MAN AS A "BYSTANDER" TO HISTORY AND IDENTITY-BUILDING

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Abstract: *In the history of imagology, Romanian self-image evolves according to various historical stimuli. In the 18th century, for instance, a century also known as "the Phanariote century", one of Romanians' main models is the "bystander" to events, i. e., the bystander to history. For the man as a bystander, the conduct of choice is to keep away from unfolding social and political events, and to look down on them with a clear sense of detachment, because he considers himself as a sage above the fray. As a matter of fact, the man as a bystander is highly conservative and opposed to all change, as change denotes adventure, and the sage is not without knowing that nothing good will ever come out of this. During an age of strong Oriental, i. e., Ottoman dominion, this type of bystander attitude, detached and critical, who refrains from action and instead looks down on history, makes its way into the Romanian language itself : many loanwords are borrowed from Turkish at this moment, but nearly all of them are either nouns or adjectives ; significantly, there is not one single verb among them.*

Keywords*: imagology, self-image, "the Phanariote century", age of strong Oriental.*

I have recently discussed (Popescu, C. T., 2010) 18th century Romanian thought as shaped by the theme of *fortuna labilis*, or *vanity of vanities* (*Ecclesiastes*, 12 : 8 ; KJV)

> always explored in amazement. But amazement (defining man as bystander) /.../ differs from the fundamental frame of mind of the Ecclesiastes facing vanity. Rather than being amazed, the Ecclesiastes understands – whereas during the 18th century the Romanian dominant frame of mind builds on amazement as a symptom of the absence of any moral compass. There are no major models of solidarity (those held before the loss of independence had long been lost), no role models, but merely intolerance of novelty. Novelty shocks and saps a world of ingrained habit (*Ibi*dem: 86-87).

During what I have labeled the "heroic" age (running from the foundation of the Romanian principalities in the 14th century to their loss of independence in the 15th century), Romanian self-image, as well as its corresponding reality, is one of active involvement in events, the proper attitude of an actor of history. Families, through the so-called *obşti* (*i. e.*, the specific peasant communities that structured each village), were ordered to mobilize in the event of war and join "the great army". However, as both self-image and corresponding reality evolve according to various historical stimuli – in the 18th century, a century also known as "the Phanariote century", the role model became the "bystander" to events, *i. e*., the bystander to history ever unaffected by it. So runs the poem *Rumeanţev in the battle between Russians and Turks :* "…to see and to watch,/ To see a long and orderly procession/ And then they camped on the Frumoasa[1] plain" (Simonescu, D., 1967: 152). Or the *Verses on the death of governor Manolachi Bogdan* :

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[1] *I. e.*, Frumoasa monastery, nearby Iaşi.

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> O the horrible deed,/ O the great danger,/ O the resounding fall,/ O the sorry sight/ For little people as for grandees,/ For the weak as for the mighty !/ /.../ Such fear among the people/ And great concern among boyars !/ Listen so that you hear,/ Watch the unseen (Simionescu, D., 1967: 203-204).

And the *Verses on the death of prince Grigore Ghica* :

> As I wish to show and speak/ I find myself amazed and astonished/ /…/ It fits a rhetorician/ To speak / And to show what happened,/ The horrible thing and amazing,/ Much revealing/ The plight of this vain world/ Deprived of any/ Constant good (Simionescu, D., 1967: 179-180).

And also *The history of Wallachia and poor Bucharest* :

> My brother, it is hard to believe/ What one cannot see./ So that as dawn broke/ That roar and clamour/ And all that fuss/ Met with some alleviation./ And as we could see well at last –/ O what a wonderful farce[1].

This poem, with its specific mix of comedy and tragedy, suggests that war between empires leaves no room for anything else than this same old type of bystander attitude :

> And in the year sixty and nine/ We saw new things/ As the Turks and the Tatars/ Waged war against the Muscovites./ As it fits us well,/ We had no concern,/ We were already used to/ Fetching lumber and sugar,/ But on November the 7th,/ On Thursday night,/ There was a big yell,/ A noise and a fuss,/ A clamour and a roar of forward, march ! have mercy !.

Against this background of inconstant fate and inconsistent vanity leading to death, the *man as bystander* (the self-styled "sage") weaves together the twin threads of tragedy and comedy into a single master narrative : everything happens because God wants it to happen ; only lunatics and fools refuse and revolt. Therefore, the conduct of choice for the *man as bystander* is to keep away from unfolding social and political events and to look down on them with a clear sense of detachment because he considers himself a sage above the fray. This poem, written several years after the event narrated (*i. e.*, the occupation of Bucharest by the *volintiri* in 1769 during the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774), voices disappointment displacing the initial hopes and reinforces the 18th century Romanian *political culture* that builds on the concept of vanity and on the rejection of action. Actually, the *man as bystander* is highly conservative and opposed to all change, as change denotes adventure and the sage knows that nothing good can ever come out of this. During an age of strong Oriental, *i. e*., Ottoman domination, this type of bystander attitude, detached and critical, who refrains from action and instead looks down on history, makes its way into the Romanian language itself : many loanwords are borrowed from Turkish at this moment, but nearly all of them are either nouns or adjectives ; significantly, there is not one single verb among them (cf. *Drăghicescu, D.,* 1907: 350).

Actually, the Romanian mindset fits well the status of the Principalities at that time. Since the loss of independence in the 15th century, the Principalities can no longer decide in matters of war and peace. Even when the Sublime Porte summons Romanian princes to join the war effort and lead their troops on the battlefield, they play only a symbolic part and are really nothing more than bystanders to battle - as bystanders are

[1] This version of the 18th century poem, that I have labeled "the Giurescu version", was first published with annotations by the author in Popescu, C. T., *op. cit.*, p. 139-149.

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always also, albeit at a different level, their loyal subjects. And they act as bystanders even when they happen to be personally concerned. Thus, for three long centuries, culminating in "the Phanariote century", the *man as bystander* removes himself from history and from events he feels he has no control of. Precarious living turns him into a "solitary" fully self-absorbed, an individualist who sees himself as fundamentally alone in adversity, and a fatalist who turns down countless options and opportunities.

From 1769 on, faced with Russian solemn pledges, a group of boyars begin to build up a national party *ad hoc*, that is Russophile for the time being. As they enter Iași in September 1769, Russians require clerics, boyars, and commoners alike to pledge allegiance to Empress Catherine II – and they would do so in virtually every Moldavian village. We should therefore ask the obvious question : how much and how many Romanians did really commit themselves to Russian plans and pledges made in 1769[1], during the Russo-Turkish War and the occupation of the Principalities ? Had it been a strong and genuine commitment, then the disappointment experienced after the end of the war, when the peace treaty of Küçük Kaynarca ignored the pledges that had been made before, naturally reinforced the fundamental position of the *man as bystander*. Conversely, had it not been actual commitment but merely lip service, then the man as bystander was not so much the role model that Romanians returned to after a very brief interlude of active involvement with history ; it was rather the one that they had never quit.

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[1] *I. e.*, first and foremost, to build up a buffer state named "Dacia" (*cf.* Cantacuzino, M., 1902: *passim* – and Iorga, N., 1938: 274 *sq.*).

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