

Teaching American Lessons To Romanian Students, A Memoir: 1990-1991—Part I

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Louis Petrich has now left Romania and gone on to teach at the American University of Kyrgyzstan, former republic of the Soviet Union. Dr. Petrich is a professor of American Studies. An abbreviated version of this memoir appears in the book, From Margin to Center, Iasi University Publishing House (Romanian.) This article will be published in two parts.

One of my favorite American authors, Henry David Thoreau, is famous for having lived two solitary years (1845-1847) in a cabin that he built himself on the shore of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. His neighbors from town, as he tells us, made very particular and persistent inquiries about his mode of life at Walden, for his retreat from American civilization into the lonely woods seemed to them “impertinent” and in need of justification. So Thoreau provided his curious fellow townsmen with a detailed account of his manner of survival in the woods in the first chapter of his book *Walden*, entitled, appropriately, “Economy.” In seventeen additional chapters, Thoreau addressed the charges that he knew his neighbors were implying throughout their economic inquiries: that he was a fool to give up the hard-earned amenities of civilized life; that he was a misanthrope to prefer the close company of trees, ants, and loons to such luminaries as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne; and that he was not a true American to take no apparent advantage of the opportunities for success in such a free and bountiful land. In short, his neighbors were concerned that Thoreau had lost his way, both as a human being and as an American citizen. *Walden* is a masterpiece because it answers these implicit charges in some of the best American prose ever written, whose clarity and authority prove that the substance of Thoreau’s life at Walden Pond consisted of happiness, freedom, truth, love, and a kind of success that Americans can proudly acknowledge as their own.

Thus may apparently ingenuous questions about such ordinary economic matters as food, clothing, shelter, and fuel lead to answers that contain the meaning and justification of a man’s life. And thus by seeking to disengage himself from the political and economic enterprises commonly understood as American, a man may succeed that much more in becoming one of America’s purest representatives.

How often have I found Thoreau’s words come flooding back to me! For during much of this past decade, I, too have had to answer constant questions about how I have managed to survive while teaching in the backward, eastern parts of Europe. And likewise there is no mistaking the deeper import of these questions: how can I justify a career that seems foolish and a lifestyle

unrecognizable as belonging to an American?

Presently, I am living in the city of Iasi, Romania, amidst conditions many of whose particulars even the most charitable of persons could not call “civilized.” Of my own free will do I live here, yet desiring no country but America to call my own. For I am a teacher of a subject in which the people of Romania, now said to be undergoing “transition” (from a very oppressive and poor way of life to one that promises to provide general freedom and prosperity), have a genuine interest, as I believe they should. That subject is America (the United States of America, to be precise, though no one in Romania has ever mistaken the meaning of the term), and this subject has become of the deepest interest to me. At the same time (for how could it be otherwise?) the subject I teach is myself, for like Thoreau, I am a representative of America to my students, and a rare one in Iasi, a city not on the itineraries of the Dracula-seeking or folklife-hunting tourists. The Romanian students I taught at Alexandru I. Cuza University in Iasi during the first year of transition (1990-91) took careful note of my words, manners, and attitudes to all things Romanian, especially the acute deprivations. They questioned me again and again about why I came to Romania and how I managed to survive it alone. For they could not understand why someone like me would choose to take up life for more than a brief period among an egregiously failed society and a desperate people (for that is what they were), leaving behind that which the rest of the world, or much of it anyway, was trying so hard to turn itself into. Was I to be trusted in my role as teacher and representative of a way of life towards which they were supposed to be heading? These questions occurred to me then as they do now almost on a daily basis.

Each time that I feel my precious hope being directed towards the pathetic elevator in my apartment block (is it operating today and will it, against all precedent, remain operating tomorrow?) I have to wonder whether my neighbors are right to suspect that I have lost the high hopes of youth in the middle years of my life. As I carefully navigate the unlit stairs and halls, relying on my flashlight to avoid the defecation that my neighbors’ dogs invariably have left somewhere in the vicinity (will the excrement at last be cleaned up today without being replenished tomorrow?) it occurs to me, as one inclined to interpret life according to tragic prescriptions, that perhaps I have been struck from my native course by the cruel hand of fate; while as a believer in a just God, I alternately wonder if I have offended Him in some way as to merit living so far from a happy home and well beneath the standards in which I was raised. Who can help asking, apart for these elevated considerations, whether this teacher of American studies, however competent he may be as a teacher, has disqualified himself as an exemplary American by preferring to live and teach in such a part of the Old World?

What, may I ask, to take up the practical matter of my qualifications for this career, does it mean to be an American? And why should the reader of this memoir, for that matter the Romanian students to whom I have been teaching American studies for several years, care what it means? The answer to the first question used to be rather simple. To be an American is to be an American citizen. And to be an American citizen means to accept the fundamental political principles, articulated

in the Declaration of Independence (1776) and put into practice by the Constitution (1789). To accept these principles means to assent by act of reason to the “self-evident” truth of human equality with respect to the possession of certain rights that are inalienable and divine in their source. The Declaration, whose succinct eloquence still has the power to move even the jaded among us, as Václav Havel demonstrated by interpreting parts of it on the political state in 1990, specifies from among the rest only three rights: that of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It also specifies one right that is also a “duty”: that of the people “to alter or abolish” any government that becomes “destructive” of its ends. These ends are to secure human rights through the exercise of “just powers” derived from the consent of the governed.

No one in my experience as a teacher, in Romania or elsewhere in Eastern Europe, has ever dared to raise an objection to the above principles. Presumably, their validity must be apparent to what used to be called “the common sense of man.” Or to put the matter in context, perhaps my students take these pronouncements as they would take a mathematical theorem—to be true, certainly, but whose application to their own lives is not clear. For they have been trained by their schooling to consider even practical subjects only according to the theoretical aspects.

Now, however, comes the second question: “Why should you,” I ask my students, “be particularly interested in the study of America?” Their diffident answers tend to reflect the fact that as students of the English language and literature they are required to take my course on American studies. But upon hearing my proposal, they begin to straighten their backs. “If the political principles that I have claimed to make one an American are universal truths, to which the common sense of mankind must in good faith assent,” I tell them, “then anyone in the world, including each of you, is potentially, if not already, an American.” (“Is he saying what I think he is saying?” their countenances seem to ask.)

All that it takes to become an American (I continue), not, of course, to be accepted as one in common practice, which is another matter. (“Ah, there’s the rub,” they note with a sigh), is to reason from a set of self-evident truths to the consequences that must follow, as I demonstrated previously, and with which you all concurred.” (“Now wait a minute, we did not know where we were heading when we agreed to follow your steps.”) In other words (I explain further), you can become an American in all but writ, for America is that country—and this, I think you will agree, is extraordinary—which created the possibility of choosing one’s own nationality through an act of deliberation that characterizes a free citizen, quite independent of ancestral origins and the varieties of culture.

The fact that American citizenship has been a long-delayed and hard-won achievement for Native Americans and African-Americans indicates that this American ideal is attainable, however difficult.

At this point the students look “wowed” by the implications of a course that they mainly just wanted to pass. They do not know if they should defend their Romanian identities from the impinging process of Americanization, or go along with my way of thinking and perhaps get a better mark.

To confront their confusion I offer my students the following analogy. Just as I return to the physical domain of America whenever I am admitted to the grounds of the American Embassy situated in the middle of Bucharest, so do they leave their native soil and become American, in a kind of fiction that is nevertheless true, whenever they enter my classroom to be treated by me as equals of their American counterparts in the possession of human rights and in the capacity to reason. Just as the mind, by creating the edifice of international law, has the power to define the nationality of the soil beneath a foreign embassy, so does the mind, by its capacity to apprehend and abide by certain political truths, have the power to define, or to render as irrelevant, the nationality of those persons who are of that mind. This is, of course, a revolutionary idea, but one that has been vindicated in tens of millions of cases by the success of the United States of America as a nation of immigrants, and moreover by the political revolutions that followed the American lead, beginning with that of the French, and including the Romanian Revolution of December, 1989. It took a long time, but America finally has come to Romania.

Usually by this point of the opening discussion I have succeeded in my purpose, which is to make the students stop wondering what I am doing in Iasi, and to make them start wondering what they are doing in Iasi. It is my purpose to convert their suspicion of my misfortune, punishment, or failure into that of theirs. It is to make them take seriously what I assume to be the main point of everything I try to teach: they do not have to remain what they were born and reared to be. They have the power to add to and subtract from their identities. They can become Americans, instead of, or in addition to, being Romanians. They will have to decide. Thoreau deliberated much over whether or not, and in what sense, he was or wished to be an American. He thus provides a model for the deliberations of my Romanian students. Still, despite all his efforts to serve as a model of “living deliberately” as both a human being and citizen, my students have found him impossible to appreciate as such. Marxism, after all, was a very deliberate attempt to solve the problems of life by implementing a new economics. In Romania, this attempt deprived the population of many of the things that Thoreau affirms we are better off without, such as fashionable clothes, spacious homes, lots of nice furniture, foreign travels, and tasty meats. To Thoreau, freedom does not mean being able to choose from among the abundant objects of desire constantly being produced in tremendous variety by the capitalist system; rather, it is being able to choose a way of life that leads one not to desire these objects in the first place. But to say that the choice of a simple life of decent poverty is wise sounds absurd to Romanians. It sounds, in fact, like the life they led under Communism (save for the decency). So I cannot blame them for rejecting the lessons of my beloved Thoreau.

America, too, despite all my above efforts to make her accessible, continues to appear to my students to be an exceptional nation, whose examples and offer of identity are not transferable to the people and conditions of the Old World. This

perception of American exceptionalism obstructs the importance of what I teach and nullifies my mission of conversion.

Alexis de Tocqueville was faced with a challenge in the nineteenth century similar to my own: how to get the French, whose own republican revolution had gone way off track, to understand things about American democracy that they were not likely to believe possible, and furthermore to apply the lessons of America to their own situation. Tocqueville learned from his study of democracy in America that experience was the only reliable teacher of the political lessons his proud countrymen needed to learn. One learns to become a citizen by doing what citizens do, just as a child learns to swim by first getting into the water. In both cases there will naturally be some floundering. The teacher of citizenship is going to find himself in the water too, so to speak, as Tocqueville did during the 1830 and 1848 revolutions in France, and as most Americans do today in the political and legal battles over the constitution of their culture. I make it clear to my students on whose side I fight in America's "Culture War," now being exported and fought around the world. What is the use of pretending to be neutral in a war with so much at stake?

To provide a substitute for direct experience, so that his readers might begin to absorb the lessons of democracy, Tocqueville undertook to write a new kind of travel book, if one can call it that. The domain of travel, America, was to be experienced not as a picturesque or sublime landscape offering many romantic adventures among native tribes and pioneers to the imagination of his readers, as countless other American travel books had done; rather, the America that he wanted his readers to experience was the idea of democracy as practiced in a state and society in the most consistent and thorough fashion ever attempted by a people. Tocqueville encourages his readers to undergo the lessons of American democracy by conducting them on a lengthy tour through the American psyche, as expressed in the laws, institutions, and behaviors of the people. Thus he demonstrates the fact that the American identity—the experience of being an American—is overwhelmingly the process of converting an idea into reality. He makes America, as a state of mind that determines the forms of government and society, accessible to the participation of the foreign reader, in a way that Thoreau, with his devotion to the sensuous experience of nature, never does. In fact I have found nothing better in literature, philosophy, or history than Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* for overcoming the sterile notion of American exceptionalism. How does he manage to turn what seems wonderful and unattainable to a European audience into what could, and given the alternatives, must become their own destiny?

Let us begin with the fact that Tocqueville's 700-page book, the product of nine months (May 1831 to February 1832) of research that consisted principally of observing and talking with people throughout America and written in two volumes over the next eight years, gives the impression throughout of being a work in progress. This is so because Tocqueville constantly reexamines his conclusions to test and elaborate their truth in light of new experiences and deeper reflection. The book in this respect imitates its subject matter.

Democracy in America has always been an experiment ever in progress. The hypothesis being tested by American democracy is that all people, regardless of

race, religion, sex, ethnicity, or previous conditions of life, are equally capable of ruling themselves under one flag. This hypothesis rests upon a prior one: that all people are equally capable of knowing, by use of their common sense, what is in their best interests.

Some of my colleagues from the British Council have insisted to me over the years that America is too young a country for it to offer reliable lessons to the nations of Europe. Any lessons on democracy should derive from the much longer history of the English. Tocqueville, however, points out that America, though comparatively young in chronological age, is the oldest country on earth, ideologically speaking, since it was the first to form itself wholly according to enlightened principles. America is the first modern nation—England, which Tocqueville also much admired, notwithstanding. In America he found that he could study “the modern” in its purest form and anticipate its combinations into a variety of compounds by admixture with elements existing in Europe. Tocqueville does not say that the modern is better than the medieval or the ancient, only that one must study the properties of modernity in America because they are so powerfully reactive with conditions in the rest of the world. Tocqueville, the scientist of politics, sought in the laboratory of America for the ideal formula in which the right proportions of freedom and equality would lead to the maximum personal happiness and social order. Americans are still learning, after several hundred years of experience, how to attain the right proportions. Therefore, the first lesson that I, as a member of the world’s oldest modern nation, whose experiment in democracy is still of indeterminate results, offer to my students as they embark on the long road to self-knowledge and self-rule, is that of patience.

Patience may not seem like an interesting lesson. But consider what the situation is like for Romanian initiates to democracy and their American teacher. What am I to say to Romanians who are no longer “serfs of the state,” as F. A. Hayek would have called them, but not yet enterprising citizens? Whose human potentials have been wasted by Communism and whose mentalities are not commensurate with the opportunities that are expected to accompany democracy? This realization of waste may help to explain why some of my Romanian friends, young and old, whose company I much enjoyed in 1990, are not as pleasantly disposed towards me in 1999. For I suspect they think that if they had my opportunities, they would not be where I am today. How strange and unfair my voluntary poverty in Romania must seem to them nine years after the Revolution. I think it pains them to be faced with the fact that I have not changed that much either.

Romanians today are truly members of lost generations. My students cannot help sharing this status with their parents and grandparents, if only because they love them too much, despite the forfeiture of adult authority that came, deservedly, with the Revolution of 1989. Thus the schools, which have undergone little change in personnel, exhibit a loss of discipline along with a “shallowing of soul.” These traits I have observed over the years in their elite who enter the universities. Why is it that my Romanian students of 1990 were more interesting and curious than my Romanian students of today? This is a question my colleagues find quite ordinary.

The answer usually offered me amounts to this: students have become more “normal” through increasing exposure to the West. If so, then perhaps Allan Bloom (in *The Closing of the American Mind*) was not so mistaken to say that an easy-going, nonjudgmental openness to many influences (relativism, in a word) tends to dull and finally to close the mind. Tocqueville asked a similar question at the start of *Democracy in America* about the decline of the American Indians: why did so many tribes vanish, often long before the arrival of Europeans, with the remainder destined to follow their predecessors into oblivion, while leaving behind signs of their deterioration? His answer is startling in its pessimism: the most durable of human works, like the burial mounds of vanished Indian tribes, are those that best record man’s misery and nothingness. I value these opening remarks of Tocqueville above all that follow because they help me to interpret much that afflicts the mind and senses in this world, to recount which, in the case of Romania, would be tedious. Let it suffice to say that the works of Romanians (performed especially, but not only, under Communism) will record for a long time to come the misery and nothingness of human life; and for the stark clarity of this record, which has so impressed itself upon my soul, I value the experience of living in Romania perhaps more highly than I should.

I admit that it may be better to live in one’s own, more or less defective apartment in one of the unvarying blocks of flats that deface the Communist landscape, than in a house in a village, subject to all the tyrannies of nature, or with one’s parents, lacking privacy. But what is to prevent young people from being infected by the tastelessness, indeed, the callousness of spirit that gave rise to these blocks, for is not architecture the outermost crystallization of the spirit? One of my better students recently heard me complain that I had to wash my clothes by hand in cold water because the hot water for our whole block had been turned off to compel a few of my neighbors to pay their long overdue water bills. To my disappointment, she did not see this imposition of collective punishment as unjust, as a violation of individual rights, but rather as a reminder of her mother, whose love for her children was expressed by having to stoop over a bucket of cold water to wash their dirty diapers and clothes year after year. She was so proud of what her family had survived that she could not bring herself to sympathize with my righteous indignation at injustice or my concern for health, provoked by the sewage accumulating in the pipes. What pedagogical methods should I use to teach women with such a fond commitment to their parents? (American studies is taught within the English Department, the students of which, as is true of other philological departments, are almost all women.) Which American authors, of a nation that has never had a peasant class, would be able to unsettle the peasant mentality (grateful for a bit of plumbing) that lives on in the blocks of flats to which the peasants were moved in order to work in Ceausescu’s factories? To live in such a concrete manifestation of the Workers’ Utopia is to understand the truth of Eugene O’Neill’s tragic vision of humanity: the past is the present, and it is the future, too. I am grateful to my Romanian student for helping me to appreciate this dark truth, for I should never have learned to do so in America.

The second and concluding part of this article will appear in the next issue of the SCR. Ω