Romanian Style Nation-building in Radu Rosetti's Early 20th Century Fiction

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The narrative fiction which openly claims to document the patriotic agenda of modernization is proper to both the writers and the literary language of national states. For the most part, it is cultural practice rather than aesthetic endeavour. Its ideology and discourse are underpinned by notions of alterity, clash of civilizations, marginality, etc. My case in point example is Radu Rosetti's early 20th century writings, which fit the profile of deliberate as well as unintentionally humorous discrimination between east and west, Romanianism and otherness, etc.

What is more, they signal a number of political and aesthetic values strikingly familiar to early 21st century Romanians too. The collective quest they embarked on in the first decade of the century to gain (more than) admission to European Union rings the same bell. In Romanian mainstream public narratives Europe was, and sometimes still is, the utopia "symbolized by the names Rome, Jerusalem and Athens" (Todorov 2010: 169). These moments in our national time are part of a genealogy which goes even deeper. The work of Radu Rosetti summarizes some of the most influential (mis)conceptions about the Moldavian self, working hard to become Romanian. The representation of such popular views on nation-building amounts to ideology effectively at work in literature. The rhetoric consists in the emphasis laid on the fetish of progress used to critically asses the time-honoured beliefs, authority figures or traditions of previous generations. The purpose is to communicate that borders are never completely erased and admission comes at a price. The public language that tells this story relies on the same old definitions of the other, which only comes to prove that the usefulness of the terms Radu Rosetti employed has never diminished. Under scrutiny is the tried-and-tested strategy of promoting one's culture and ethnicity as a body of evidence the other needs to cope with under the threat of retribution. This naïve trail of thought interprets the cultural memory of the multi-ethnic/racial, and even cosmopolitan, world Radu Rosseti's protagonists live in. The rather surprising point made is that, less than two hundred years ago or so, mostly the urban area of nowadays eastern Romania was something of a melting pot. His work names Greeks, Turks, Russians, Albanians, Jews,

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Hungarians, a number of French and Germans who settled in the country. If we were to take Radu Rosetti's word for it, a few, if not most of them ended up being devoted Romanian nationals.

The author tracks down the westernizing reform in fashion and mores the 19th century brought about. The canonical landmarks of Romanian history are duly noted: the medieval Turkish grip on the country, the two Russian military occupations (1806–1812 and 1828–1834, respectively) the 1848 revolution, the union of the Romanian Principalities, etc. The Phanariot family the writer was born in actively supported what nowadays is confidently phrased as the national agenda of the unionist Moldavian aristocracy. Looking back, it seems that, at the time, things were not black (anti-unionism) and white (patriotism). At least, not the way even our 20th century, full-fledged Romanian writer, Radu Rosetti seems to think. He discusses at length his lineage – the Rosettis are the descendants of the 17th century Greek Lascaris Rosseto, an Orthodox Church official (Rosetti 2013: 20). The ethnocentrically legitimizing statement made by his literature is that, irrespective of their extraction, the Rosettis sided with the national(ist) party.

Radu Rosetti's early 20th century's writings, in-between the genres of memoirs and fictional writing, stage some of the above-mentioned events. His reissued chronicles of the 19th century, *Memories* (2013) and *The Monk Zosim and Other Stories* (2014), define a rather naïve conviction about the threshold civilization (Mukherji 2013) he tries to invent and describe. The belief in the exceptionalism of this setting and, implicitly culture, comes with the territory. Whatever he thinks is peculiar to this area has to do with the state of the country, its government and policies. The perspective employed is that of the European and the Russian encroachment on the native sense of identity. In the first place, the world under scrutiny was shaped by a long-standing condition of subjection to Ottoman rule. Of course, his testimonial is less committed to indict the French or the Germans. By and large, he is poised to prosecute Tsarist Russia. He also manages to phrase convincingly what is going to become the stereotyped expression of national distrust against the big eastern neighbour. Explicitly, the narrative voice is at odds with "the conservative nature of Russian autocracy" (Jelavich 2004: IX). Besides, the Russians themselves are alleged to be the easterners who corrupted the values the western institutions and practises were commonly believed to promote. They are labelled nothing less than "semi-barbarians" [semi-barbari] (Rosetii 1922: 195). Humorously enough, the author complains even that these handsome and western-like dressed officers increased the divorce rate among the honourable women and men of the country. The tsarist protectorate over the principalities helped make that exceedingly clear. The margin(al) people of the future Romania always seem to find themselves on the threshold of something. In so many words, at the beginning of their joint effort to gain again and again admittance to whatever is in their proximity or at reasonable distance (Russia, The Hapsburg Empire, etc.).

Accordingly, the characters, usually big landowners, are out-standing and in-between. They are posturing some mutually reinforcing positions which otherwise would have been mutually exclusive. Namely, they associate primary and secondary performances that involve replicating socially sanctioned conduct meant to legitimize their cultural authority. These are levels of their public relation strategy

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which can be crossed at will and according to circumstances. Essentially, they display a submissive bearing in relation to the outside world and a paternalist, authoritarian stance against the indigenous population. They seem equally eager to embrace them both, in the Phanariot spirit of truly opportunistic behaviour. Such a bipolar routine annuls easily recognizable notions of similarity and difference. This is probably why authority figures are constantly portrayed on the threshold of one or another of their complex dramatic personae. Most of the times, they are putting on a show for the eyes of a public or private audience.

However, the narrative voice is bound to build up the story in terms of at least one convenient binary opposition. Those who perform on the historical stage of Radu Rosetti are set in contrast to the locals: "The Greek, a cunning schemer, had grasped from the beginning boyar Moldovan's guileless but the exceedingly vain nature; he had played his part artfully [...]" [Grecul, vulpoi şiret, pătrunsese de la început firea fără de vicleşug, dar cu deosebire de vanitoasă a boierului Moldovan; îşi jucase rolul de minune...] (Rosetii 1922: 106). Anyway, the actual unfolding of the stories does not arouse excitement. Chiefly, it is tantamount to a tentative effort to vouch for the exploits of his ancestors. The characters do not engage the attention of actual fiction readers. At best, they are recognizable citizens of the principalities, being devoid of dramatic conduct and, for all intents and purposes, of emotion-arousing thoughts and words. Their exchanges are formulaic and actual instances of dialogue almost absent. The narrative unfolding is pre-emptied of climax and entirely patterned on exposition. Basically, the verbal skill of the author boils down, essentially, to the re-telling of small-talk instances and various anecdotes he, as the story goes, "heard from others". In view of which, he himself delivers them once more in the bland language of reported speech.

Consequently, the readers are warned against the big chance of even confusing the characters: "his brother-in-law Toderas (not to be mistaken for Toderita) Bals" [cumnată-său Toderaş (a nu se confunda cu Toderiţă)] (Rosetii 1922: 197). The same candid narrative strategy is further developed. Family trees spring up throughout the text and the boughs of his own are particularly worthy of attention. "The Ghikas […] have come from Rumelia and are of Albanian origin" [Ghikuleştii […] sunt veniţi din Rumelia şi de neam albanezi] (Rosetii 1922: 210). The longwinded explanation of the spelling his mother surname had in history is revealing. Basically, the readers find out why their Moldavian branch, "Ghyka", decided to write their name with the "y" letter, while the Wallachian "Ghika" used the "i" instead. Everything spirals into the admission that, for unknown reasons, "many of them decided to sign Ghika too" [au început şi ei să iscălească Ghika] (Rosetii 1922: 213), irrespective of their roots and residence. Likewise, the so-called recording of the past is mired in half-done reports: "Lascar Bogdan had been married to some other woman before, but I forgot the name of the lady" [Lascăr Bogdan a mai fost căsătorit cu cineva, dar am uitat numele doamnei] (Rosetii 1922: 198).

The clichéd, formula-ridden literature of Radu Rosetti basically accounts for his current literary rediscovery. He is applauded on account of the factual and

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cultural information[1] about the 19th century Principality of Moldavia. At any rate, his work is reconsidered from a documentary rather than aesthetic point of view. In other words, the reading in progress carried out on his fiction is intended primarily for instruction purposes and praised for recording local human experience. Of course, such an approach to narrative fiction turns out to foster notions which pertain to Romanianism. They advertise an antagonistic sense of collective identity, which basks in the historical moment "we" outranked "them": "Turkey and Austria fought hard to oppose the unionist creed in Moldavia, where the union severely threatened the prosperity of the very upper class […] The unification of the two countries was a transaction which brought to Wallachia only profits and to Moldavia only losses" [Turcia și Austria și-au pus toate puterile în combaterea ideii unioniste în Moldova, unde unirea primejduia greu interesele materiale tocmai ale clasei celei mai puternice... […] Unirea era o transacțiune între amândouă țările în care Muntenia avea numai foloasele materiale iar Moldova numai pagube] (Rosetii 1925: 315). Most of the times, his is a brand of western-oriented discourse, almost exclusively concerned with the representation of our neighbouring (former empire) states. This is one celebrated subject matter of Romanian historiography. The upshot of this insistent (academic) research/discourse is that the "theme of the plot has taken root in Romanian political culture" (Boia 2001: 175).

Nationalism is packaged in the straightforward literary practice of harmless storytelling. Yet, the narrative voice's knowledgeable discourse on the Phanariot art of government is obvious. His ability to convey meaning stands for both worldly wisdom and conservative politics. Namely, for making the state modern, achieving self-government and building the nation, in the face of various adversities. The otherwise awkward author is proficient at making known his main ideological assertion about the ruling class. Explicitly, he argues that the policy-makers of the time were concerned with the consequences of their actions and less so with the history books. Anyway, they are always written by the victors. Their offspring, Radu Rosetti, is aware of the radical shakiness of political and historical representation. His mastery of propagandist language is plain to see. The proof is that his choice of words has tapped into the commonplace phrases of Romanian historiography. It may very well be that the Romanian writing of history is narratively documented by his fiction. Anyway, the result is the same. The phrasing of the particular ethnic nature he envisaged makes sense to the extent to which it is thought to summarize the common good of the general public.

His rhetoric gained the currency of one of the most popular paradigms the nation's cultural memory has to offer for public consumption in media or in state-run schools since the beginning of the Romanian national state.

This view of the world is mainly centred on strong group loyalty. The notions of belonging to and acceptance by society explain much of what others told the writer about the merger of the two principalities into one country. Such storytelling simplistically sharpens national self-definition by means of experiential knowledge

[1] Cristina Manole, *Memoria istoriei* [The Memory of History], in *Observator cultural*, 16.08.2013, available at http://www.infocarte.ro/amintiri-carte-recenzii, retrieved on 15.04.2014; I. Stanomir, *Radu Rosetti: un moldovean de altădată* [Radu Rosetti: a Moldavian from the past], in *LaPunkt*, 16.10.2013, available at http://www.infocarte.ro/amintiri-carte-recenzii, retrieved on 15.04.2014.

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and folk memory. They are, at best, inferential. However, more often than not, they are objectionable. Particularly so, because their current usage is highly contentious on account that they conspicuously fail to conform to the ideological orthodoxy of the day. The worldview they amount to is liable to face charges of tribalism, racism, sexism, so on and so forth.

The memoirs of Radu Rosetti are evidence that the western-schooled aristocracy of the land successfully advanced the agenda of Romanianism. At least as far as the early 20th century kingdom of Romania was concerned. Ruled by a Hohenzollern sovereign, the one Latinic country of the eastern-European Slavic world, something of an agricultural powerhouse, the nation had in Radu Rosetti the informed writer to conveniently fictionalize the past. Almost bankrupt due to the recklessness of his father and step-father respectively, he pursues a public carrier. Elected in the parliament, he is, most of the times, to be found in a governmental office. Unquestionably, he has the standing and the education to be a mouthpiece of the society his reformist family worked to bring about. The glorified version of the past he literarily shared with his fellow citizens gives him insight into the way history is effectively told. Accordingly, the conservative party's main complaint against the liberal regime in inter-war Romania surfaces. This is what Radu Rosetti, the conservative MP, has to say about his political rivals: "Theft was universal, and, as far as this is concerned, only the current post-war administration may be considered to top the corruption of the past" [Se fura de sus până jos, în această privință numai regimul postbelic actual poate fi privit ca întrecând în corupțiune pe cel de atunci] (Rosetii 1925: 401). Anyway, this is also part of the leading public discourse of the time which was mostly hijacked by the topic of Romanianism: "the majority of Romanian intellectuals were engaged in a grand debate about what it meant to be Romanian and how national character determined social and political development" (Hitchins 1995). Rosetti's take on the issue is much more sophisticated, at least by comparison with the fanatic partisanships prevailing at the time, as shown, for instance, by the names of the contending parties: "the westerners" versus "the traditionalists". Correspondingly, the liberal-minded ancestors and their conservative heir reach the consensus obvious when he pays his respects dutifully: "Beware to pass rush judgment against our elders […] Their sins are many, but we are all sinners, and for most of them the circumstances are to blame, and not they" [Ferește-te de judecăți pripite asupra bătrânilor […] Păcate au multe, dar păcătoși suntem cu toții, și-apoi pentru multe din acele păcate ale lor sunt vinovate împrejurările, și nu ei] (Rosetti 2014: 238).

Coming back to the Moldavian society, only the privileged class is able to bring together the inside with the outside of the geography they inhabit. The author assumes the territoriality of identity, particularly as far as the peasantry and the illiterate low middle classes were concerned. Their belonging to one and the same community was obvious in terms of language, shared living and (what used to be) public ownership of resources, mainly land. Yet, it was somewhat baffling due to their lack of common historic and political heritage. It follows that the local society is patterned on remote ancestry and continuous exposure to naturally occurring environments, i.e., on geography. The author commonly overlooks such concerns but whenever the natives his family owned (Moldavians and Gipsies alike) are

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subjected to his colonising gaze, they came across as inheritors of comprehensive (and at odds with each other) popular cultures. The nation's colonial past is downplayed by the ethnically-focused address of the narrative voice. Hardly ever does the discourse touch on the economic immigration which seems to have fuelled the initial Phanariot settlement of Moldavia and Wallachia. These two "were for the Greeks of Constantinople what Mexico and South America were for the poor hidalgos of Spain" [erau pentru grecii din Țarigrad ceea ce erau Mexicul și America de Sud pentru hidalgii săraci din Spania] (Rosetii 1922: 23). For that reason, all foreign nationals brought (as skilled labourers, teachers, etc.) by big land-owners or politically/militarily stationed in the country seem to have been driven by self-interest.

Radu Rosetti delineates and further marginalizes the fictional Romania/ Romanians as if they all required constant critical scrutiny in order to tell apart their past from their present identity. The negotiations of the western versus the eastern cultural constructions of Romanianism are telling of the author's anxieties and desires. Radu Rosetti's understanding of Europe is a naïve commitment to the social reform he conveniently uses to capture public imagination. The outlying Romanian principalities benefited from the geopolitics of Napoleon III who supported their demand for self-determination. The story shows the very moment in time the pro-French feeling started "[…] the lively cry of gratitude to the emperor of the French to whom we owed the foundation of our future. […] At that time, for the Moldavians of our society there was only one emperor and one empress in Europe […]" […un însuflețit strigăt de recunoștință la adresa împăratului francezilor căruia i se datora punerea temeliei viitorului nostru. […] Pe acea vreme, pentru moldovenii din cercul nostru era un singur împărat și o singură împărătească în Europa] (Rosetii 1925: 339).

Even more, his liberal rhetoric serves to conceal the feudal rank and practices most of the times sympathetically described by his narrative voice. His suspicions and biases are democratically unleashed against both the West and the East. The self-serving discourse of the author celebrates what essentially seems to be the phraseology of a non-interventionist ideology. The Phanariot family candidly states its status motivated allegiance to their newly acquired homeland: "My grandpa had little sympathy for the Greeks and my grandma had completely forgotten her own Greek descent in order to be completely at one with the country where she had been living for so long and enjoying such an affluent position" [Bunul meu simpatii grecești nu avea, și bunica uitase cu desăvârșire obârșia ei grecească pentru a se identifica cu desăvârșire cu interesele țării unde trăiau de atâta vreme și în care se bucura de o situație atât de frumoasă] (Rosetii 1922: 82). As seen above, everything can, nonetheless, be construed as devotion to the dream of a great fatherland. What is more, narrative fiction here is invested with the politicized function of articulating resistance against the invading foreigner on behalf of the natives.

Paradoxically, the ethnically-focused writing of Radu Rosetti has always been complicit in the matters which caused, in the first place, the issues he mainly targets. His anti-foreign feeling is strikingly at odds with his own background and social class. Whether involved knowingly or with passive compliance, the people remembered by the author worked to produce some of the historical circumstances

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he protests against. I.e., to relegate the nation they settled in to a dominion status within one empire or another. For example, they secured the appropriation of indigenous resources for export purposes, i.e., in acknowledgement of Romanian Principalities submission to the Ottoman Empire. Territorial conquest and changing the ethnic make-up of the country always seem to loom in the back of the author's mind. The imperial policies of the Eastern and Western powers shaped the obsessive discourse of Romanianism, not to mention the ethnic composition of the country's political elite. Its members had first-hand knowledge of our neighbours and helped articulate the national rhetoric Romanians have come to take for granted.

Such a colonial frame of reference is employed by the narrative itself. Although the storytelling is anecdotal, the political mandate carried out on behalf of the 20th century Romanian kingdom is self-explanatory. The aggrieved party is rhetorically endowed with the accepted wisdom as well as with the controversies about various kinds of independence one might have nonetheless experienced at the time of Ottoman and Russian sovereignty. This comforting strategy has to do mostly with "the complacent nature of the Moldavian people, keen to live and let live" [firea indolentă a moldovanului, aceea de a *se lăsa să trăiască dus de valurile vieții*] (Rosetii 1922: 192). In other words, the text hints that they were not really bothered by feudal abuse and subjection to old-school imperialism. Except for the Roma community, class consciousness tells the story of nationwide wealth and snobbish parroting of western polite living. The author assertively contends that nourishment, employments, social and personal rewards were plentiful and at hand. He argues that each and every one, of course in accordance with his/her station in life, benefits from market economy and on-going developments in both nation-building and state modernization. Accordingly, there were "two hundred privileged citizens who enjoyed fame and fortune." What is more, "do not suspect that the other walks of life, apart from the gypsies, led a very unfortunate life" […cele două sute de privilegiați bucurându-se de o vază excepțională întru toate și pentru toate […] Și să nu se creadă că celelalte clase sociale, afară de țigani, duceau o viață din cale afară nenorocită] (Rosetii 1922: 192).

In the two principalities, the years of 1844 (Moldavia) and 1847 (Wallachia) commemorate the emancipation of the Roma who were owned by the state. Those who were privately owned by citizens and even by the Orthodox Church had to wait until 1855 (Moldavia) and 1856 (Wallachia) respectively. The deliberate racist undertones of the address are obvious and conclusive in respect with the distribution of resources and decision-making.

The national narrative climax in the two founding father figures of Romanianism, Alexandru Ioan Cuza and Prince Charles of Hohenzollern, later to become King Charles I of Romania. As it is the case with popular culture too – still prejudiced against the German born King Charles I (due to the communist regime which lionized Cuza) – Radu Rosetti pays to Vodă (i.e., Prince) Cuza the highest compliment ever in his book: "Cuza was a Moldavian Romanian" [Cuza era român Moldovan] (Rosetii 1925: 399). However, Prince/King Charles the statesman, whose moral authority and feats of military success built and westernized the country he inherited from Cuza, is fittingly eulogized.

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Conclusively, Radu Rosetti's memoirs are a detailed and almost exhaustive account of national cultural memory, told from the perspective of the Moldavian who managed to phrase the influential buzz-words of pop culture Romanianism as early as the very beginning of the 20th century.

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Abstract

The narrative fiction which openly claims to document the patriotic agenda of modernization is proper to the literature of newly constituted national states. On the margins of the western and the eastern worlds, the self-aware Romanian Radu Rosetti writes fictional accounts of the past which fit the profile. During the last two hundred years or so, Romanians underwent a continuous major change which consists in learning western habits and values. This westernizing narrative is underpinned by notions of alterity, clash of civilizations, marginality, etc. Rosetti's fiction foregrounded some of the commonplace phrases in Romanian historiography, later to become the popular paradigm of the nation's cultural memory: the anti-Russian and the pro-French feelings, the issue of the Roma community, the Latin country in the eastern-European Slavic world, the founding fathers Alexandru Ioan Cuza and Prince Charles of Hohenzollern, etc.

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