

THEODORA-ELIZA
VĂCĂRESCU

Mihaela Miroiu &
Mircea Miclea, *R'Estul și
Vestul* (The R'E(a)st and
the West)

Polirom Publishing House,
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I read *R'Estul și Vestul* slowly, not devouring the pages, more like some sort of a psychotherapy that you want to benefit from as long as possible, to feel every word and every fiber of thought. So far this has been the second book that had such a heavy influence upon me. The other one is Slavenka Drakulic's *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*. Discursively shaped as we all are, it seems that sometimes experiences mold and produce us more than discourses do, or the two are so profoundly interwoven that it's becoming more and more difficult to clearly distinguish between them.

R'Estul și Vestul is a collection of electronic messages between two intellectuals troubled by their 'eastern' and 'western' experiences, curious and critical, and especially exigent with themselves and with the world(s) they inhabit. Their stories are tremendously personal and honest, they talk about their first encounters with the 'west', they talk about their expectations and hopes, anxieties and wonders, torments and dreams. Mihaela Miroiu's two fragments of diaries that complete the book are two related experiences on two continents: Europe (United Kingdom) and North America (United States) and the process of intellectual creation.

R'Estul is a book of everyday-life anthropology, at the intersection of two feelings: acute shame and intense bewilderment, feelings that do not always overlap the two systems (may they be political, cultural, feelings or values systems etc.) that the title might allude to. It is an assumed and conscious anthropology, so very sincere that it amounts to complete denudation. In *R'Estul* I found myself as well as my mother; my gynomorphoses (as one of the authors traced her life-herstory somewhere else) contributing and painfully elucidating my indirect, mediated experiences.

I have somehow come to believe that shame is not such a negative feeling after all; sometimes it can be productive, healing, liberating and, maybe more importantly,

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clarifying... I was so terribly ashamed while reading *R'Estul*. Not too long ago I used to be so angry when hearing old people - or not so old indeed - saying that life was better and easier during communism. I used to be so revolted, I used to consider them traitors, ingrates, people for whom the evaluation of a good life goes through their stomachs (quite a masculine revolt, I came to think, see the 'elitist' male discourse virtually everywhere around us). But I was so wrong. I was actually thinking from the position of a 'westerner' who does not understand what is going on, who evaluates the experiences of the others through her own - not even experiences, but theorizations.

There is a profoundly revealing moment in *R'Estul*: at a feminist philosophy conference in Boston, Mihaela Miroiu presented a paper on the analogy between totalitarianism and patriarchy with a case-study on Romania. At the end of the session, an American researcher came to her, cried and apologized. She had presented in another earlier session a paper on the right to kill with a case-study also on Romania, more particularly on the execution of Ceaușescu, her conclusion being that what happened in Romania was immoral, the 'the rule of law' having been broken. But she had considered everything from a theoretical point of view, from an abstract perspective, with an abstract dictatorship, people's lives having been rendered abstract and thus intelligible to outsiders. Mihaela Miroiu spoke about her feeling of guilt and shame because of not having murdered the 'Comrade' herself, about the absolute evil that Ceaușescu embodied. This is the 'view from inside' that as much as one tries to convey, to explain, to theorize, one cannot render but partially understood, and this applies to virtually all the dimensions of the 'eastern' life.

Moreover, also until not long ago I did not use to consider myself substantially different from 'westerners': I did part of my studies in a 'western-like university', my grades were higher than those of some of the 'westerners', I published in 'western' journals, I organized - in the good post-socialist and pre-integration style - workshops and seminars with 'western' money. Although I am concerned with the differences between the 'east' and the 'west' (cultured note and in the spirit of *R'Estul*: see the volume *Gender and the (Post) 'East'/'West' Divide* that Mihaela Frunză and I edited), I had not realized my 'eastern-ness'. Only a feeling of inadequacy here and there when I had to pay for a dinner in a fancy (though 'eastern') restaurant or to buy a book from the 'west'. But these could also be dealt with 'western' money from small grants or scholarships. And this is when the trouble surfaced. Actually the very famous 'form without content' was acutely and painfully actualized. We are 'westerners' here and there, or at least so we like to think, and we really do think so until we are proved wrong, a thing that generally we carefully try to avoid for fear it might crush down an entire value system. And ultimately, since we are people who function with value fuel (some sort of oil, only more difficult to refill when exhausted), not to be crushed down ourselves. I do not think I was crushed down by this book, for if I had been, I would not be sitting here writing this text, instead I would do something to change things. But I was shaken a bit, I asked myself some questions, maybe I will eventually succeed in changing my direction.

Essentially, this is what *R'Estul* does: helps you comprehend yourself, makes you aware of discourses and experiences you had not yet figured out entirely. And it does not do it tenderly or smoothly - for this would not be consistent with the feelings so openly exposed - but disturbingly and crushingly. Disturbances and crushes that we seem to be in need for.