

# IDENTITY AND MULTIPLICITY IN CANETTI'S AND WAGENSTEIN'S BIRTHPLACES: EXPLORING THE RHIZOMATIC ROOTS OF EUROPE

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The aim of this article is to present some commonalities between the works of two writers who share the same Bulgarian and Jewish origin: Elias Canetti (1905–1994) and Angel Wagenstein (1922–). Both writers can be considered as highly multicultural personalities: they both came from Sephardic Jewish backgrounds, and were influenced and fascinated by different cultural worlds such as the Bulgarian one, the Jewish one, the Central-European one, and even more.

This paper will explore the contribution of their birthplaces, respectively, Rustschuk (today, Ruse) and Plovdiv, to the development of what I will define as a particular kind of sensibility for multiplicity which was central to their subsequent cultural and social undertakings.

The image of the native city is reflected explicitly in two works of these writers: Wagenstein's novel *Daleč ot Toledo*<sup>1</sup> (2002), set in Plovdiv and dedicated to the city, and Canetti's first autobiographical volume *Die gerettete Zunge*<sup>2</sup> (1977), the first part of which deals with the writer's early memories of his hometown. It is mainly these two works which will be taken into account, along with one of Wagenstein's autobiographical essays contained in his volume *Draskulite ot neolita* ("Doodles on the Neolithic", 2011).

The concept underlying my interpretation of Canetti's and Wagenstein's works is that multiple identity is derived from an integral and complex vision of culture: in this merit, my analysis is inspired by Edouard Glissant's (1996, 1997) conception of questions of identity, which departs from the distinction made by Deleuze and Guattari (1980) between the notion of root and the one of *rhizome*. If the single root is the one that kills everything around it, the rhizome is, on the contrary, the one that extends towards a connection with other roots. Glissant (1996) applies this image to the topic of identity, also in view of a categorization of cultures, distinguishing the so-called *atavistic*<sup>3</sup> and monolithic ones from the *composite* ones, which are the ones we will find described by Canetti and Wagenstein.

No one was ever able to affirm for certain which nationality Canetti belonged to. Canetti himself explicitly identified the events of his early childhood in Bulgaria as fundamental for his further spiritual and artistic formation (in: 1972, 1977) although he left

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1 "Far From Toledo"

2 "The Tongue Set Free"

3 See in particular Glissant 1996:33-36

Rustschuk when he was only seven years old.

A multiplicity of influences were present in the early years of his life, which contributed to the determination of his particular “unidentifiable” identity. One of these is surely the Austrian one, particularly strong because of his parents’ interest in its culture and language, but there is the Jewish Sephardic one too, along with a Turkish and “Oriental” one. All of these tendencies can be recognized in Canetti’s family’s life in the city of Rustschuk.

As far as concerns Angel Wagenstein, born in Plovdiv in 1922, most of his family members were Sephardic Jews, but one grandfather was of Ashkenazi origin; this explains his Central European surname. The author spent part of his childhood in France, where his family moved for political reasons, and came back to Bulgaria as a teenager, but he was soon arrested for his participation in anti-fascist activities and sentenced to death. Similarly, Bulgaria belongs to both the Balkans and Eastern Europe, is definitely the “Other Europe” (Marinelli 2008), and is a crossroad where cultures of the West and the East have met and have been in dialogue for centuries: not only Bulgarians, but also Armenians, Turks, Greeks, Roma, Albanians, and so on.

Furthermore, as the Austrian world became for Canetti a fertile inspiration, the same can be said about the Ashkenazi one for Wagenstein. Quoting the words of writer and playwright Moni Ovadia, himself of Bulgarian origin:

95% of Bulgarian Jews were of Sephardic origin, which means of Spanish descent. Both Wagenstein and I belong to this group, and both of us have been captivated by the culture of the Ashkenazi minority, that is, of those Jews of Germanic ancestry who speak Yiddish. (Ovadia 2011)<sup>4</sup>

### **Sephardic Jews in Bulgaria**

Both Wagenstein and Canetti are Jews of Sephardic origin, which means that the two of them carried on a genealogical story made of long dispersions and movements between “East” and “West.” Wagenstein remembers:

И тъй, корените (...) По този генетичен път се е образувал хороводът от баби, (...) който започва от Толедо, на брега на реката Тахо, и се е проточил до другия край на Европа, до Пловдив, на брега на Марица.<sup>5</sup> (2002: 5-6)

Most of these Jews who had been expelled from Christian Spain found shelter and welcome within the borders of the Ottoman Empire, which was at that time about to reach its highest moment of splendor. Tradition remembers the words pronounced by the Sultan

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4 My translation (from Italian).

5 'These are the roots... Along this genealogical path there was formed a string of grandmothers (...) which begins from Toledo, on the shores of river Tagus, and reaches the other side of Europe, all the way to Plovdiv, on the shores of river Maritsa'.

Bayazid II: "You claim Ferdinand is a wise King, but he impoverishes his lands and enriches mine!" (Ferracuti 2011: 30).

In fact, the commercial and intellectual skills of Sephardic Jews were undiscussed and widely acknowledged: considered a synonym for material and cultural wealth, they represented a very relevant resource for the still young Empire thanks to their trading and administrative abilities, especially by virtue of their strong linguistic skills. Around 80,000 Jews were welcomed by the Ottoman Empire in several massive waves from Spain. Canetti reminds us of the following:

Viele dieser Juden wurden in der Türkei gut aufgenommen. Die türkische Sultan fand nützliche Untertanen in ihnen. Sie hatten allerhand Fertigkeiten; es gab Ärzte unter ihnen, Financiers, Handwerken, die besondere Dinge beherrschten. Sie wurden gut behandelt und sie verbreiteten sich über das ganze damalige türkische Reich.<sup>6</sup> (Canetti 1972: 106-107)

Inside the Ottoman Empire the Jews found reception and tolerance that were missing in "Europe": they were allowed to keep their private and public rights, their properties and goods, as well as their religion, in exchange for the annual payment of a tax and the respect of certain limitations. Wagenstein highlights the contribution given by his people to the life of the Empire:

Високата порта в Стамбол (...) разреши на бегълците от Инквизицията да се заселят по земите на Османската империя. Това беше едно разумно решение, защото новодошлите (...) пренесоха до тези места нови и непознати знания и занаяти. Известно е, че сред тях е имало забележителни лекари, строители, финансисти, лозари и винари, поети, философи и търговци.<sup>7</sup> (2002: 8-9)

The Jews scattered rapidly all over the lands of the Ottoman Empire, in all directions, and started to found communities in every important city, creating settlements which in terms of the number of inhabitants and cultural degree, went fast beyond the levels reached by any preceding community, including the Spanish ones. The Jews were able to maintain for about 400 years the traditions and culture they had carried from Spain, continuing moreover to communicate in the language they considered their mother tongue: the *Judeo-*

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6 'Many of these Jews were well welcomed in Turkey. The Turkish Sultan saw them as useful subjects. They had all kind of skills: among them there were physicians, traders, craftsmen, who dealt with specific things. They were well treated and they spread all over the Turkish Empire.'

7 'The great gate in Istanbul (...) allowed those fleeing the Inquisition to settle among the lands of the Ottoman Empire. And it was a wise decision, because the recently arrived ones (...) brought with them skills and crafts that were still unknown. Among them there were remarkable physicians, architects, experts of finance, winemakers, vintners, poets, philosophers and traders.'

*espanol*, or *Ladino*, a topic we will soon explore.

After the end of the Ottoman Yoke and Bulgaria's declaration of independence in 1878, notwithstanding several changes in everyday life, a distinct Sephardic cultural identity was kept intact until Second World War. Canetti tells us the following about the time of his birth in 1905:

Von den Spaniolen waren die meisten noch türkische Staatsbürger. Es war ihnen unter den Türken immer gutgegangen, besser als den christlichen Balkanslawen. Aber da viele unter den Spaniolen wohlhabende Kaufleute waren, unterhielt das neue bulgarische Regime gute Beziehungen zu ihnen, und Ferdinand, der König, der lange regierte, galt als Freund der Juden. (Canetti 1977:121)<sup>8</sup>

From the narrations of these two writers emerge the important contributions given by the Jews to Bulgarian cities, such as the spread of linguistic knowledge, of crafts and trades, and so on. All of this could happen thanks to the conditions created by the *millet* system (Castellan 1996: 136-140) combined with the specificity of the Balkan area, which had always been characterized by great ethnic mixture and was a place where languages and cultures met.

As concerns the Second World War in this part of Europe, there is a very important fact to remember, which has often been stressed by Moni Ovadia: Bulgaria has represented the unique case of a country in which its inhabitants have successfully saved their Jews from deportation. Around 48,000 Jews were rescued from the territories of inner Bulgaria, thanks to the decisive action of Dimitar Pešev, vice-president of the Parliament, who, despite his conservative positions, opposed strongly the deportation of Bulgarian Jews (Crampton 1997). Decisive also was the action of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church led by the heroic Metropolitan Bishop Stefan, who publicly condemned the Nazis, threatening them with irreparable consequences if they tried to lift a finger against Jewish Bulgarian citizens. After the end of the Second World War, most Bulgarian Jews decided to leave the country to reach the newly-founded State of Israel, a migration which has been immortalized in Wagenstein's novel *Daleč ot Toledo*, as well as in the movie *Sled kraja na sveta*.<sup>9</sup> Nowadays, even if limited, a Jewish community still survives in Bulgaria, amounting to 2000 people, mainly concentrated in the capital, Sofia.

### The Cities of Colors and Life

Canetti was born in 1905, in the post-Ottoman Rustschuk, while Wagenstein was born in

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8 'Most of the *Spaniolen* were still Turkish citizens. Under the Turks they had been always treated well, better than the Christian Slavs of the Balkans. But as many of the *Spaniolen* were rich traders, the new Bulgarian Kingdom maintained good relations with them, and Ferdinando, the long-ruling King, was considered a friend of the Jews.

9 'After the end of the world'. Bulgarian Movie of 1998 written by Angel Wageinstein and directed by Ivan Nitchev.

Plovdiv in 1922, in the post-war period. Notwithstanding these years of difference, the situation in the two cities appeared rather similar, both of them characterized by a cultural legacy that was particularly colorful and heterogeneous. Canetti's Rustschuk, situated on the Danubian border with Romania, Bulgaria's main fluvial port, had always played a strategic role in the history of the country and had for a long time represented the Ottoman gateway to Europe:

Rustschuk war ein alter Donauhafen und war als solcher von einiger Bedeutung gewesen. Als Hafen hatte er Menschen von überall angezogen, und von der Donau war immerwährend die Rede.<sup>10</sup> (Canetti 1977:10).

After the start of Bulgaria's independence, this city had become a fundamental cultural and economic center, as well as the biggest city of the Kingdom and the seat of Bulgarian navigation along the Danube. Massive works of architectural construction modified its facade, to the point of transforming it into the so-called "little Vienna"; the city became strategic as Europe's entrance to Bulgaria. The city's ethnic composition at Canetti's time was still highly varied, and Rustschuk was home to Bulgaria's most prosperous Jewish community.

The memories of this special city shine through the pages of *Die Gerettete Zunge* (1977): the writer describes a fascinating city, characterized by a unique multifaceted identity, where it was possible to hear a real Babylonian confusion of languages, where the most diverse nationalities, human types and destinies crossed and met:

Rustschuk, an der unteren Donau, wo ich zur Welt kam, war eine wunderbare Stadt für ein Kind, und wenn ich sage, dass sie in Bulgarien liegt, gebe ich eine unzulängliche Vorstellung von ihr, denn es lebten dort Menschen der verschiedensten Herkunft, an einem Tag konnte man sieben oder acht Sprachen hören. Außer den Bulgaren, die oft vom Lande kamen, gab es noch viele Türken, die ein eigenes Viertel bewohnten, und an dieses angrenzend lag das Viertel der Spaniolen, das unsere. Es gab Griechen, Albanesen, Armenier, Zigeuner. Vom gegenüberliegenden Ufer der Donau kamen Rumänen, meine Amme, an die ich mich aber nicht erinnere, war eine Rumänin. Es gab, vereinzelt, auch Russen.<sup>11</sup>

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10 'Ruschuk was an old harbor city on the Danube and as such had been of some importance. Because of the port it had attracted people from all around, and the river was a perennial matter of discussion.'

11 'Ruschuk, on the lower Danube, where I came into the world, was a marvelous city for a child, and if I say that Ruschuk is in Bulgaria, then I am giving an inadequate picture of it. For people of the most varied background lived there, on any one day you could hear seven or eight languages. Aside from the Bulgarians, who often came from the countryside, there were many Turks, who lived in their own neighborhood, and next to it was the neighborhood of the Sephardim, the Spanish Jews-our neighborhood. There Greeks, Albanians, Armenians, Gypsies. From the opposite side of the Danube came

(Canetti 1977:10)

Among the servants that worked at his home there were people of several nationalities: for example, a Circassian and an Armenian. His mother's best friend was Russian, and once a week a large group of Roma arrived in the house's yard. In addition to this, he remarked: "Anything I subsequently experienced had already happened in Ruschuk" (Canetti 1977: 11), which stresses the importance of those first years of life for his future work, and also the awareness that his books must necessarily integrate that experience (Guglielmini 2001). We can say that perhaps the biggest contribution given to Canetti by his native city was a certain fruitful contact with multiplicity, an awareness of the extension of diversity.

The same can be affirmed about Wagenstein's city: Plovdiv, the ancient *Philippopolis*, is a city with a long-dated history which makes it one of Europe's oldest cities. Throughout the centuries it has represented an important cultural center as well as the crossroad between different ethnicities and cultures. In his collection of short autobiographical notes *Predi kraja na sveta, Draskulki ot neolita* (2011), Wagenstein recalls the city's different denominations, starting from the times when it was the Thracian city of *Pulpudeva*, to when it became the *Philippopolis* of Philip the Macedonian, to its Roman name *Trimontium*, the Slavic *Paldin* and the Turkish *Filibe*, and finally to contemporary Bulgarian Plovdiv, "любимият мой град, която великодушно ми позволи да се родя в него"<sup>12</sup> (2011: 31).

Градът, в който съм се родил, заема особено място в емоционалната ми памет. И ако не преувеличавам – самият град играе заслужена роля в историческия и естетическия спектакъл на най-древните и изумителни градове на Европа.<sup>13</sup> (2011: 30).

For what concerns the ethnic composition, at the time of Wagenstein's birth, apart from the Bulgarian majority, the city, similarly to Canetti's Ruse, saw the presence of a strong Turkish, Jewish, Armenian and Roma community, along with other minorities such as the Greeks and the Albanians. In his novel *Daleč ot Toledo*, inspired by autobiographical facts, the main character, the very young Berto has the chance of getting to know different people, religions and languages, gaining from all of them important life lessons. The Jewish Rabbi Menashe Levi, Muslim Mullah Ibrahim Hodja, and the Orthodox Christian Pope Isai, inseparable friends and fellows in the bizarre adventure of his grandfather Abraham are significant figures that make him understand how he should behave in society. The writer evokes Plovdiv in all its beauty and cultural diversity: its three mosques and the five granite

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Romanians; my wet nurse, whom I no longer remember, was Romanian. There were also Russians here and there.'

12 'My beloved city, which generously allowed me to be born in it.'

13 The city where I was born occupies a special place in my emotional memory. Without exaggerating, I would say that the city itself plays a deserved role in the historical and aesthetic panorama of Europe's most ancient and fantastic cities.

hills, the clock tower and the Catholic church, the little Orthodox churches and finally the synagogue of the Fountain street, together with its multifaceted population consisting of “Bulgarians and Jews, Turks and Armenians, and even the Gypsies and the Albanians” (Wagenstein 2002:14).

The cornerstone of Wagenstein's descriptions and belonging is his neighborhood *Orta Mezar*, “модел на едно бърдно човечество”<sup>14</sup> (Wagenstein 2011: 32), which stands out by virtue of the humble and authentic coexistence of hard-working people. This place is described as the example of an unusual and rare inter-ethnic tolerance and spontaneous human solidarity:

Моята махала Орта мезар, което на турски значи средна гробница (...) населен с най-добронамерените и простодушни хора на света – българи, турци, евреи, арменци, цигани, алванци, татари, както и с редките тогава междинни етнически смески, беше най-жизнената, най-очарователната част на града и както сега ми се струва, туптящото му горещо сърце<sup>15</sup> (Wageinstein 2011: 36)

### Sensorial Experiences

An aspect both of the writers touch on in the depiction of their native cities is the one linked to the sensorial world: the places of their childhood seem to reveal themselves in all of their enchantment and their picturesque character, the profusion of products linked to the earth and to nature and to an “Oriental” way of enjoying life:

Живи са още в душата ми залезите, изпълнени с аромата на порасени със сусам топли гевреци и на сладко от смокини, с висналите по клоните есенни тежки дюли (...).<sup>16</sup> (Wagenstein 2002: 22)

Да изясним, че мастиката беше предимно турско и еврейско питие, докато българският етнос се ориентираше към червеното вино, а арменското и циганското малцинство пиеше каквото падне.<sup>17</sup> (Wagenstein 2002: 28)

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14 Paradigm for a future humanity.

15 'My neighborhood Orta Mezar, which in Turkish means 'middle graveyard,' populated with the most simple-hearted and well-intentioned people in the world – Bulgarians, Turks, Jews, Armenians, Gypsies, Albanians, Tatars, and a series of transitional ethnic mixtures – was the most vital and fascinating part of the city as well as, how it seems to me now, its warm pulsing heart'.

16 'I can still see in front of my eyes the sunsets emanating the essence of warm sesame donuts or of fig-jam pastries, I see the trees of quinces with their branches pushed down by the weight of autumn colors (...)'

17 'The mastika was preferred by Turks and Jews, while the Bulgarians had a preference for red wine, while the Armenians and Gypsies would drink whatever happened in

Aber auf Fähr in der Droschke und später, als wir ausstiegen, sahen wir die üppigsten Gemüse und Obstkulturen, dunkelviolette Eierfrüchte, Paprika, Tomaten, Gurken, riesige Kürbisse und Melonen, ich kam aus dem Staunen nicht heraus, was da alles wuchs.<sup>18</sup> (Canetti 1977:126)

Aber da die Lebensmittel in Wien schon nach dem ersten Kriegswinter knapp wurden, deckte sie sich vor der Abreise mit getrocknetem Gemüse ein. Unzählige Stücke der verschiedensten Arten wurden auf Fäden aufgezogen(...) <sup>19</sup> (Canetti 1977: 127)

That Southern environment helps little Elias open his eyes to the sensorial richness of his hometown, showing him the profusion of the Bulgarian land, filled with incredible amounts of ripe fruits and vegetables that the “West” doesn't know. The fascination with those places mixes with a certain shade of exoticism, but it is something less superficial and more rooted than this, in the sense that it seems to give its contribution to the formation of a sort of epistemological experience which will later be translated in Canetti's works in an ethic of multiplicity and diversity.

Die Zigeuner. (...) trotz dieser Angst hätte ich mir ihren Anblick nicht entgehen lassen (...) Der ganze Aufzug hatte etwas unheimlich Dichtes, so viele Menschen, die sich bei ihrer Fortbewegung nah beisammen hielten, bekam ich sonst nie zu Gesicht; und es war auch in dieser sehr farbigen Stadt das Farbigste. Die Lappen, mit denen ihre Kleider zusammengeflickt waren, leuchteten in allen Farben, aber am meisten stach überall Rot hervor.<sup>20</sup> (Canetti 1977: 20-21)

Similarly, we remark how in Wagenstein the multiplicity is not something purely aesthetic, but it takes shape in the complexity of human lives that meet in that city and share different communal moments, which of course were convivial ones:

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their hands.'

18 'During that ride on the carriage and also later, when we got off, we admired the most magnificent and blooming cultivations of fruits and vegetables you could imagine: dark-purple aubergines, peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, huge pumpkins and humongous melons; I could not get over the astonishment to see all the things that grew in those places.'

19 'But before leaving she gathered lots of supplies of dried vegetables, as in Vienna, already after the first winter of war, groceries started to run out. Innumerable pieces of the most diverse qualities of vegetables were hung on a string to let them dry out.'

20 'The Gypsies: I would have never allowed myself to miss the show of their visit, which was truly wonderful: the most colourful show you could observe in that city, already itself so colourful. The pieces of rags their clothes were made of were of the most shining colors, and above all would stand out the red.'



Кърчака беше душа и един от главните жреци на тези поклонничества по светите места, изпълнен с грижа ритъмът им да не заглъхва и да бъде равномерно разпределен между българската, турската и еврейската общности, като не се пропускат циганската и всички други, чак горе на трихълмието, при арменците.<sup>21</sup> (Wagenstein 2002: 75)

Diversity, encounters, and multiple alterity are offered as a founding principle of identity in the formative moment of the two writers: the everyday context leads to a perceptive enrichment first of all, but also to a human and cultural one widely understood. The perspective that enables such a process is the one where the single root doesn't find a place to grow, as the concept of the root itself is insufficient to represent and express the multiplicity of influences and experiences of the past and the present. The overwhelming power of the senses forces us to reformulate the premises of identity and belonging, as in these cases they are linked to some key places of daily encounters and sharing, such as coffee places, markets, pubs, and common yards.

The market occupies a special place in the heart of Wagenstein, as a symbolic context of encounters and exchange, where people, colors, products, and costumes come across each other:

Друго важно средоточие, място за ежеседмични пленарни срещи на цялото народонаселение на квартала а и на цял Пловдив, беше Четвъртък Пазар (...) <sup>22</sup> (Wagenstein 2011: 35)

The Thursday Market is represented as a quirky, crowded and exotic place of extreme abundance: there one could see carriages pulled by oxen, and camels carrying tobacco and other products from the neighboring Kardzhali region. A mixture of people and customs, among which one could recognize the typical red fez of the Turks and the white one of the Albanians, the women's black and white scarves, the shawls from the Rhodopes and the hats and scarves of the widows:

Това, разбира се, беше странично петно в шумното тържище, където планини от зеленчуци, дини, пъпеши и тикви и сплитки лук и чесън, и сухи арнаутски чушлета, и всички плодове на благодатната тракийска земя, и чували с ориз,

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21 'The drunkard was the soul and one of the main spiritual leaders of those pilgrimages to the temples of inebriation. He kept under control the pace of the visits, and the frequency with which he honored Bulgarian, Turkish and Hebrew temples, not to mention the Gypsy ones and all the others, like the Armenian one at the top of the Trimontium.

22 'Another important point of reference, a place for weekly plenary meetings of the whole population of the neighborhood and of the entire city of Plovdiv, was the Thursday Market.'

боб, жито, царевица, нахут и фъстъци , и пуйки, (...) сменяха собствениците си, за да има хляб на трапезата и мир на земята...<sup>23</sup> (ibid.)

A relevant element for the purpose of this essay is a concept evoked by Wagenstein, structurally linked to the life of his beloved neighborhood *Orta Mezar*: the so-called *komšuluk*. This term of Turkish origin refers both to the experience of “good neighborhood” and to some kind of inner doors that used to exist between the walls of the houses, the purpose of which was not to separate but rather to unite the adjoining yards of the neighbors. Through the *komšuluk*, Bulgarians, Jews, Turks, Armenians and other communities would exchange special dishes on the occasion of important festivities: sponge cakes, spring strudel with parsley, fig compote — as well as the hottest local gossip. With a shade of nostalgia, the writer regrets to see those *komšuluk* of good neighborhoods solidly walled up now, disappeared from the everyday life of the city and the area as an element of union between different people and ethnicities. But it was not only the *komšuluk* that united: the inner structure of the house yard itself enabled communication and exchange, as in the “connecting structure” theorized by Gregory Bateson (1972).

The *komšuluk* seems to embody in the eyes of Wagenstein the connecting principle through which multiplicity could communicate itself, by which everyone could look at the other and see his or her same identity reflected, part of a world structured in a way so as not to envisage divisions, but rather to generate heterogeneous and multifaceted cultural settings. This is the reason why the descriptions of everyday life in these cities evoke principles of complex identity, where ethnic determinations and a monolithic culture do not make much sense. These are contexts where the one who speaks already comes from a “minority community” which dates back to a handed-down past of mobility and non-exclusive belonging. Here it is the connecting principle of heterogeneity, the principle of multiplicity that is in force, similarly to what has been defined by Deleuze and Guattari (1980) as the *rhizome*, and then extended by Glissant (1996) to describe matters of identity.

The memories of Rustschuk and Plovdiv are not limited to pure aesthetic descriptions or nostalgic reflections of a mythicized past, but rather are connected with deep insights and reflections on the role of diversity in the development of a cultural ethic. We can trace back the origins of the authors’ thinking precisely in this early exposure to a stimulating surrounding, and we can see the fruits of the engagement and interest of the authors in exploring life through a writing perspective which is sensitive to all that is marginal and “minor.”

It has been affirmed (Deleuze & Guattari 1975) how minorities find their place within the concept of literature itself: because literature is a process of “becoming a

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23 'This was a lateral part of the crowded market where mountains of vegetables, melons, pumpkins and watermelons, lines of onion and garlic and dried Albanian peppers and fruits of the fertile Thracian land, rice and leek, beans, wheat, corn, chickpeas, pistachio nuts and turkeys (...) would exchange their owners so that there would be bread on the tables and peace on the ground.'

minority.” Literature has always reflected on questions of multiplicity and in the case of these writers, there is no doubt that what they propose is a vision of the world that is based on a non-unitary foundation, and rather more on the conception of a sort of *cultural multiverse*. The following is a brief extract from Wagenstein's depiction of minorities in Plovdiv:

Арменското и циганското малцинство пиеше каквото падне. Употребявам понятието “малцинство” доста условно и в разрез с Конституцията, защото всички пъстри съставки на квартала Средни Гробища, взети поотделно, включително българите, представяха малцинства, които се превръщаха в едно единно и могъщо народно мнозинство събота вечер в кръчмата срещу старата турска баня.<sup>24</sup> (Wagenstein 2002: 80)

And Canetti's one:

Manche Figuren sind mir bloß in Erinnerung geblieben, weil sie einer besonderen Stammesgruppe angehörten und sich durch ihre Tracht von anderen unterschieden. Unter den Dienern, die wir im Lauge jener sechs Jahre im Hause hatten, gab es einmal einen Tscherkessen und später einen Armenier. Die beste Freundin meiner Mutter war Olga, eine Russin. Einmal wöchentlich zogen Zigeuner in unseren Hof, so viele, dass sie mir wie ein ganzes Volk erschienen (...)<sup>25</sup> (Canetti 1977: 10)

### The Sound of Multiple Languages

Among the prominent impressions of this colorful world of the writer's native cities, a privileged place is taken by the element of the language, or rather by the Babel of languages, a truly unique experience, the traces of which will remain forever imprinted in the consciousness of the two writers.

Regarding Canetti, the future writer spends the first part of his childhood in a boundary world, a crossroad of encounters, commercial exchanges and trades, where apart

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24 'The minorities of the Armenian and the Jews used to drink haphazardly anything they would find in their hands. I say “minorities” in an entirely generic and anti-constitutional way, because taken individually, the ethnicities of the multifaceted neighborhood of *Orta Mezar*, Bulgarians included, represented actually all a minority, but on Saturday night in the tavern in front of the old Turkish hamam they would melt together to form a compact and powerful majority.'

25 'Some people have stuck in my memory only because they belonged to a particular ethnic group and wore a different custom from the others. Among the servants that we had in our home during the course of six years, there was once a Circassian and later on an Armenian. My mother's best friend was Olga, a Russian. Once every week, Gypsies came into our courtyard, so many that they seemed like an entire nation.'

from Bulgarian, other languages such as Turkish, Ladino, Greek, Romanian, Russian, Albanian and Romany could be heard. For people of the most varied background lived there, on any one day one could hear seven or eight languages:

Es war oft von Sprachen die Rede, sieben oder acht verschiedene wurden allein in unserer Stadt gesprochen, etwas davon verstand jeder, nur die kleinen Mädchen, die von den Dörfern kamen, konnten Bulgarisch allein und galten deshalb als dumm. Jeder zählte die Sprachen auf, die er kannte, es war wichtig, viele von ihnen zu beherrschen, man konnte durch ihre Kenntnis sich selbst oder anderen Menschen das Leben retten.<sup>26</sup> (Canetti 1977: 38)

Already at that time, a continuous and attentive interest in the word and its expressive possibilities awakens inside Elias, a fact that will later take the shape of the challenge in the context of learning German and completely appropriating it, making it the language of his literary writing.

Canetti learns Bulgarian thanks to the girls coming from the countryside, who play with him in the common courtyard of his grandfather's house. He hears from them his first fairy tales about people and animals in this language, which impress him deeply. In this way, Canetti approaches the secret and pleasant world of Bulgarian folk tales, feeding his imagination with legends of ghosts and werewolves, stories of horses and wolves crossing the iced Danube.

Wagenstein writes about how in Plovdiv's social texture the families of Jews, Bulgarians, Turks and other were tightly woven together, so that everyone would get by in the language of the other:

(...) българчетата се псуваха на турски, по петъчните вечери кварталният ни майстор-обущар, турчинът Исмет, почиттелно поздравяваше баба ми с еврейското "Шабат Шалом", а евреите при раждане или смърт в съседско мохамеданско семейство, изпращаха тава с банички, които като знак за произход носеха турско название с прикаченото испанско окончание - "бурекас."<sup>27</sup> (Wagenstein 2002: 109-110)

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26 'People often talked about languages; seven or eight tongues were spoken in our city alone, everyone understood something of each language. Only the young girls who came from the villages could speak exclusively Bulgarian, and were therefore considered stupid. Everyone would list the languages he knew: it was important to command many of them, with language knowledge you could save your own existence and also the other's one.'

27 'Bulgarian kids addressed each other in Turkish, on Friday night Izmet the shoemaker would greet my grandmother with an impeccable *Shabbat Shalom!* And the Jews, in occasion of birthdays or mournings, would prepare the typical filled strudels, whose Turkish name was just a bit adapted with a Hispanic suffix: *burekas*'.

A nice example of this linguistic openness is represented by the grandmother Mazal, who always liked to show her knowledge of many words coming from different linguistic backgrounds, keeping them together:

Разбира се, предавам думите и в свободен превод, защото вече бе хвърлена светлина върху непостижимите испано-турско-славянски лингвистични форми, с които си служеха старите еврейски в нашата махала.<sup>28</sup> (Wagenstein 2002:140)

The character of Berto does not directly represent Wagenstein's childhood, as he left Bulgaria for France very early to make his return there only as a sixteen or seventeen year-old boy. However, what is important in this novel, which deals with his hometown Plovdiv and his multicultural world, is that Wagenstein wants to show us the reciprocal understanding of different languages and cultures, the daily multilingualism which becomes a fact of normality, and the richness represented by this Babel of sounds and words.

For what concerns the family language, being both Sephardic Jews, both Canetti and Wagenstein would hear Ladino during their childhood, the language used in communication among relatives and friends in these Jewish families (Harris 1994). Sephardic Jews used the Hebrew characters and wrote books in the Hebrew language, but in everyday life they preferred to use Ladino (also called "Judeo-Spanish") (Foa 2000: 108-137). In the description of Canetti's and the character Berto's daily life, this is the language used by the family. It was, as Canetti affirms (1977: 11) a quite antiquated Spanish, which he would have also later heard and never forgotten.

In a recent interview with a Spanish journalist (2010),<sup>29</sup> Wagenstein, as a good Sephardi, still mixes some words of Ladino with French. He also defines this as a language that becomes more and more protected, but less and less spoken, because "el ladino no es una lengua, es el recuerdo de una lengua."<sup>30</sup> The topic of Ladino is widely treated in his novel *Daleč ot Toledo*, which already in its title recalls the lost Sephardic world, in which the miracle of linguistic continuity positively stands out. Canetti is equally conscious of his own Sephardic linguistic legacy: in an interview (1972: 106), he speaks about the language of his ancestors, describing how his predecessors managed to preserve it in spite of the number of peregrinations and migrations around Europe. Spanish is for him the language

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28 Originally my Grandmother pronounced the order in that incredible linguistic mixture of Spanish, Turkish and Slavic terms which was the typical idiom of our neighborhood's Jewish women.

29 From the Spanish Interview: "Mi abuelo se llamaba Angel *El Borrachón*, recuerda Wagenstein durante su charla, recuperando un español teñido de sintaxis francesa con reminiscencias de ladino" and again: "Eso es verdad. Ahora, los *viellos* —los viejos, pero voy a decir *viellos*, como hablamos en Plovdiv." in: [http://www.mediterraneosur.es/prensa/wagenstein\\_angel.html](http://www.mediterraneosur.es/prensa/wagenstein_angel.html) (accessed on 5/31/2016).

30 'Ladino is not a language, it is the memory of a language.'

of his childhood, of his strong childish memories, of the first years in Rustschuk (Caruzzi 1999: 24). He affirms that:

Nur besonders dramatische Vorgänge, Mord und Todschlag sozusagen und die ärgsten Schrecken, sind mir in ihrem spanischen Wortlaut geblieben, aber diese sehr genau und unzerstörbar.<sup>31</sup> (1977:17)

In addition, the pride of these Jews in their Spanish origin, the esteem and preservation of their ancient form of Spanish has a powerful and colorful impact on the future writer, who claims that even the children's songs he heard would contribute to forging a sort of specific Sephardic attitude towards the others, always combined with a sort of pride:

Die ersten Kinderlieder, die ich hörte, waren Spanisch, ich hörte alte spanische 'Romances', was aber am kräftigsten war und für ein Kind unwiderstehlich, war eine spanische Gesinnung. Mit naiver Überheblichkeit sah man auf andere Juden herab (...) <sup>32</sup> (1977:11)

This pride seems to derive precisely from the awareness of coming from "elsewhere," and of having been able to preserve such a distinctive trait. Also in Wagenstein's novel we can observe a similar characteristic among the Sephardic people: this element of non-exclusive consciousness of identity, where the use of the ancient Spanish language (which has retained specificities lost from the contemporary Castilian standard) reflects an ability to guard their own past and to preserve it in time and space, notwithstanding the multiple influences and the lack of a national state:

Така тази странна, но обяснима езикова, а може би и духовна връзка се е проснала от малката ни синагога в един пловдивски квартал с турското име Орта Мезар, (...) за да се втурне назад във вековете, чак до изворите на легендата за печалния ездач на Росинант. (...) <sup>33</sup> (2011:11)

Този език като малък самотен сал, люшнат сред разбунения туркоезичен, елински и славянски океан, оцеля и до днес, векове след онази юнска нощ на

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31 'Only particular events, murder and fear of death for example and the most intense frights have remained impressed within me their Spanish sound, but these are very precise and indestructible.'

32 'The first children's songs I heard were Spanish, I heard old Spanish *romances*; but the thing that was most powerful, and irresistible for a child, was a Spanish attitude. With naive arrogance, the Sephardim looked down on other Jews (...).'

33 'This linguistic phenomenon, or maybe also spiritual, wandered around half of the world before reaching our little synagogue in the heart of a Bulgarian neighborhood that takes the Turkish name of Orta Mezar (..) back in time to rejoin with the sad legend of the owner of Rocinante.'

1492-ра (...) <sup>34</sup> (2011:10)

### A Particular Family Context

Both Canetti and Wagestein warmly evoke their childhood and link it to their family world, which appears as a fundamental and paradigmatic context to start from in order to pursue a perspective for a multi-focused identity. Some figures particularly stand out in the memories of the two writers, as the figure of the grandfather, who embodies the attachment to a “lost world”, Turkish and more generally “Oriental”, made of mixtures, dialogues and pleasures. These are people capable of relating with the world in all its complexity, having the skills to extract complex human and cultural resources for every situation; two great personalities open to the world, whose social intelligence the grandsons benefit from and whose legacy inside the their soul and cultural education is undeniable.

Кърчака е начетен, няма съмнение, той владее не само ладино и турски, но и псува на изящен български, да не споменаваме цветистите крѣпки от цигански, арменски и грѣцки език, нужни в ежедневноста му битка (...) <sup>35</sup> (2011: 13)

(Großvater) suchte zu allen Menschen in ihrer Sprache zu sprechen, und da er diese nur nebenher auf seinen Reisen gelernt hatte, waren seine Kenntnisse, mit Ausnahme der Sprachen des Balkans, zu denen auch Spanisch gehörte, höchst mangelhaft. Er zählte gern an den Fingern auf, wieviel Sprachen er spreche, und die drollige Sicherheit, mit der er es bei dieser Aufzählung – Gott weiß wie – manchmal auf 17, manchmal auf 19 Sprachen brachte, war trotz seiner komischen Aussprache für die meisten Menschen unwiderstehlich. <sup>36</sup> (1977:109)

The figure of the grandfather is also the one who shows attachment and pride in that “minority” world from which they originated, opposing its abandonment. They are

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34 'As a little solitary raft lost between the imposing waves of Turkish, Greek and Slavic, that language has survived until today – centuries after that famous June of 1492.'

35 'He is an educated drunkard, there is no doubt about it. He can speak fluently not only Ladino and Turkish, but he can also curse in an impeccable Bulgarian, not to mention his ability to patch the texture of his sometimes unraveled language with loans from the Gypsy, Armenian and Greek languages, which are useful in his everyday life (...)'

36 'My grandfather always tried to speak to everyone in *their* language, but as he had just heard them a bit through his travels, his actual knowledge of the languages, with the exception of the ones of the Balkans, including his Spanish, was not up to standard. He enjoyed a lot counting on his fingers the number he spoke, and the and the droll self-assurance in adding them up – God knows how – sometimes seventeen, sometimes nineteen, was irresistible to most people, despite his comical pronunciation.'

“oriental” men, who share a different vision of the world and don't believe that other places can be better than the one they live in.

Rustschuk wurde von den Spaniolen, die ich in England und Wien kannte, nur mit Verachtung erwähnt, als ein provinzielles Nest ohne Kultur, wo die Leute gar nicht wussten, wie es in 'Europa' zugeht. Alle schienen froh, dass sie von dort entronnen waren, und kamen sich als aufgeklärtere und bessere Menschen vor, weil sie nun woanders lebten. Nur der Großvater, der sich nie für etwas schämte, sprach den Namen der Stadt mit feurigem Nachdruck aus, da war sein Geschäft, das Zentrum seiner Welt (...).<sup>37</sup> (1977:120)

Дядо ми, кърчака, много пиян, изрече упорито като удари с юмрук по масата и разплиска пълната чаша с мастика. - аз не мърдам от тук! Децата ми са паднали за тази земя, аз оставам!<sup>38</sup> (2002: 257)

Also, the role of the women of the family is important: for Canetti it is his mother; for Wagenstein's novel's main character, an orphan, it is instead the grandmother. Canetti's mother had worried a lot about the possibility that her son was not talented in languages, fearing he would be the only one of such a numerous family not to possess such a fundamental skill. But it was rather his curiosity about the enigmas of language that was strengthened by the fact his parents spoke in German between themselves and when they had to keep something hidden, as that was the language of Ruse's educated class. It was his mother who taught him German, with a very strict discipline that eventually proved effective.

Sie duldeten keineswegs, dass ich die anderen Sprachen aufgab, Bildung bestand für sie in den Literaturen aller Sprachen, die sie kannte, aber die Sprache unserer Liebe (...) wurde Deutsch.<sup>39</sup> (1977:90)

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37 'Usually the “Spaniolen” I had met in England and in Vienna mentioned Rustschuk only with disdain, as a lost provincial corner without culture, where people did not know anything about what happens in “Europe.” Everyone seemed very happy about having left it, and felt better and more illuminated, precisely because they lived elsewhere. Only Grandfather, who would never be ashamed of anything, used to pronounce with great emphasis the name of Ruschuk, which constituted for him the center of the world(...)'.

38 'My grandfather, the drunkard, was very drunk and hit angrily the table with his fist, so much to pour down the glass full of mastika - I will not move from here! My children have died for this country. I will stay!'

39 'Mother would not tolerate that I would give up the other languages, for her, culture was found in the literature in all the languages she herself mastered, but the language of our love (...) would be German.'



Similarly, the grandmother of *Daleč ot Toledo* expressed strong love for many languages:

Защото наречието, което сеньора Мазал употребяваше при подобни междуетнически контакти, беше неописуема смес от славянски думи с испански окончания и обратното, архаизми на иврит с имплантирани турски ругатни и с най-упорито объркване на женския с мъжки род, като цялото това езиково меню бе обилно полято със сос “ладино”.<sup>40</sup> (2011: 89)

The two writers grow up in a world where different languages coexisted, where it seems that what Glissant suggests could happen, that is, a sort of mutual respect and understanding, where people would strive to let all these languages be open to one another, so that they could “hear each other, comprehend each other and harmonize to each other” (Glissant 1996: 35), probably the best conception of multilingualism. The core of this idea is indeed to speak a language while not ignoring the presence of other languages, having instead the awareness that they exist and influence us even without us noticing: it is a matter of imagery of the languages. To listen to the other is to accept that the truth of elsewhere opposes our truth (ibid.)

In the discourse on multilingualism, the Jewish context reveals itself as crucial: within the Ottoman Empire, the Jews were known for their ability to speak a variety of languages, and this allowed them to become interpreters and intermediaries between the central government and local Muslims, who had troubles in learning Turkish (Ferracuti 2011: 33). The cases of the writers’ families are a great example of such care and attention to the other, a fundamental openness which is essential to the survival of the community. The Jewish minority has been capable of maintaining its cultural integrity throughout the centuries while making continuous efforts toward integration in society, thus living and sharing its existence with other communities. The writers examined in this paper seem to be aware of such a degree of multilingualism: because knowing many languages is a way of not being limited to a particular identity. To live was to acquire languages—Canetti’s were Ladino, Bulgarian, German, and later English and French—and Wagenstein’s were Ladino, Bulgarian, French, and later Russian.

If a “minor” literature is not a literature written in a minor language, but the one that a minority creates in a majority language, then we can easily claim that this is what Canetti does with German. Wagenstein writes instead in Bulgarian, which is unfortunately not considered an important language in the European context, but being a member of a minority within a minor language makes a complex question which could be related to Deleuze’s and Guattari’s conception of “minor literature” (1975). Wagenstein’s literature undeniably presents some of these features, such as the fact that his language is subjected

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40 'The idiom that *Seniora* Mazal would use in occasion of multiethnic encounters was a crazy herd of Slavic terms with Spanish suffixes, Hebrew archaisms and insults in an impeccable Turkish, the whole thing set in a methodical confusion between masculine and feminine gender – in other words, a great linguistic menu that my grandmother served drowned with Ladino sauce.'

to a high degree of deterritorialization (in the sense of decontextualization), filled with words from other languages such as in his novel *Daleč ot Toledo*, but also in his other novel *Isaac's Torah* (in Bulgarian: *Petnoknižie Isakovo*, 1998). We have already remarked how Wagenstein evokes lots of Spanish and Turkish terms in the former novel. This seems to correspond also to the possibility of making a “minor” use of one's own language.

### Effects of Multiplicity and the Borders of Europe

The first foundation of the motives that have become fundamental in Canetti's work, such as the end of the world, the fire, and the crowd, can all be found in his memories about his early life in the old Danubian Rustschuk at the beginning of the Century. They all constitute that strong, rich, and colorful “human province” the writer drew inspiration from and developed a curiosity about, which allowed him to develop that particular enthusiasm for human events and a sensibility for multiplicity, both of which were crucial in his role as a writer:

Als Kind hatte ich keinen Überblick über diese Vielfalt, aber ich bekam unaufhörlich ihre Wirkungen zu spüren.<sup>41</sup> (1977:10)

Es wird mir schwerlich gelingen, von der Farbigkeit dieser frühen Jahre in Rustschuk, von seinen Passionen und Schrecken eine Vorstellung zu geben. Alles was ich später erlebt habe, war in Rustschuk schon einmal geschehen.<sup>42</sup> (1977:11)

In his place of origin Canetti came to approach human diversity and became fascinated by it, starting to experience things with passion. A quality began to germinate within him (Kostantinov 1996), which he would come to consider later as the most important one for a writer:

(...) das Bedürfnis für alles, was man empfangen hat und was die geistige Substanz ausmacht, etwas zu hinterlassen, das gut genug ist, um zu dauern und zur Substanz späterer Menschen zu werden.<sup>43</sup> (1972:127)

In *Die Fackel im Ohr* (1980), Canetti confesses that since the age of ten, he has felt as if he consisted of many different characters: his life was experienced as a multiform stream that never ceased. The importance of building up his own multiplicity became fundamental in

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41 'As a child, I had no real grasp of this variety, but I never stopped feeling its effects.'

42 'It would be hard to give a colorful picture of that early time in Ruschuk, the passions and the terrors. Anything I subsequently experienced had already happened in Ruschuk.'

43 'the need to leave something behind us, for everything we have received and what constitutes the spiritual substance, which is good enough to last and become substance of later human beings'.

the process of becoming a writer, because the one who writes is multiple, and we cannot determine exactly where he comes from. Canetti seems to be in line with what Glissant points out about his poetics of difference, claiming it is nonsense to talk about the point of view of uniqueness and that concepts like the one of “nation” should be revisited.

If we focus more on their writing context, we can see how both Canetti and Wagenstein are to a certain extent nomadic writers from the beginning. Even before starting their path in the world, they were born into a mixture of ethnicities, languages, and cultures which became the paradigm for their future perspectives.

Wagenstein spent his youth between Bulgaria, France and Moscow, and then settled in Bulgaria. His novel *Daleč ot Toledo* is part of a trilogy dedicated to the destiny of the Jewish people and at the same time the representation of the end of certain cultural worlds. The latter are precisely those particularly multicultural territorial entities which used to exist until Second World War, such as post-Ottoman Bulgaria and post-Habsburg Galicia, where a number of ethnicities, religions, and visions of the world coexisted. His other novel *Farewell, Shanghai* is dedicated instead to a less known episode of Jewish history, which is the arrival in Shanghai of entire Jewish communities from Eastern Europe and Germany, where they meet with the Iraqi Jews.

The end of certain “European” worlds is significant, as the collapse of empires accelerates a crisis of identity and culture and, as Deleuze and Guattari claim about the Austro-Hungarian Empire, “they accentuate everywhere deterritorializations and stimulate complex archaizing, mythical or symbolistic reterritorializations”<sup>44</sup> (Deleuze Guattari 1975:45). Such are places of cultural encounters and multiple roots, where national definitions do not count much, as in the case of Isaac Blumenfeld, the protagonist of Wagenstein's *Isaac's Torah*, in the region of Galicia. In this special, multiethnic region of Eastern Europe, where Wagenstein's Ashkenazi grandfather (Abraham the Drunkard) came from, Isaac has to go through five phases of life and five languages and political dominations just as the books of the Torah, changing five different nationalities without moving from his little town: Austro-Hungarian, Polish, German, Ukrainian and Soviet.

Wagenstein sets his novel in this other extremely multicultural place, another part of Europe characterized by linguistic pluralism and a kind of coexistence manifest in different aspects of former “Eastern” multiethnic empires (Lörinzci 1999:33). It is precisely this particular feature that we can define as an extremely relevant contribution of Eastern European history to the creation of a common European heritage: the respect for multiplicity was an everyday practice, a reality we can draw from such examples; this could encourage us to go beyond national traditions and canons in favor of a multicultural approach and the perspective of a sort of *transnational* canon (Böhmig 2004: 16).

Canetti claimed (1977) that antisemitism didn't exist in Bulgaria; it was something unconceivable, and Wagenstein similarly affirmed that antisemitism started outside the borders of Ottoman Empire, that the friendship between the Rabbi, the Pope, the Mullah

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<sup>44</sup> ‘La décomposition et la chute de l'empire redoublent la crise, accentuent partout les mouvements de déterritorialisation, et suscitent des reterritorialisations complexes, archaïsantes, mythiques ou symbolistes.’

and his atheist grandfather was real and it was a symbol of tolerance in a small neighborhood, between people and between religions. In Bulgaria during Ottoman times there had never been ghettos, as it was part of an empire that opened its doors to welcome the Jews after they were expelled from “European” Spain. Canetti remembers how, maybe in a naive way, people of his hometown would refer to Europe as something beyond the borders of Bulgaria, located closer to Vienna:

Die übrige Welt hieß dort Europa und wenn jemand die Donau hinauf nach Wien führ, sagte man er fährt nach Europa, Europa begann dort, wo das Türkische Reich einmal geendet hatte.<sup>45</sup> (1977:11)

But what is “Europe” then? Both Canetti and Wagenstein, in the works we are referring to, tell us stories about coming from a “marginalized” part of the continent that does not appear to have been sufficiently considered in the making of its collective history, or at least not equally so to the contributions coming from Western Europe (Marinelli 2008:85).

The collective atmosphere and imagery which forged the writers' early sensibility are derived from two cities which in a way could be considered part of a “post-imperial world,” a dynamic and complex setting where identity is still in question. But what matters is that these spaces are also extremely European, in the best possible meaning of this word. Therefore, it would be finally time to rethink a bit more attentively the ethical and cultural standards at the basis of our idea of Europe. On this merit, Gayatri Spivak (2009: 88) has affirmed: “There is Turkey, entering Europe, but Bulgaria is European in a different way for the rest of the world, although it is not sufficiently European by its own count, because what the Bulgarians call Europe provincializes them.”

### **Jewish “Multiple Belonging”?**

In contrast to her son, Canetti's mother had a very contradictory relation with her Bulgarian and “Oriental” past. Sometimes she would talk about her hometown with nostalgia, but otherwise she would openly minimize it, as a kind of “barbarian” and uncivilized place:

‘So ist hier’ sagte die Mutter, ‘ein gesegnetes Land. Das ist auch eine Kultur, da braucht sich niemand zu schämen, dass er hier zur Welt kam.’<sup>46</sup> (1977: 129)

Aber dann in Varna: ‘Dieselben Straßen wie früher! Das sind orientalische

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45 'There, the rest of the world was known as 'Europe' and, when somebody sailed up the Danube to Vienna, people said he was going to Europe. Europe began where the Ottoman Empire once ended.'

46 “That's how it is here’ – said my mother – ‘a blessed land. This is also culture, and there is nothing to be ashamed of to have been born here.’”

Zustände. Diese Leute werden nie etwas lernen!’<sup>47</sup>(*ibid.*)

Spanish-Jewish, Turkish-Bulgarian, Austrian-Swiss-English, Canetti would have rather preferred being European (Ishaghpour 1990: 18), and he is on the other hand not ascribable to any precise place on the continent. In the young imagery of the future writer, there is, however, a trip dominating his dreams, the double-sided journey that would descend and go back up to the Danubian stream, from Vienna to Odessa and from Odessa to Vienna and in which Rustschuk, placed quite low on the route, would have found its right collocation (Canetti 1980). Symbolically, that trip seems to connect the crucial points of an identity and emotional geography dense of meanings for his human and cultural formation, uniting the post Austro-Hungarian world of Vienna with the cosmopolitan Russian world of Odessa and the post-Ottoman one of Ruse: a composite one surely, but again, extremely European.

Composite cultures are the ones Glissant looks at connecting to the principle of *rhizomatic* identity: if the single root has the pretension of depth, as *atavistic* cultures do, the *rhizomatic* one develops on the contrary in the extension, and originates cultures characterized by streams of complexity, just as the trip dreamt by Canetti.

In order to be aware of the extensions of roots and be able to acknowledge diversity, a particular procedure is required, which both of the writers express in their works dedicated more or less explicitly to the idea of multiplicity.<sup>48</sup> As Ishaghpour (1990) has remarked, it is indeed necessary to stay at the margins, not being subjected in an exclusive way to any human phenomenon, but rather cultivating a deep interest for all of them; it is necessary to experience every phenomenon as deeply as if it was the one you belonged to, but without being forced to belong to it without the possibility of experiencing others.<sup>49</sup> Both Canetti and Wagenstein suggest to us how to conceive the multiple as such, how to respect differences and let every form take shape in its specificity. Human phenomena can be comprehended only as differences within constellations of form, and the multiple remains multiple.

Belonging remains therefore an open question, not giving way to identity

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47 “But then, later in Varna: “The same streets as before! These are Oriental conditions. These people will never learn anything!”

48 See Ishaghpour's analysis about Canetti's crowds and power in Ishaghpour: 1990.

49 In addition to this, see Wagenstein's foreword in his novel *Farewell, Shanghai*: (in Bulgarian: *Сбогом, Шанхай*):

So, who am I? Neither a hero neither a victim. An anonymous extra in the mass scenes of the drama (...) That's why sometimes I prefer to stay at the margins. Frankly, I do not even take part in mass scenes, to say nothing of agonizing monologues, I just want to be a spectator who is sitting in the third row of the half-dark theater. Because things exist independently from our points of view. They are as they are' (my translation).

temptations. With respect to this, Wagenstein (2006) tells us something significant and paradigmatic about Bulgarian identity:

Тази разраченост е вековна за България — между Изтока и Запада. Никога не сме знаели накъде да тръгнем — ту с едните, ту с другите. Празнуваме Рождество Христово с католиците, а Възкресение Христово с православните.<sup>50</sup>

Thanks to Abraham the Drunkard, a colorful world which existed historically is given shape, which enhances the richness of the little known history of this Balkan country.<sup>51</sup> By virtue of their multifaceted identity and their “nomadic” formation, in both of the writers the native Bulgarian “Oriental” atmospheres meet with the sweet and troubled ones of Central Europe. Canetti and Wagenstein embody the best product of an authentic European culture interwoven with a strong stance on what has been and to a certain extent remains, the marginality of “other” cultures (Spivak 2003). Both of the writers give voice to the Babylonian confusion of languages, cultural traditions and lifestyles of their hometowns, with fine descriptions that appear as a praise of multiculturalism and interculturality, in opposition to brutal and tragic interpretations of identity which those places have also produced.<sup>52</sup>

Maybe precisely the original experience of multilingualism and multiculturalism had to lead Canetti and Wagenstein to consider as central topics in their works the contradictions of history, the tensions between crowd and individual, between the single place and the collective world, between identity and alterity (Cacciatore 2008:161). Cosmpoliatan writers such as Canetti and Wagenstein can contain and reveal the spirit of multiple cultural experiences: through their narration they suggest patterns in which the human being becomes aware of the surrounding complexity, discovers “multiple belonging” and promotes the interaction between different cultures in conditions of absolute reciprocity. This situation is similar to what Wolfgang Welsch (1999) has defined as *transculturality*, a concept which can provide us with new paradigms for exploring modalities of complex interaction.

The Sephardic community described by the two writers expresses the two main features of a transnational identity: on the one side, continuity, which is the living memory

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50 This bifurcation is centuries-old for Bulgaria – between the East and the West. We have never understood in which direction we should go – at times with ones, at times with others. We celebrate the Birth of Christ with Catholics, and the Resurrection of Christ with the Orthodox. (Interview with Angel Wagenstein in Bulgarian newspaper *Standart* : <http://paper.standartnews.com/bg/article.php?d=2006-10-20&article=164901> (accessed on 5/31/2016)).

51 Spivak (2006) has claimed: “Of course Bulgaria has been incredibly conscious of its languages, an amazing phenomenon.”

52 Wagenstein took a fierce position against the discriminations against Bulgarian Turks during the 1980s and was harshly criticized for this.

of their own past (different in a temporal and in a spatial sense), and, on the other, the spirit of integration in the host country, together with a series of influences it is exposed to (in these cases the Turkish, the Bulgarian, the German, and so on). This model relates also to the concept of “cultural polyvalence” (Zekiyan: 1997)<sup>53</sup>, a form of multiple belonging, something that allows us to think of identity roots in a more tolerant way. It is again an entity that stretches out its branches towards the others, like the rhizome. A transcultural identity is indeed able to cross linguistic, temporal and spatial borders and enrich the different grounds it settles on. The co-presence of diversities manage this way to compose together in a series of shared experiences, nourished by a plurality of roots (Ceruti 2004: 41).

Through the colorful and picturesque descriptions of their hometowns, the two authors seem to evoke with a shade of nostalgia a “world of yesterday” which has vanished forever, leveled by ethnic and national uniformity, deprived of the richness of multitude, of the experiences of coexistence that were part of a common European heritage. Both of these narrations seem to conceive a different future for Europe, distant from the one enhancing its segmentation in isolated, separated and atomized microcosms. The roots of Europe and of its current national states are indeed much richer and varied than what the official versions have been showing us. There is still a great amount of work to be done in reconfiguring the European imagination, which would help both “Eastern” and “Western” sides to undergo a process of reciprocal comprehension.<sup>54</sup>

The attention to multiplicity is expressed in Canetti already from the first pages of his memories, where childish pleasures mix with notions such as multilingualism, the crowd, and metamorphosis, which will prove so fruitful in his future work. In 1946, Elias Canetti wrote: “A man must learn to consciously be different human beings and keep them all together... at that point, instead of the others, he will have to govern his own personalities: these will have a name, he will know them and will be able to command them” (in Canetti 1973).

Similarly, Wagenstein, in discussing his link to Bulgaria, remarks on his attachment to that country, at the same time claiming a multiplicity of perspectives he could belong to: not only the Jewish one, but also potential others are still viewed as part of him:

And I love Bulgaria. I do not leave Bulgaria. That means that I travel a lot but I always return (...) I have always been very engaged with the struggle for the humanitarian, for peace against fascism. Always... And it is for that reason that I always that my books not be presented as Jewish books. They are books about the fate of the Jews, but I could have written books about the destiny of Gypsies for example, with a full heart, with all of my heart.<sup>55</sup>

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53 This term has been used by Boghos Levon Zekiyan in reference to Armenian identity.

54 See Czeslaw Miłosz's (1990) “inclusive” idea of Europe.

55 Interview with French TV in 2004. <http://fresques.ina.fr/europe-des-cultures-en/fiche-media/Europeo0330/angel-wagenstein.html> (accessed on 5/31/2016).

In one of his last interviews in 1992 (see Kostantinov 1996), Canetti talked about that “colorful mess,” about the confusions of characters and forms of his birthplace, affirming that, in his memory, that was one of the most beautiful imaginable cities for a child. He also asked the interviewer to greet the people of Ruse for him, no matter if they knew him or not, as they were the descendants “of those wonderful people his childhood was populated with.” And Konstantinov (ibid) tells us that in reply to his question, if he ever considered coming back to Rustschuk, Elias Canetti answered the following way:

Für jeden Menschen gibt es etwas Heiliges - nicht im religiösen Sinne, ich bin Atheist, sondern als Substanz, als Kern des Daseins. Meine Geburtsstadt ist für mich dieses Heilige, das ich als ein sehr festes Bild immer im Bewusstsein trage. Ich habe Angst, wenn ich nach Rustschuk zurückkäme, nach so vielen Jahren, dieses heilige Bild verändert vorzufinden. Das ist, was mir die Lust an einer Rückreise, vielleicht die Donau hinunter, wegnimmt.<sup>56</sup>

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56 'For every human being there is something sacred – not in a religious sense, I am atheist, but rather as a substance, as the kernel of the existence. My birthplace is for me that which is sacred, which I keep inside my consciousness as a very powerful image. I am afraid that if I went back to Rustschuk after so many years, I would find this sacred image modified. This is what takes away my desire of taking a return journey down the Danube.'



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