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POLITE LITERATURE REVAMPED: PRE-NATIONAL, TRANSNATIONAL, POSTNATIONAL UNDERPINNINGS OF A 21ST CENTURY NOVEL

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Abstract: *I attempt to track down the transnational dimensions of literature in the current convention of the ethnic literary image, as it unfolds in one instance of the contemporary novel genre. I find it to be an issue of both storytelling and cultural conditioning. Notions of taste, beauty perception, the appreciation of style and dramatic composition come together to advertise once more the time-honoured human knowledge department of polite literature. Belles-lettres appropriates the special effects of a political meta-discourse that effectively relies on the reactionary notions of the West-East divide, clash of civilizations, etc. The academic discourse of literary image studies eventually develops a narrative that (re)produces contextual knowledge, sanctioned by its cultural use-value. For instance, it borders on notions of transnational(ism), and postnational(ism). Both of them intermingle to the extent to which they stand in for other, familiar ideas about racism, nation(alism), xenophobia, belonging, etc. A novel written by an American, in print first in French (*Autobiographie érotique*, 2004), later released in the U.K., and finally published in Romanian (*Românul. O autobiografie erotică*, 2008), *The Romanian* (2006) by Bruce Benderson circulates the politicized rhetoric of the E.U. utopia/liberalism, regional otherness, postnational/transnational/expat identity, economic migration, socio-cultural transnationalism, etc. My conclusion is that, in the 21st century, polite literature tries to come back with a vengeance in order to reclaim its original social clout and, possibly, gain recognition for the public service rendered to readers and to society at large.*

The wide cultural currency enjoyed by English-written contemporary public narratives (through translation) effectively advertises a Western-centric worldview. A case in point example is the late 20th century aesthetical and analytical (that is to say, narrative) repackaging of ethnicity in fictional discourses. Explicitly, the novel genre fictionalizes concepts like transnational(ism), postnational(ism), not to mention the celebrated postcolonialist predicament, to highlight the more familiar notions of nation, xenophobia, racism, etc. Of course, this is the “unsavory form of transnationalism anchored in antiforeigner, anti-immigrant, anti-minority sentiments [that] is making headway as Europe’s shared value system” (Taras 4). I plan to consider this particularly contentious take on current ethnicity, alongside the postnational claim of ‘supersession’ which states that “national identity is being outstripped and displaced by the rise of alternative forms” (Breen and O’Neill 3).

Inadvertently or not, my paper turns out to be proof of the Eastern, i.e., Romanian, reception of nation – and Western-centric storytelling written in English.

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Namely, a twenty first century fictional text that, ultimately, reworked ethnic stereotypes in the mainstream of three European languages as well as national cultures. Having been in print throughout (mostly Western) Europe makes for a distribution market that, on its own, may very well be statistically significant. *The Romanian* (2006) by the American Bruce Benderson was first printed in French (*Autobiographie érotique*, 2004), later released in the U.K., and finally reached the Romanian audience (*Românul. O autobiografie erotică*, 2008). In the process of tracking down the transnational dimensions of literature, my work is also aimed at typifying the in-progress writing of the ethnic literary image (i.e., its actual production against the backdrop of the E.U. enlargement) coupled with the study of such narrative fulfilment. These two concerns, next to my inherently non-Western (i.e., Romanian) imagological reading, amount to a threefold treatment of the subject matter. It follows that my view on narrative fiction plays down the aesthetic agency of literature in favour of cultural contextualization and for some good reasons. The bulk of it is that, unmistakably, “works of literature that embody processes of global translation and circulation within their textual fabric” do exist (Frassinelli, Frenkel, Watson 10). What is more, they prove that “the ontology of a text is embedded in material processes of circulation and transnational contextualization” (Frassinelli, Frenkel, Watson 10). Apart from that, what is left attests to the rather poor literary quality of Benderson’s avowedly biographical text. The storytelling is somewhat sentimental and definitely pornographic, which could not possibly make the reading experience necessarily worthwhile. The novel boasts vivid descriptive passages about what seems to be the legendary Romanian (bi)sexual prowess. This is exemplified by the stereotypical background characters of *The Romanian*: the narrator’s lover, Romulus, helps Bruce Benderson read modern Romanian history as the boudoir exploits of King Carol II and of his mother, the British born queen Marie. Conclusively, the text’s fictional invention and aesthetic achievements deserve to go unmentioned, while its transnational circulation and value is worthy of attention.

More to the point, my approach to the narrative reflection on the imagined community (Anderson, 2006) of modern nationhood is read through the lens of the so-called ‘comparison literature’ I presume *The Romanian* belongs to, exclusively on cultural grounds rather than literary significance. Anyway, on account of its description of and function in “cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations and social formations spanning nation-states” (Vertovec 2) it draws attention

to the traditional distinction between the disciplines of national literature, which typically refer to what books are, who wrote them, or where they were produced, and the discipline of comparative literature, which typically refers to what we do with books. “Comparison literature” implies both of these projects, asking us to understand comparison as the work of scholars, to be sure, but also as the work of books that calculate . . . the transnational contexts of their own production, circulation, and study. (Walkowitz 223)

On the one hand, the novel’s plot appropriates a political meta-discourse that effectively relies on the reactionary, stock images of the West-East divide, clash of civilizations, etc. On the other, the academic discourse of literary image studies eventually

develops a complex cultural narrative that is eagerly quoted by *The Romanian*. The story incorporates the trans/postnational buzzwords and, at once, it seems to engage in a conservative project of classifying otherness, particularly (and conveniently) in ethnic terms.

The said comparison which structures this brand of narrative address deserves further consideration. Firstly, the contrastive paradigm at work in the text is the cultural (to be read transnational) competence to try and pre-empt the likely criticism of stereotyping the Romanians, which, beyond reasonable doubt, the narrator indulges in. Considering that the writer (Bruce Benderson) candidly claims responsibility for the first person statements of the author-narrator (Bruce Benderson), one can only wonder to what extent indiscriminately calling names to one ethnic group in the twenty first century is different from the argumentative drive of western travellers in the Eastern world centuries ago. Secondly, the memoir-like feel of his writing (which can only add to the 'comparison') is also a publicity stunt as, I think, the changed title of Benderson's English version of the novel comes to prove once more.¹ While claiming the legitimacy of comparative literature study, of documentary writing and of travel guides, this brand of fiction moves on to a new(er) reshuffling of the rhetoric of the novel genre. Basically, it invites turning the tables on the rather famous narratological insight that most, if not all, public communication is patterned on the basic and universal devices of storytelling. The consensus on the issue has already been recorded in the "numerous attempts to deal with narrative as a cognitive structure" (Fludernik IX).

Instead of arguing that the story is ubiquitous, it might prove equally consequential to advocate that aestheticizing the cultural agency of humanities is an assumption rather than a discovery proper. This is to say that narrativity might have engulfed (the 20th century comprehension of) culture, yet a variety of culturalism (i.e., the presuppositions of the author's worldview with respect to gender, sexual orientation, ethnic identity, etc.) seems to have always been part and parcel of the more narrative arts. Whatever the transnational language and practice stand for, they essentially advance the perception of globalization much in the same familiar terms of reporting on social reality. In so many words, "poetry, fiction, drama, and comedy, . . . would not only penetrate our actual 'pedestrian' thinking of the world and ourselves, but even fuse with the sense of enactment of our actual existence" (Tymieniecka X). The performance of a collective sense of identity is narratively enacted, irrespective of the story's aesthetic credentials. The Romanian makes a point out of its place in the American homosexual subculture, i.e., in the "out gay life cherished by today's contemporary Western gays" (Benderson 54). This view of the world is moral judgment and intellectual stimulation for the use of a niche public. In order to reach for a wider audience, the pop culture of homosexuality is grafted on Benderson's insistent orientalisng of individual Romanians: "Romania's hundreds of years under Ottoman rule have left their traces in his sharp Oriental features

¹ From the French *Autobiographie érotique*, to the English *The Romanian*, Benderson's transparent attempt to take advantage of an ethnonym succeeded in, for instance, getting his text published in Romanian. His choice of a resoundingly pulp fiction title *Românul. O autobiografie erotică*, sums up the two previous ones and advertises everything else left unsaid to the western reading public.

and coal-black eyes” (Benderson 44). Much to the native’s dislike, the belief in their non-European identity seems to have led to “an internalization of a general disdain for the Orient” (Drace-Francis 28) throughout all Romanian walks of life.

However, Byzantine, Levantine, Ottoman and Oriental are profusely used by Bruce Benderson to outline “Romania’s Turkish, Greek, Slavic, German and French influences and its relatively short history as an independent nation” (Benderson 44). Rather simplistically, all the fictional invention is subsumed under the headings of gay and Romanian culture. When put together, they convey the figure of the closet homosexual, historically-named bisexual prostitute, Romulus, and that of the memoir writer Bruce Benderson. The narrator is keenly aware of the purposes served by his book: recording his experiences, making money, gaining a reputation as a connoisseur of Romania. That is, if the reader is to buy into the memoir-writing convention he boasts about, for example, when repeatedly listing his own name among the fictional agents of the text. Once, he even names his Russian-born mother, Ida Benderson (Benderson 79), conceivably, with the same intention (if this is not the case, my apologies are in order). Anyway, some living Romanians (at least at the time of the first release of the book) are also mentioned, being the only natives who bask in the Western consideration of Benderson: “Johnny Răducanu, seventy-four at the time of this writing” (Benderson 364), the film critic Alex Leo Șerban, Carmen Firan, “the cultural attaché who so graciously received me at the Romanian Cultural Center in New York” (365). The country and its people are pragmatically depicted in all sorts of embarrassing circumstances. For example, he metatextually promises his lover’s mother, Floritchica, that if “I make more than thirty thousand dollars, [i.e., writing the book under scrutiny] I’ll give you your seven” (211). Everything points at the 21st century narrative convention of the memoir, which is still able to promote ‘the underdog’ – be that the ‘gay’ or the ‘Romanian’ one, in the public arena. Their collocation, the ‘Romanian gay’ (culture), probably benefits too.

Although not an academic himself, Bruce Benderson apparently welcomes such an association. He gives plenty of insight into his lecture on his area of expertise he delivered at the “Centre Pompidou”, in Paris (Benderson 156). He translated “Céline Dion’s co-written memoirs . . . despite some embarrassment at having my name linked to such a frivolous enterprise” (163) for the badly needed \$10,000 he used to live together with Romulus in Romania. Unambiguously, he is a (French) prize-winning writer. Consequently, it seems safe to assume that *The Romanian*, apart from all its other features, may very well be equated with the academic memoir genre. This particular form of educational writing enables “academics working in the humanities to escape from the self-reflexivity that the increasingly politicized realm of literary studies has come to demand” (Franklin 2). Politicized or not, Benderson’s writing about the country and its post-communist history made it in the mainstream of Romanian studies. The biographical story pays tribute to the entire Romanian cultural Pantheon. In other words, most, if not everything the modern Romanian nation managed to sell to the West – from cuisine and pop culture to literature and traditional civilization – is touched upon by the academic undertone of Benderson’s remotely diaristic narrative of sensual exploits outside but mostly in the country. This is an articulate account of the Romanian cultural experience, told mainly from the outside of a declaredly “schizophrenic” (Benderson 44) minor

Eastern European culture, which, occasionally, manages to catch the eye of the self-declared post/trans-national gay author. In that respect, The Romanian makes a distinctly humanist statement (i.e., characteristic of humanities). The writer-narrator's shallow, yet enthusiastic knowledge of French and British literature on Romania's German-born kings and queens (except for Carol II, the first one born on Romanian soil), on Brancusi, Panait Istrati, Maramureş, the pre-Christian Thraco-Dacian heritage, the Romantic poet Vasile Alecsandri, Ana Aslan, Miorita, Lucian Blaga and Mircea Eliade, documents the instructive purpose of his narrative fiction. The text is part of the cultured Westerner's domestic knowledge about a fixture in the exotic, primeval European Orient: "Romanians are, they themselves believe, Latins lost among the barbarians, the Roman victims of Turks" (Benderson 101); their "language is largely pure vulgar Latin and its closest modern equivalent" (2); on the streets of their cities "wild dogs and even wilder homeless children keep crossing our path" (95). Though the entries of this text, part travelogue part memoir, are not ordered alphabetically, this is a book of information or, at least of reference on any and all subjects pertaining to local issues.

For the many reasons I mentioned so far, I believe that all those Bruce Benderson had in mind while writing his text (first and foremost himself, but also Floritchica, the Romanian reading public, the universal gay community) benefit from the free agency of his take on what has come to be known as comparison literature. Namely, they all benefit from the cultural task carried out by the rhetoric of storytelling rampant in social communication. The address of the author's book amounts to the already mentioned cognitive structure of the narrative, at the expense of all aesthetic expectations. Nonetheless, his text provides a dictionary of facts that claims to be factual knowledge, useful exclusively for those concerned with the issues at hand. Ultimately, no escape from the hackneyed Western-gay-meets-Eastern-hustler scenario is in sight. If the strategy is meant to confront heterosexual bigotry, the book's choices are somewhat out of pace with the illiberal-minded in need of reformation. I mean that Bruce Benderson's acting out against discrimination is a matter of causing embarrassment with unseemly displays of sensual emotion. For example, he sometimes quotes Freudian clichés that cannot go down well with the "aesthetic cultures full of mysticism, rural romance and pantheism" (Benderson 44) he comes across in Romania. Unequivocally, homophobic arguments are buttressed by the narrator's sexual fantasizing about the picture of his dead father in his twenties: "Valentino-swarthy with a brooding, sensitive face, he could have attracted me when he was young" (241).

Notwithstanding such peculiarities, The Romanian still qualifies for admission to a select human knowledge department. The moral to the story recalls of the public service traditionally performed by the venerable institution of polite literature, as enacted nowadays by manifesto-like fiction, under the name of gay novel/memoir/documentary.

Nowadays fallen into disuse, the term used to be in the mainstream of British life. An 1802 definition² signals its instrumentality in building "the moral and

² In the early 1800s, the interest of the average literate public in polite literature shows that the notion was nothing short of what should be expected from the "latest discoveries, inventions and improvements, chiefly applicable to . . . domestic economy", as the full title of the 1802

intellectual character of man” (Willich 246). This take on public narratives (fictional or not) raises a number of familiar questions in regard to public reporting on social reality. Essentially, it equates the continental (obviously French) ‘belles-lettres’ with the study and recording of human experiences, otherwise better known currently as humanities. Literally, the author submits that the “extensive ramification of the subjective sciences, which are peculiarly calculated to improve the heart, and enlarge the mind, in contradistinction to those objective” (Willich 246) is used for the accomplishment of the politeness philosophy, which has developed into the cultural paradigm of the 18th century.

The ideology of politeness has medieval roots in courtly etiquette. These notions of civility have eventually led to European Enlightenment, as far as values of citizenship and secularism are concerned, not only in Britain but throughout Western continental Europe. The need to render democratic, in fact, to extend to the common people the use of the term politeness which “reinforced an elitist ideology,” (Klein 3) points at a culture of liberty. “Polite learning was gentlemanly because it did not demand technical or specialist knowledge. . . . It fixed knowledge in a firm ethical and social grid, flagged by such key words as judgment and taste” (Klein 5-6). Accordingly, notions of ethics, politics and literature resulted in the coinage of similar phrases: polite arts, polite letters, polite learning. The bottom line is that “the rise of politeness was closely associated with a reorganization of culture and social life at the beginning of the eighteenth century in which the forms of public life were expanded and elaborated” (Klein 13). This is archetypal civic-mindedness that gained wide currency prior to the present relegation of the term to the past of humanities, yet the concern with public affairs is still at the core of social responsibility. The Romanian argues for the enactment of Western (in)formal laws by staging cross-border relationships, transnational patterns of exchange and postnational affiliations. This is the gift bestowed upon the world by the Western civilization: “[the] great shift toward the West and its materialistic values” (Benderson 231). However, Bruce Benderson finds the Romanian underclass, who “deprived [him] of contact with educated Romanians” (256), lacking in such cosmopolitan substance. His acknowledgement of the (very few) educated natives is based on their ability to fit in the global universe of this Western world. In other words, Romanians able to grasp “the play of identities, masks and performed selves in which individuals as well as groups must engage” (Ommundsen 3) are worthy of respect. The construal of globalization in the novel is ethnocentric and centred on exposing the economic and historical conditions that are to be held accountable for the retrograde state of affairs Romanian forms of public life and, generally, civility are in. Homophobic tribalism, preliterate nationalism, the threat of sectarianism, etc., are all obvious in the metaphors the narrator comes up with in a rather idiosyncratic manner: “Romania is a country of wood, where woodenness is inspiring enough to create an artist like Brancusi” (Benderson 64). Conclusively, this is a surrealist landscape, populated by hustlers, pimps, orphans, stray dogs and children, medieval

encyclopaedia goes. The cross between travel book and memoir results in the obviously historical, documentary and political purposes served by public narratives that openly take advantage of the novel genre’s aesthetic credentials while re-enforcing national, gender and class identity.

peasants, displaced and disenfranchised citizens while only a handful of people actually escape the “the innate pastoralism of Romanians” (Benderson 125).

To some extent, *The Romanian* brings together comparison literature and transnationalism, as if they were markers of the Eastern country’s dated national policy. The plot relies on the re-phrasing of Western multiculturalism, insistently used as the benchmark against which the natives themselves are being judged. This cultural set of ideas is carefully scrutinized from the viewpoint of the American narrator (as well as from that of the self-professed aficionado of all/some Romanian people). For example, modern nation-building in Romania is re-staged in order to have it removed from the grand ethnocentric narrative of the nation state. The need to summarize the tabloid-like exploits of the last Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen king, Carol II, blows out of proportions the adventures of Benderson himself. Eventually, the narrator’s transparently solipsist bent of mind is self-aggrandizement at its best. Factually, Benderson’s appetite for an exotic, schizophrenic culture “encompassing Occident and Orient” (Benderson 44) boils down to an obsessive compulsion to come to terms with his own public persona: the Western self is the only available object of knowledge. In his very words: “Maybe it’s grandiose of me to inject a relationship that changed the political destiny of a country into my own abject narrative” (237). Anyway, the king’s infamous affair with the “satanic Jewess” (366), Elena Lupescu, as she was dubbed by the newspapers of the time, also introduces the assessment of Romanian anti-Semitic feeling. Consistently, the love story with Romulus is read much in the same terms. He even feels that the mother-son relationship, Carol II – Queen Marie, is identical to the love-hate one he experiences with his own mother. To top it all off, he goes on to picture himself as the Latin poet Ovid of the Roman Empire (309), at the time of his legendary exile in the remote Eastern province that was to become the present day Romanian Côte d’Azur (296).

Inadvertently, *The Romanian* helps Romanian and gay readers look back on the historical meaning of the “word literature [that] was often used as a *singulare tantum*, in the sense of learning as expressed in writing, and nationally or linguistically a-specific” (Leerssen 15). English being possibly the closest thing ever to a *lingua franca*, and West continental identity being formalized in the ethos of the European Union, this written gay-related memoir about travelling and living for nine months in Romania seems to accurately fit the profile of advertising a pan European identity, widely recognized prior to the advent of the Europe of nations. Of course that the after-lives of “classical philology, which stressed the common European culture” (Lernout 54) and of polite literature in the current novel genre are secondary and subordinate to cultural paradigms that do not essentially have to do with pre-Romantic Western Europe. Yet, to some extent, the postnational, ethnically de-territorialized culture of the E. U. seems much like the pre-national ideological geography of the Latin speaking elites who disregarded entirely “language-based categorizations of literary corpuses . . . in the seventeenth century, let alone earlier” (Leerssen 15).

Conclusively, *The Romanian* accidentally revisits the tradition of the late medieval and early modern European “Republic of Letters” in terms of the famed “intellectual sociability” (Van Dixhoorn and Speakman Sutch 4) that produced literary

knowledge about the world Western intelligentsia lives in. To all extents and purposes, the international exchange of ideas fostered by the transnational dimension of the novel genre signaled by comparison literature revamps a foundational paradigm of the European literary culture.

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