. Anything short of this agon is weak, trite, immature, muddled. One becomes what one is by getting the Persians out of the way. If that does not work out—and it did not—one becomes Parisian by beating the French at their own game (that did, and brilliantly so, as Cioran's French writings bear witness). One becomes Persian, French, and anything else in between, Calinescu replies directly and indirectly throughout his career, by all sorts of ways, most of which are *not* of one's own making, especially if you live in exile. So much steeped in difference and diversity, U.S. culture teaches him (1994, 224) that, at the end of the day, “scandalous” are not so much the distinctions and the particular lives built on them but the bemusement before them.

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Footnotes

1. On Lacan and the self's "ex-centricity," see, e.g., "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious" (83). On Lacan, identity, and "L'Autre," see the whole issue "L'identité en question dans la psychanalyse" of *La Revue de psychanalyse du Champ lacanien* (2008, 6), especially Jean-Jacques Gorog, "L'identité est 'de l'Autre'" (59–65). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Calinescu's Romanian works are mine.
2. Drawing from Levinas, Adam Zachary Newton discusses the remote, the strange, the "not-here," and their "liberating" role in *The Elsewhere. On Belonging at a Near Distance: Reading Literary Memoir from Europe and the Levant* (116). On Levinas's *sortie de soi* and how this "exit," *ex-cedence* (in Newton), or *ex-cessive* repositioning of the self outside of itself in the "proximity of the other" empowers the self's life and mind, see Levinas, "La proximité de l'autre," in *Altérité et transcendance* (108).
3. Mark Taylor in a commentary on Richard Rorty in "Paralectics." See Scharlemann, 1991.

4. Nicole Lapierre (2006) glosses on Montaigne's dictum "Nous pensons tousjours ailleurs" ("Our thinking always takes place elsewhere") (11–20).

5. See Taylor (1986, 4).

6. On Montesquieu, Valéry, Cioran, and the scandal of identity, see, among other places, Calinescu's chapter 10 in *Amintiri in dialog* (223–224); "How can one be what one is," his 1996 article; the little Romanian book on Ioan P. Culianu and Eliade; and the French book on Ionesco.