

***FIGHTING NATURE WITH TOBACCO: SCIENCE AS A SYSTEM OF  
BELIEFS IN MILEN RUSKOV'S THROWN INTO NATURE***

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*Abstract: Thrown into Nature, the second book of the Bulgarian novelist Milen Ruskov, is framed as a hybrid between the genre of the picaresque novel and a scientific treatise on the healing powers of tobacco. The discourse that emerges at the intersection of genres manages not only to throw light (from a theoretical perspective) on the complex networks of the history of early modern Europe, but also to 'embody' (in a narrative sense) the 'primeval soup', that indefinite mixture of popular superstition, scholastic speculation and ruthless pragmatism that gave birth to modern Science. Thus the novel aspires to become an alternative to the much too theoretical histories of science that have appeared as a result of the so-called 'cultural turn' as well as a critique on the hidden relations between Science and Capital.*

*Keywords: medicine, history of tobacco, picaresque, scientific treatise*

*Thrown into Nature, the second book of the Bulgarian novelist Milen Ruskov, the winner of the European Union Prize for Literature in 2014, is framed as a hybrid between the genre of the picaresque novel and a scientific treatise on the miraculous healing powers of tobacco. At the intersections of genres, a complex discourse emerges, a discourse that manages not only to throw light (from a theoretical perspective) on the cultural, social and economic history of early modern Europe, but also to 'embody' (in a narrative sense) the 'primeval soup', that indefinite mixture of popular superstition, scholastic speculation and ruthless pragmatism that gave birth to modern science. Thus the novel aspires to become an alternative to the much too theoretical histories of science that have appeared as a result of the so-called 'cultural turn' as well as a critique on the (not always visible) alliance between Science and Capital.*

The novel opens with a paradoxical statement: "There is hardly anything more natural than hating Nature" (3). The voice that makes this pronouncement belongs to Guimarães da Silva, the Portuguese narrator of the tobacco adventures and one half of the couple of medical

‘picaros’. The other is the wealthy Spanish doctor Nicolas Monardes for whom da Silva acts as an assistant. The name and character of Doctor Monardes are inspired by the real character of Nicolas Bautista Monardes, a Spanish physician and botanist (1493-1588) who was responsible for the growing fame of tobacco as a medicinal plant in early modern Europe. According to tobacco historian Jordan Goodman, Monardes “provided all the justification needed for locating tobacco at the heart of the European material medica” (43). The relationship between da Silva and Dr. Monardes alludes to the complex history of tobacco, one of the most successful models of cross-cultural translation from the New World into the old one. It was the Portuguese Columbus that found Native Americans growing and using tobacco both for medicinal and recreational use in 1492. It was another Portuguese explorer, Pedro Alvarez Cabral, who reported the use of tobacco “for treating ulcerating abscesses, fistulas, sores, inveterate polyps and many other ailments” and called it “a holy herb because of its powerful virtue in desperate cases” (Charlton 292) and thus started tobacco’s fame as a panacea. Yet it was the Spanish Dr. Monardes who established it firmly in the European medical and cultural framework by adding “a voice of authority to advocates of nicotian therapy, and thereby legitimized its use among physicians and herbalists.” Monardes’ compendium and description of the medicinal uses of many plants from the New World was further translated into the major European languages and used as the main source of information for decades and even centuries. (Goodman 46).

The introduction to the novel is written in the form of a scientific *laudatio*, a genre meant to present characters as worthy of respect and imitation and to show them in the most favourable light. The philosophical asides of Guimarães, as well as the long-winded presentation of his treatise and scientific opinions by the ‘intrusive’ voice of Dr. Monardes stay true to the *laudatio*. Yet when Guimarães explains why he chose to call himself da Silva, making reference to the stereotypical heteroimages<sup>1</sup> of the Portuguese and the passion for aristocratic titles, irony becomes visible. The genre is further subverted by the comments of Dr. Monardes on the translation of his book in English<sup>2</sup> and the advice that he offers to the

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<sup>1</sup> “The Portuguese are thought to smell bad, spread malaria (since they wade through the swamps around the city) and to constantly present themselves as noblemen who just happened to end up in Sevilla and who try to swindle everyone they can out of piddling sums.”(4) While da Silva is invented, Guimarães, the real name of the character, is the eponym of the city that is considered to be the cradle of Portuguese identity and nationality.

<sup>2</sup> “In England, due to the singular whim of its translator, it appeared under the title “Joyfull News out of the New Found World”. Following my indignant inquiry, I was assured that in England if something does not begin with “Joyfull News” no one buys it or reads it. The English, as I came to understand, look upon all books, including medical writings, primarily as a means of entertainment to pleasantly while away one’s spare time, for which

reader, which turns out to be a set of platitudes now offered by every tabloid, TV show or internet site. The ontological presupposition of the picaresque novel, that ‘appearances are deceptive’ and that there is a gap between reality and appearance intrudes upon the claims of the *laudatio*, showing Dr. Monardes’ scientific reputation to be built upon something other than objectivity, truth and impartiality. The final ironic subversion lies in Guimarães’ claim that even if there are almost forty examples that can be given in favour of the healing power of tobacco, his intention is to cite thirty-six. However, the book consists of only nineteen such examples (the curative powers of tobacco are illustrated by particular cases), the last one being entitled “The Death of Dr. Monardes” (due to what looks like a severe case of lung cancer).

The novel is structured in a highly hybrid form that mixes philosophical and scientific speculation with the loose plot of the picaresque novel. There are many allusions to Cervantes: the subverted imitation of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in the pair Guimarães and Dr. Monardes (down-to-earth, cynical characters), the characters of Rincon and Cortado (who echo Cervantes’ Rinconette and Cortadillo, two rogues from *Novelas Ejemplares*) and last but not least in the character of Cervantes himself, who is examined by Dr. Monardes and treated against toothache. At first sight, the two genres seem worlds apart. Their ontological grounds as well as their epistemological claims are at odds. While the picaresque novel is a product of a world that lived on dissimulation, masks and social pretence, the genre of the scientific writing aspires to truth, objectivity and rigor. However, the scientific treatise, a popular genre originating in the Greco-Roman antiquity, is according to Markus Asper, a “rather fuzzy genre” (8), combining scientific claims with rhetorical devices in order to construct a medical ego’s authority. Philip van der Eijk notes that we tend to “associate the treatise with systematicity, rigorous and sober reasoning about a well-defined subject or question, with the inquiry proceeding through rational argument from premises to conclusions, sometimes presented in the form of theses with demonstrations.” (146). In his detailed analysis of Galen’s treatise on *Mixtures*, van der Eijk also notices the emergence of a clear ‘rhetoric of confidence’, meant to enhance the medical authorial persona. How does then the hybridization of the two genres work, if we take into account the further fuzziness of the scientific treatise? My claim is that the picaresque, whose function is to tear the mask off appearances, reveals both the pompousness of this ‘rhetoric of confidence’ used by Dr. Monardes to build and strengthen his

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reason every other title there now begins with “Joyfull News”. For example, if the work in question addresses the massacre in Lancaster, the book will be published as “Joyfull News out of the Massacre in Lancaster.” (8)

reputation, and the doubtfulness of his scientific claims. The picaresque reveals the doctor and his aspiring assistant to be ‘enterprising’ professionals, whose medical knowledge is often limited to folk wisdom and whose curative methods consist in the indiscriminate application of tobacco (a kind of universal panacea) to all medical cases. The description of some cases borders on the absurd or the impossible, while others verge on the preposterous. Their first medical feat is to cure ‘death’. While Guimarães, the voice of sound reasoning, is afraid to follow the doctor’s orders and blow smoke into the dead man’s mouth, the Dr. Menardes gives a great performance of authority<sup>3</sup>:

In any case fear got the best of me. But Dr. Monardes! I would say that his very body, his stance, his shoulders, his feet firmly planted on the ground – all this radiated confidence and determination. He inhaled on the cigarella two or three times blowing the smoke from his nostrils like a fire-breathing rhinoceros, two thick streams of smoke rose from either side of his face and for a moment he reminded me of a mythical bull with two horns of smoke (14)

While the doctor’s authority is conveyed by his attitude and physical stance, Guimarães’ further description, by introducing the rhinoceros, the bull and indirectly the devil as the terms of comparison, undermines these claims to authority. This is the basic strategy of the text: to make claims to knowledge and authority and then to subvert them by recourse to tropes like irony and oxymoron. For example, when the doctor, wanting to impress the audience, uses the medical jargon and asks Guimarães to ‘pulpate’ instead of ‘palpate’, the irony of the mispronunciation is not lost upon the educated reader. This strategy is repeated to reveal the pretence of another illustrious member of the medical community, the English Dr. Cheynell, who, in a discourse meant to impress the king and convince him of the usefulness of tobacco, uses the wrong Latin plurals: “our enlightened king [...] must protect our bodies not from illnesses and contagions [...] against *bacillusae* and *bacteriae*<sup>4</sup>, but rather against hostile armies” (153)

Afterwards, they have to give an enema to the king’s son, afflicted with intestinal worms. The crude humor of the procedure, where Guimarães had to blow tobacco smoke

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<sup>3</sup> The doctor makes use of the theatrics of confidence whenever he deals with a difficult case. When Guimarães is about to make a mess of the treatment of a young woman, the doctor steps in and puts things right: “The presence of the doctor and his confident manner suddenly inspired calm in all of us, but especially in me. I somehow felt certain that he would solve the problem. The doctor radiated such assurance, such confidence about his person – that was one of the great secrets of his success in the medical profession. This confidence, of course, was due in large part to his enormous wealth of knowledge, but not entirely. It was also a mysterious gift, which some people possessed, others not” (117)

<sup>4</sup> The correct forms are ‘bacilli’ and ‘bacteria’.

through a glass tube inserted into the prince's anus, while the doctor was administering an infusion at the other end acts as a kind of biting comment on the doctor's source of wealth and prestige. Because, as Guimarães informs the reader

Dr. Monardes made his name in worms and established a prospering practice.[...] His wealth dates back to that time and even to this day it is based on the curing of that illness and not the doctor's numerous far more serious medical achievements. It could be said that Dr. Monardes' wealth is shored up by worms, that he had turned worms into gold. (18)

It turns out though that Dr. Monardes owes his wealth not only to this widespread condition, whose roots lie in the widespread lack of hygiene, but also to his deep involvement in the slave trade. The doctor confesses to his assistant that the origin of his wealth lies in the partnership he had set up with a slave trader. The story of Nunez de Herrera illuminates the relationship between medicine and colonialism in the context of early Europe. Medical ethics are simply non-existent, and medical practice is a lucrative profession. The Doctor's success is doubly indebted to colonialism, first as the capital he used to open up his practice came from the slave trade, and second as the plant that allegedly cured all the "ills" had been brought from the New World. Although he professes to be a humanist, Dr. Monardes is a ruthless proto-capitalist, who is as knowledgeable in worldly matters as he is in his use of tobacco. Taking his time, he explains to the naïve Guimarães the complex interdependence of power and money. In his analysis of de Leca's strategy one can recognize the contemporary misalliance between the economic and the political, which lies at the root of corruption:

Power is what tempts him, not riches. People are different. Those like him are the most refined examples of the human animal species. He wants to rule, to make decisions and to govern. Though wealth he has made many people dependent on him. He has bound them with a golden chain, which no one breaks, and now they are loyal to him, literally to the grave.(27)

The doctor invests the same interest that he has for wealth into following philosophical fashions. He professes to be a Renaissance man and a humanist insofar as this is the fashion of the day. When Guimarães replies that as a wealthy man he does not need to follow any philosophical fashion, the doctor gives him a lesson of intellectual pretence. As a learned man, to keep up his scientific prestige and high social standing, he feels obliged to read all the books written by the "Northern fools"<sup>5</sup>; moreover, he has a keen sense of the cultural pragmatics of

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<sup>5</sup> As Joel Myerson demonstrates in "Emerson's 'Success'—Actually, it is not," the passage that annoys Dr. Monardes so much that he throws the book of a "Northern fool" into the sea is in fact one of the best known misattributions to Ralph Waldo Emerson: "To laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent persons and

science and of its historical development and he warns his assistant that “Tomorrow it may not make any difference that you were rich and highly successful in medicine. It may turn out that the only important thing will be whether you were a man of the Renaissance and a humanist.” (40)

As a humanist, Dr. Monardes shares his contemporaries’ distrust in scholastic theology and its fatuous arguments and disputes. Professing to offer some useful insights on the relationship of the soul to the body, the doctor’s philosophical discourse is as much a sham as the scholastic religious discourse. The flowery and ornate style and the long-winded sentences that more often assert and refute rather than argue are a perfect imitation of scholastic discourse. While the purpose of the brief philosophical essay intercalated at the end of the “Worms” chapter is to define the soul against theological speculation, this is done almost *en passant*, in a short Latin phrase which remains as obscure as the discourse it attempts to unsettle: “a type of interaction and *actio pro functio et junctio* of the four bodily humors with the bodily organs” (33). Most of the essay is focused on a misguided attempt to reject Neoplatonism by using dubious arguments, at least one of which is a kind of indirect *ad hominem* refutation of the reality of the soul. Unable to think of serious alternatives to platonic idealism, Dr. Monardes resorts to an intricate reasoning to prove it wrong, a mixture of pragmatism (what he calls common sense) and moralism:

They say [...] that each soul is valuable in and of itself. This is the height of inanity! What value could the soul of a killer have? [...] Even if the soul really existed, it would resemble everything else we see in nature and the world which is either well or poorly made, either precious or worthless, with all the levels between them, as between gold and charcoal. [...] the soul, if it exists, could not possibly be anything particularly special – it would be like the leaves on the trees, like drops of rain, the stones on the road or the grass in the field.(34)

It becomes increasingly clear that far from being serious debate, this does not even qualify as philosophy, insofar as the whole train of argumentation is logically wrong, confusing the ontological with the ethical. However, this confusion is not a naïve one, as it comes not out

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the affection of children; to earn the approbation of honest citizens and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to give of one’s self; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition; to have played and laughed with enthusiasm and sung with exultation; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived—this is to have succeeded.” (18) The passage had been written by a contributor the Boston National Magazine magazine in 1911, Bessie A. Stanley. Its inclusion in the novel points to the recursive theme of mistakes (mis-pronunciation, mis-quotation and mis-attribution, and later, in the episode of the spirits exorcism, mis-understandings)

of ignorance, but out of a definite pragmatic interest. The doctor is engaged in a kind of power struggle with the church, a struggle over resources and authority.

The ‘humanist’ conclusion of the doctor’s essay is that “man is simply a pipe, [...] through which nature passes – it goes in through one side and out through the other.” (35) This conclusion goes hand in hand with another concept that Dr. Monardes came up with and which Guimarães quotes from one of the treatises: “*Eat-to shit* is a complex concept invented by Dr. Monardes and made up of two words. According to the definition that Dr. Monardes offers in one of his treatises “it describes man from one end to the other as a natural machine and almost fully exhausts his significance as a creature in the wider framework of Nature”. (57)

What transpires from the doctor’s pseudo-philosophy is in fact his anti-humanism, for according to the Renaissance humanists, the gift of free will meant that man was able to choose between exercising his rational and spiritual powers (and in this way becoming more like God and the angels) and neglecting them, and thus sinking to the level of brutes. The Renaissance manifesto, Pico de la Mirandolla’s *Oration on the Dignity of Man* described man as “the interpreter of nature, set midway between the timeless unchanging and the flux of time” (4), not as the slave of nature, as he appeared from Dr. Monardes’ description. His concept of man as a “natural machine” reminds one of another philosopher and physician, Julien Offray de la Mettrie, whose work *L’homme machine* was one of the earliest examples of French materialism. Yet la Mettrie’s materialism was more philosophically complex and refined than the doctor’s cynical pragmatism.

In contrast to the amoral pragmatism of Dr. Menardes, Guimarães’ philosophical stance would be best described as a kind of natural Gnosticism. Guimarães, of low social extraction, still preserves a kind of innate respect for what lies beyond his reach. His healthy common sense frequently saves him from the trap of ridicule into which the doctor is often pushed by an excessive belief in rationalism. Guimarães’ conception of Nature reveals it to be more akin (in its dualism of a spiritual God and a material Nature) to the Gnostic demiurge than to the early modern concept of Nature as the complement of God that was pertinent to natural philosophy:

the world is simply mad Nature’s work [...] is there anything more endlessly energetic, more lavishly fertile, yet crazier, than she? [...] she would be of the female sex, of course, giving birth to a child every five minutes, laughing and jumping about at the same time, and impregnated without a visible agent, as if by the wind itself. [...] she alone is the procreator of

the world. Not the Devil or God, not some evil genius or some moronic mad scientist, much less the good Lord, but simply a mad, all-powerful, all-purblind, accidental and chaotic Nature. (3)

While Guimarães hates and reveres Nature simultaneously as a kind of displacement of centuries of religious belief, Dr. Menardes adopts the attitude of an empiricist that questions everything which lies beyond immediate perception. This difference is brought to light by their dispute after they exorcise a poltergeist with tobacco. Shaken by the experience, Guimarães is ready to believe that there is something beyond the material world; the doctor, however, strongly denies it. He calls the spirits “misunderstandings”, “mistakes in the functioning of Nature” (83-4). The doctor’s denial of the existence of the spirits which he had so courageously fought before reveals a kind of schizophrenia, a gap between acting and thinking. At the same time, his empiricist stance appears as another intellectual pretence: his theory of the spirits as “misunderstandings” reveals the limits of his understanding and his incapacity to deal with what exceeds his dogmatic empiricism.

Thus the hybrid framing of the novel, employing both a scientific and philosophical discourse and a picaresque narrative deconstructs the character of Dr. Monardes, who turns out to be a sham scientist and a sham philosopher. What kind of (anti)hero is then the doctor? Is he a quack, a charlatan? There is not enough textual evidence to prove it, or rather: the medical knowledge on which the doctor relies is the average humoral theory of the day going back to Hippocrates and Galen. When asked to give a speech at the court of king James in support of the use of tobacco, the physiological explanation of the workings of tobacco on the human body relies almost exclusively on the Galenic theory of the humors and of disease as a result of humoral imbalance<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, the Renaissance was the age of medical progress, the age of Andreas Vesalius, who dared to contradict Galen on the basis of his anatomical studies of dissected bodies. Dr. Monardes, though, does not belong to the category of revolutionary physicians. His interest does not lie in experimenting and advancing new theories, yet this does not make him a quack. My contention is that the real point of the novel is to reveal the hidden connections between the early scientific discourse and the nascent capitalism that thrived on

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<sup>6</sup> Here is Dr. Monardes’ extended argument: “the smoking of tobacco must be practiced primarily after travelling in foggy and rainy weather, since it hinders the inflammation of the mucus membranes and hence rheum and generally removes all harmful agents which the moist and foul air induce within the head and other parts of the body. The smoking of tobacco at such a moment is beneficial for every bodily state, except for when the brain has a very dry composition.[...] We must also remember that there are two ways of using tobacco: the first is to hold the smoke in the mouth and from there to pass it through the nostrils to warm and dry the brain and to dissolve and disperse the cold humors and unnecessary air found therein.(162)



Spain's colonial enterprises. Dr. Monardes is a capitalist hero, an entrepreneur. Having already raised a capital from the slave business, he uses the discovery of tobacco in an entrepreneurial way, to make a profit, gather fame and money. In his ground-breaking *Theory of Economic Development* Schumpeter claimed that economic development was due to the entrepreneur, an agent of innovation that was able to perceive the new opportunities in his historical environment and take advantage of them in order to create new products and services. (64-5) When Guimarães refers to the Doctor's 'secret of success', he paints the picture of a medical entrepreneur:

What is the secret of success in the medical profession? [...] the ability to predict the future. [...] Long before he took up medicine, sailors with cigarellas were as common as blackberries in the port of Sevilla. But the doctor foresaw that tobacco had a great future, and he became grand and rich. He also foresaw that the New World would need slaves and got into that trade, together with Nunez de Herrera, and became if not grand, at least richer. Nobody could predict the future like he could. And it's not that tobacco is so very curative – it is, of course, and this is important, but if you go down to the chemist del Valle's, he can tell you dozen of substances, which, although they don't have the healing power of tobacco, nevertheless they have many merits, but no one has ever heard of them and almost no one uses them. (180-1)

Dr. Monardes is, therefore, an example of early capitalist practice in medicine. This explains, on the one hand, his anti-humanism, his amoral pragmatism and lack of interest in scientific discovery. For Dr. Monardes, science is the handmaiden of capitalism, whose practices, although incapable of theorizing, he uses to perfection. As an entrepreneur, he combines ruthlessness and vision (what Guimarães calls 'predicting the future') with a keen sense of the necessity of promotion. His frequent speeches on the miraculous curing properties of tobacco are less scientifically descriptive and more economically prescriptive. He even seems to be aware of the basic rules of customer service when he reprimands Guimarães for shouting at the husband of a sick woman: "You should not have lashed out at the man like that. The woman is sick, but he is the one paying. Never forget who is paying." (69) Subservient to profit, science becomes thus one among many ways of making a fortune, a thing blandly recognized by Guimarães in a chapter entitled 'For the treatment of domestic animals and the quick accumulation of wealth'. The surprise ending of the novel, when after the death of his master, Guimarães discovers that the doctor did not leave him anything except a letter in which

he instructed him on how to bribe the city authorities in order to obtain his house, leaves us in no doubt: the great advertiser of tobacco is another great ‘master of combinations’ in the vein of Ostap Bender and his enterprising friends.

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