

CULTURE BOUND NARRATIVES IN ROMANIAN LITERARY DISCOURSE

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*Abstract: A (popular) culture of passing unfavourable judgement on others seems to be in the mainstream of public communication. Accordingly, narrative invention in literary fiction works within the culture-bound rhetoric of socially sanctioned versions of national identity. Particularly, instances of the novel genre encapsulate the aesthetic use of ethnocentric discourses related to an organicist past. Two Romanian novels of Eugen Barbu, *The Prince* (1969) and *The Week of the Fools* (1981) are case in point examples of the self-aware Romanian alignment to Western standards, which come across as the benchmark against which the concerned parties judge each other. The attribution of moral responsibility and even guilt is obvious in the narrative unfolding of events I put together out of the various circumstances of the plot, as they are narrated by mutually recriminatory narrators who impersonate the natives and the foreigners. I argue that Eugen Barbu's work is essentially structured by a brand of populism legitimized in terms of the postcolonial buzzwords that run rampant and make readily available offensive meanings.*

Keywords: *culture-bound, public narratives, (two instances of) Romanian literary discourse.*

A (popular) culture of passing unfavourable judgement on others is in the mainstream of public communication, being something of a cultural narrative on its own. The stylistic currency of fault-finding seems to be universal, considering, for example, its ease of use in literary Romanian.

I will discuss the way blame is assigned publicly and argue that, rhetorically, this practice comes across vividly in storytelling about Romania. I am interested in the obviously biased reporting on reality delivered by literature that essentially comes up with a Romanian sanctioned narrative of cultural identity. The originator of the cultural rhetoric under scrutiny is Eugen Barbu, something of a cultural apparatchik in the communist regime, guilty of plagiarism and well-known for his anti-Semitic and nationalist views in post-communist Romania. Irrespective of the peculiar issues that fuel disputes, the performance required from both the producer and the consumer of such an address is consistent with notions of popular insolence and vicious language. The cultural exchange between the national communities, historically living in the Wallachian Principality, is literarily assembled into an ethno-symbolic language that conveys much of the Romanian identity narrative. The storytelling borrows heavily from the mainstream of news coverage, academic and political discourses fostered by the public policy of the 20th century Romanian nation state.

The broad field of cultural policy I am about to read, in the language of these public narratives, is instanced in the rhetoric and ideological paradigm of Romanianism (Romanian nationalism). It is something that brings together both high and low culture in universal appreciation of ethnic identity. In other words, since 18th century there is an East European agenda Romanian intellectuals have advanced themselves, in tune with the political action which eventually led to the formation of national states:

the modern idea of popular culture is associated with the development of national consciousness in the late eighteenth century, and results from the attempt by intellectuals to turn popular culture into national culture. (Strinati, 2004:1-2)

The distinction between popular and national cultures only comes to prove once more that public narratives are committed to taking sides and calling names. Intentional or not, rudeness of speech is commonplace and comes into play to emphasize that “some features of our identity necessarily depend on the[ir] reactions” (Neu, 2008: 31-32) of others.

Plainly said, both *The Prince* and *The Week of the Fools* display the said contemptuous narrative that spirals into a recriminatory paradigm, eagerly embraced by the markedly Greek and Romanian defined characters. The attribution of moral responsibility and even guilt is obvious in the narrative unfolding of events I put together out of the various circumstances of the plot. The delineation of easily recognisable ethno-national ideologies is of great consequence to fictional eventfulness, as the story of the Phanariot age gets to be told by mutually recriminatory narrators. To a large extent, they impersonate the natives versus the foreigners in their social intercourse, as envisaged by the nationally-informed symbols and rhetoric of a Romanian 20th century public culture. In *The Prince* the colonized-colonizer frame of reference is simplistically political. It successfully manages to gloss over much of the inherent ambiguities of “a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object [...] is new, *neither the one nor the other*” (Bhabha, 1994: 25). The narrative construction of the Greek establishment in the principalities is grossly calumnious. Flagrantly, they are indicted with conspiracy, while the Ottoman state on whose behalf they act goes almost unmentioned: “The wretched have forgotten their ancestors, we have corrupted their minds, we have taught them to steal, they do not have an army of their own”¹. Instead, *The Week of the Fools* is better at delivering a more sophisticated outlook on the past, which is not that straightforward about its purpose.

Anyway, it turns out that both novels appropriate the take on the Phanariot age already verified in much of the Romanian historiography on the topic. Commonly, mainstream Romanian public discourse on this former elite of the country is rather famous for reading the first half of the 18th century “through the prism of the conflict between Romanians and Greeks, thus giving their interpretations an unwarranted nationalist twist” (Georgescu, 1991: 73).

The overlapping discourses of two ethnic groups engaged in various political practices at the said time of the story, in what was to become Romania, fuel fictional invention. Moreover, reading the two novels, from the perspective of what is essentially the cultural policy of Romanianism, means that the reader experiences a sense of heightened national emotion that demonizes the Ottoman and, particularly the Greek, administration of the Romanian Principalities. Here is what the mother of the Phanariot Prince, appointed in Wallachia by the Porte, has to say about it: “We are ruling over feeble folk. It is quite enough that we plunder here at no cost”².

The language of ethnically based conflict is heavily employed throughout the novel. The characters are delineated in order to have the fictitious re-enactment of the past done in accordance with the criteria of stereotyping the other. They are alien and somewhat irrational:

¹ My translation of “Nenorociții ăștia nu mai știu ce sunt aceia strămoși, i-am corupt, i-am învățat să fure, nu au o armată a lor”; Barbu, E., 1969, *The Prince*, Minerva: București, 1977, p 53.

² My translation of “Stăm peste un popor blând. Destul că-l jefuim”; Ibidem, p 47.

“We are Phanariots, the more of us are beheaded, the more we stand to increase our clout”³. *The Week of the Fools* is steeped in the same tradition of vilifying the other. The fate of the high-ranking officials of the Romanian Principalities in the 18th century is mentioned in order to prove the same point too. The Mavrocordat, the Cantacuzen or the Roset families feature in this value laden narrative of good and evil in the Romanian past: “Hadn’t the former prince Alexandru Callimachi begged, alongside his old wife, happy to have escaped alive, next to the Iccapu gate...”⁴. Various other Greek (Albanian, Italian, etc.) names and identities are only listed in respect of specified information, meant to convey notions of status and class, all delineated by comparison with what, for the most part, is an indigenous disenfranchised population: “he had seen the procession of boyars going towards the inner-city slums. [...] he had known most of them for a long time, from the filthy Phanar where they amassed great wealth to buy their way to principedom”⁵.

The assignment of guilt and the paradigm of recrimination I have already mentioned is transparently masterminded by the author to make his point known. His reporting on the past is meant to deliver a version of Romanian nationalism that was both state-enforced and voluntary. The national partisanship of the literary discourse verges on tribalism and is, most likely, self-imposed. Certainly, it is a cultural matter of loyalty to the ethnic group of which the author is a pugnacious member. This one-sided reading of the history is plain to see and helps advance a vision of the present that figuratively redeems the suffering of the past.

My study of Romanianism, as expressed by the novel genre and, explicitly, by the means of a literary language boasting aesthetic credentials, is informed of the so-called ethno-symbolism. The practitioners of the field “seek the sources of nationalist appeals in the various symbolic elements of their shared historical and cultural milieu – be they myths and symbols, or memories, traditions and values” (Smith, 2009: 134). Essentially I argue that the two above-mentioned novels of Eugen Barbu are structured by a brand of national populism, legitimized in terms of postcolonial buzzwords that run rampant in the fictional text. The world-wide famous binary opposition ‘us versus them’ makes readily available the offensive meanings of the indictment, which fuels both an ideological address and the dramatic quality of storytelling. I rally to one claim made by both the primordialists, who argue for “the rootedness of the nation in kinship, ethnicity, and the genetic bases of human existence” (Smith, 1999: 4) and by the modernists of nationalism studies, who find “the era of the French Revolution as marking the moment when nationalism was introduced into the movement of world history” (Smith, 1999: 6).

Even if they are at odds over the nature of national communities, they have nonetheless concluded that “nation-states seem to have the power, tools (media) and legally enforceable apparatus (official education) to impose their” (Conversi, 2007: 15) nationalist myths, symbols, memories, traditions and values, most of the times at variance with those of other (neighbouring) nation states. According to such a frame of reference, my reading of

³ My translation of “Sîntem fanarioți, noblețea noastră e cu atît mai mare cu cît avem mai mulți decapitați în familie”; Ibidem, p 49.

⁴ My translation of “Dar fostul domnitor Alexandru Callimachi nu cerșise cu femeia sa bătrână, mulțumit că a scăpat cu viață la poarta Iccapu...”; Barbu, E., 1981, *The Week of the Fools*, Albatros: București, p 12.

⁵ My translation of “văzuse convoaiele spre Ulița Calicilor [...] îi știa de mult pre mulți, din Fanarul puturos, unde strîngeau bani cu ruptul pentru a cumpăra tronurile”; Barbu, E., 1981, *The Week of the Fools*, Albatros: București, p 131.

Eugen Barbu's novels tracks down an "ordered political space and its prized identification of ethnicity with territory" (Lampe and Mazower, 2004: 2). Storytelling amounts to a legitimizing narrative that magnifies the past injustice Romanians were subjected to at the hands of the foreigners who settled the country. Essentially, the story told is that of the indigenous people in the second half of the 20th century looking back in anger at their national history. The effective advocacy of their very indigeness, as opposed to the colonizing Greek elite, articulates the language of recrimination the narrators employ with a view to reinforcing the ethnic stereotyping of the other in literary terms.

This is a discourse on group-shared experiences and loyalties, allegedly told from the inside of the body politic of the 20th century Socialist Republic of Romania. It is told by means of a rather narrow, culture-bound narrative, which is part and parcel of the public policy each and every nation state needs to articulate. It turns out that literature makes known the agenda of westernizing the nation rooted in the grand narrative of alignment to European values and practices.

The rhetoric of indictment delineates a standard course of action against which the Romanianism of the address is almost compulsively evaluated. Deciding whether or not the specifics of the plot fit in with the cultural policy enforced by the literary culture, on behalf of the ethnic group, is a matter of self-imposed censorship. The critical revision of the public address is willingly performed by Eugen Barbu's narrators in order to please the authority of the people, now (in the second half of the 20th century) at last able to ideologically put into cultural effect the national truth about the past: "the land does not welcome you, and there is no secret that the people does not love you in the least. The people is stooping as low as the ground, but their minds dream of other kings of their own, who know the native ways and do not admonish nor do they plunder"⁶.

Of course, the mostly unspoken guidelines of the Romanian grand narrative come with the territory of a self-serving vision of history. The Romanian alignment to western values, as they are interpreted by the informed authors of the two novels, structures both language and ideology, all subsumed under the statement that: "the West, or <<Europe>>, as many Rumanians referred to it, served the elite as a model of development, to be followed or avoided, but never ignored" (Hitchins, 1994: V). The characters of *The Week of The Fools* inquire about the mores and culture of the natives in such anthropological terms: "have you forgotten the good customs and laws, or have you not heard about the European ways?"⁷. Much in the same vein, the privileged Greeks of *The Prince* spell out in detail what their understanding of the country and of the people is. They place themselves in "positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (Said, 1979: 7). Eugen Barbu's novels are meant to turn the table on the Easterners (the Phanariot Greeks) who perpetrated the orientalisng of the Romanians in the Western world. They are conveniently indicted with

⁶ My translation of "pămîntul ți-e strein și nu-ți ascund că neamul nu vă iubește. El este plecat cu capul său în țărîină, dar mintea lui visează la alți domnitori, ai săi, ce-știu obiceiurile și nu-l suduie și nu-l jefuiesc"; Barbu, E., 1969, *The Prince*, Minerva: București, 1977, p 74.

⁷ My translation of "cum, voi ați uitat obiceiurile cele bune, ori n-au ajuns pînă aici știrile evropenești?"; Barbu, E., 1981, *The Week of the Fools*, Albatros: București, p 31.

advertising the belief that, together with the locals, they “stand at the gates of the Orient”⁸. Such clichés of orientalism should explain and even legitimate the foreigners’ blatant disregard for the well-being of the country’s inhabitants. In so many words, these fictional agents of history are adamant that civilization in this part of the world is: “idle talk, messer Ottaviano. We are not in Athens or in Rome, we share some other fate”⁹. Of course, the readers are prompted to suspect that the characters of both novels may have been wrong, considering the evidence provided by the 20th century Romanian world they were living in. These two novels circulate and enforce the prevailing Romanian view on a former Oriental disposition of the national identity. The books have been successful at it too, since they are part of the Romanian literary canon. In order to achieve such an expected result (Eugen Barbu enjoyed the status of a literary celebrity even at the time of *The Prince* release), they also made the most out of the resources of a 20th century European nation: they had a large literate audience for a public and an established literary language for a medium.

The current revival of the otherwise obsolete Marxist notion of ‘ideology’ comes in handy. It helps better understand the fictionalizing of ethnicity I track down so that a mandatory paradigm for Romanian-sanctioned storytelling can come across vividly:

identity has become a powerful ideological device wielded as much by academics as political entrepreneurs, social movements or state institutions. The fact that until very recently identity was almost unquestioned as a categorical apparatus of social analysis, as well as in ordinary life, is itself a good indicator of its omnipotent ideological status.
(Malešević, 2006: 3)

However, the attempt to pinpoint the ideological meaning of national identity in the novel genre is a slippery enterprise. The author of *The Prince* and *The Week of The Fools* seems to be aware of the fact and strives to become yet another mouthpiece of the people. Inescapably, to champion the views of the average citizen is “a mode of representation virtually indistinguishable from contemporary, media-enhanced modes of representation” (Arditi, 2007: 7). I believe this is also true of any and all public communication instances brokered one way or another by the centralized values and paternalistic worldview of the national state. Essentially, a cultural policy is equated with an entrepreneurial practice (doing whatever it takes for the benefit of our people). This feeling is articulated into an otherwise almost metaphysically explained notion of patriotism, considering that the (post)modernists and the ethno-symbolists more or less concur that, basically, the very idea of it is “typically a grave moral error and its source is typically a state of mental confusion” (Kateb, 2006: 3).

The populist rhetoric of the novels relies on fallacious inferences drawn from disparate facts. The literary text clings on to the shortcut strategy of quickly concluding from basic, partly or sometimes true particulars. A basic contradiction is at the heart of the said discourse: the nation is the metaphysical legitimation of political and cultural agency while, at the same time, the people need proper leadership due to their unmistakable ignorance. Trading accusations is the side-effect of such a conflicting stance. Accordingly, the language of nationalism, authoritarianism, xenophobia, etc. is proliferating in the fictional discourse. A

⁸ My translation of “aici sîntem la porțile orientului...”; Barbu, E., 1969, *The Prince*, Minerva: București, 1977, p 35.

⁹ My translation of “nu sîntem la Atena sau la Roma, avem altă soartă”; Ibidem, p 48.

likely conclusion might be that these are the routine tropes of the Romanian culture-bound discourse, as it was decoded by Eugen Barbu in 1969 and 1981, respectively.

Nonetheless, the rhetoric of nationalism and nation-building cannot possibly be conceived of in pejorative terms entirely. Legitimate national values spiralled into the already mentioned recriminatory paradigm mainly due to the contrastive narrative mode of knowing the world employed by most, if not all, ethnic and cultural communities even today. Next to what has been previously indicted as xenophobia, populism, etc., the Romanian national grand narrative relies on instances of the very democracy western national states, intentionally or not, put forth for the use of the European borderland, Romania included. The trouble one finds himself in when it comes to mention these positive values explicitly is easily noticed. I believe that it has everything to do with their originating context, and not necessarily with their Romanian version.

Anyway, even if unmentioned, they all seem to be universally known and acknowledged as such by both foreign and native characters and narrators of the two novels. As previously shown, the recriminatory paradigm of public narrative I try to track down is somewhat conspicuous in my own discourse. This only comes to prove the ease of use indictment and recrimination, respectively, have developed in various areas of public communication. They exert something of a fascination for the popular mind, always glad to indulge in calling names. They all amount to a cultural narrative of exclusion and belonging I have exemplified myself. Such a reading of social and national identity is meant to deal with the past entirely from the perspective of a literary culture in the service of one political body or another – the most illustrious example being, of course, that of the nation states.

The Prince and *The Week of The Fools* are underpinned by such universally recognized meanings, particularly useful when it comes to magnifying the Romanian public policy throughout the 20th century. As a result, the search for the national self-identity is translated for whoever is concerned and, simultaneously, is structured for the use of the Romanians.

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