Literature and the Symbolic Engineering of the European Self

MONICA SPIRIDON

University of Bucharest, Romania.

My study draws on the construction of a pro-European identity in modern Romania, a process set in motion by two main engines: a political one (the export around 1848 of the Great French Revolution, in a 'tamed' version, to Eastern Europe) and a cultural one (the emergence of Paris as the capital-city of European modernism). Born at the periphery of the continent, the Romanian identity project puts on display a series of insightful dimensions: a logic of homogenization, a centripetal pull towards centralization, linguistic standardization and unity, against any centrifugal forces of cultural difference, a top-down dynamics and, finally, an imaginary self-colonizing drive. As illustrated by the Romanian case, the paradigm of European nationalism opened up new ways of linking nation-building to the needs of modern societies and the interests of professional elites.

Imagining Europe: self and other

Born at the Eastern periphery of the continent, the Romanian identity project is worth accounting for, since its historical starting point was Europe.

In Romania, the collective memory related to national identity was the stage of an intense transit of cultural paradigms. It was responsible for tensions, deviations and ruptures, catalysed collective attitudes and served as a rich source of stereotypes. The polar drive of these models attests to the attachment of peripheral cultures to strong explanatory landmarks, which enable them to organize the unquiet plurality of their semantic areas. Consequently, antinomies such as *European/Non-European* were extremely appealing to Romanian agents in charge of national identity construction.

Cultural identity emerged as a public issue in the country only in the wake of the 1848 bourgeois and nationalist revolutions. The so-called *révolutions à la française* kick-started the split between Romania and the Ottoman Balkan world. This switch towards the West involved an ardent endeavour for cultural engineering.

Over the last 150 years or so, the Romanian nation as a socio-symbolic construct has been constantly reworked. Cultural elites have been assigned an emphatic mission in defining the nation, to itself and to the world, and literature played the main role in the construction of a Romanian nation. Although theoretically evaluated as a *secondary social force* (Ref. 1, pp. 4–7), by the middle of the 19th century, literature was perceived as the source, and as the privileged vehicle, of several models of cultural action, with a tremendous axiological impact.

This process was set in motion by two main engines. First, a political one, meaning the late export of the Great French Revolution, around 1848, in a 'tamed' version, to Eastern Europe – for the largest part in areas formerly under Ottoman influence. Second, a cultural one, endeavouring to build up the national language and the national literature, in the wider context of the emergence of Paris as the capital-city of European modernism.

1848: The anatomy of a national obsession

The paradigm of modern Romanian identity implied a top-down dynamics: it was propelled by intellectual elites and resulted in an over-determined imaginary construct, very similar to the type of nationhood advocated by Benedict Anderson, among others.[2] It is worth noting who the architects, the builders and the promoters of this campaign were. In 1848, no more than two dozen of the bourgeoisie, nicknamed *les bonjouristes*, most of them writers, philosophers and journalists, turned the national identity project into an issue of the largest public interest.

Set up as signposts of Romanian national identity, the generic categories *European/Non-European* provided profitably speculative umbrellas, disguising a whole series of implicit polarities: cosmopolitanism versus autochthonism; innovation versus tradition; dynamics versus stagnation; criticism versus creativity; secularism versus spiritualism, and so on. Converted into existential, philosophical, moral, ideological or political strategies, these antinomies also acquired a strong rhetorical identity and developed into stereotypes, *topoi*, literary genres, super-styles, images, verbal clichés etc.

Within this conceptual framework, Europeanism meant confidence in progress, rationalism, historicism, individualism, secular spirit; the cult of originality and the capitalist economy. Its opposite was deemed the equivalent of emphasizing primitivism, anachronism, authenticity and Orthodox spirituality, a phobia of capitalism, fatalism, Orientalism and exoticism (Ref. 3, pp. 15–17).

Moreover, the two antipodes were either idealized or demonized, using a very simple and effective strategy: one of the two categories was identified as a dominant dimension of national identity, the real national Self. Conversely, its opposite was stigmatized as the peripheral, the decadent and subversive dimension: Alterity (the Other).

In Romania, this Eurocentric brand of nationalism operated under the political roof of a large nation state.[4] Romanian intellectuals of the mid-19th century closely followed the French philosophers of the Enlightenment (Ref. 5, pp. 19–21), engaged in a pursuit of reason that led to the rediscovery of the dichotomy between civilization and barbarianism. For French philosophers, moreover, France represented the pinnacle of civilization. In Europe, French replaced Latin as the language of the intelligentsia at this time. One century later, in Romania, French replaced Greek and Old Slavonic as the privileged religious and cultural languages.

In the wake of the bourgeois revolutions, Romania cherished the illusion of an effective and historically stable connection with France. Around 1840, the first generation of Romanian intellectuals started to seek higher education and top professional training in Paris. This early brand of Romanian Francophilia should be evaluated as an elitist option insofar as only the economically privileged could afford to study abroad.

Romanian youth enrolled in French universities, kept abreast of French political life, frequented literary salons and even built family alliances. French–Romanian relations often took an unmediated, personalized, and even affectionate form. In a letter published by the *Courrier Français*, C.A. Rosetti and Ion C. Brătianu, two prominent liberal Romanian political leaders of the time, urged Edgar Quinet: 'Help France remember that we are her sons and that we have fought for her in the streets. Add to this that everything we did, we did following her example' (Ref. 6, p. 49).

In 1853, Ion C. Bratianu wrote to Napoleon III asking for his support in favour of the future union of the Romanian Principalities, soon to be discussed in Paris. The main argument of his petition was that the forthcoming political union could be seen as a veritable *French Conquest*: 'The Romanian army,' he maintains in his letter, 'would become a French army; the Romanian harbors on the Black Sea and on the banks of the Danube would be the warehouses of the French market and so on. In this way, France would have all the profits of a real colonization minus its numerous discomforts' (Ref. 7, p. 31).

In some respects, this process had a striking theatrical dimension. More precisely, the highly dramatic atmosphere of the Great Revolution and of the French post-revolutionary context was both institutionally and rhetorically imitated in a way that left ample room for comical effects. In retrospect, by the end of the century, the national poet Mihai Eminescu labelled the 1848 uprising as the 'imitative revolution', pointing to the strong mimetic impulse and to the ludic dimension of its political discourse (Ref. 8, pp. 93–95).

A mimetic syndrome has been one of the constant, deep dimensions of Romanian identity construction. When, between the wars in Paris, Emil Cioran paraphrased Montesquieu, and launched the resounding and pathetic question '*Comment peut-on être Roumain?*' ('How can one be a Romanian?'), he knew

that cultural mimeticism was one of the inevitable answers (Ref. 9, p. 54). The construction of Romanian identity involved a constant search for prestigious and legitimizing cultural models elsewhere, the most prominent and durable of which was not just the French paradigm in general, but particularly Paris as the cultural capital of 19th century Europe.

The adoption of Europeanism *à la parisienne* in everyday life, in civilization as a whole, and in the people's mentality, was extremely strong and, in certain respects, without competition. Social life, formal relationships, the rhythms of the streets, the institutions, everything that happened under the public eye was trying to comply with the new patterns. The education of the younger generations, the elegant manners, public entertainment, the shows and the luxurious promenades were following French models, which were progressively internalized. In the universe of modern Romanian *flâneurs* or the literary coffee shop pillars, as well as in the world of hairdressers, restaurant owners, fashion shopkeepers, and pastry makers, the equivalence between 'European' and 'Parisian' was beyond any doubt.

Nonetheless, though emphatic, this French mimeticism was deeply rooted in a purely literary network. Before preparing to enact its scenarios in everyday life and to transplant its models into Romanian fiction, the fancy and highly educated milieus of Bucharest had access to the original sources of French literature. At its highest, elitist level, Romanian Francophilia displayed the unique fingerprint of Baudelaire and of some symbolist *flâneurs*, such as Nerval or Barbey D'Aurevilly, but also of Balzac, Proust, and Gide.

Meanwhile, in the suburbs of the city, the lower middle class, in its vigorous social and economic ascent by the end of the 19th century, was eagerly devouring *Notre Dame de Paris* or *Les Mystères de Paris* by Eugene Sue, in *feuilleton* translations, mostly published in women's magazines.

The literary representations of Bucharest provide excellent examples of mutual support and enhancement between Romania's aspirations in the field of cultural modelling on the one hand, and its Manichean obsession with the alternatives *European/Non-European* on the other. Romanian literature frequently embodied its drive towards cultural modelling in memorable symbolic topographies, which focused on the capital city.

Promoted by modern Romanian literature, the 'city-text'[10] called *Little Paris*, meaning modern Bucharest, played an important part in the construction of Romanian cultural identity. Under closer scrutiny, *Little Paris* was the result of a fascinating blend of local literary projections, ideological clichés and common sense stereotypes, mostly circulated by the reports of foreign travellers. The verisimilitude of this symbolic modelling was rhetorically validated by the mass education of the time.

On a different level, parallel to popular Francophilia, a different process started: the institutionalization of a modern national language and literature. After 1848,

the Romanian language was programmatically drawn back to its Latin matrix by a steady import of French neologisms, suited to contemporary civilization and culture. For ordinary Romanians, keen on the idea of the Latin roots of their language, *Romance* meant *French*. In this way, local ethno-history and the ideals of the general public, obsessed with their Roman descent and the Latin heritage, converged with the modernist paradigm in shaping the national identity. This was not an uncommon initiative because theorists of nationalism insist on the constructed nature and elitist origins of all national languages:

> National languages are always semi-artificial constructs and occasionally virtually invented. They are the opposite of what nationalist mythology supposes them to be, namely the primordial foundations of national culture and the matrices of the national mind. Where an elite literary or administrative language exists, however small the number of its actual users, it can become an important element of proto-national cohesion. (Ref. 4, p. 48)

Romanian intellectuals of the time tried to assimilate the Herderian ideas, then fashionable in Paris. This led to a Romanian revival of the vernacular and of oral culture, to an emphatic interest in national history, in rural traditions, and in *couleur locale* – if not in pure exoticism. The abundant national literature evolving around identity, heritage and memory, was steadily promoted by the emergent literary magazines and by a series of prestigious cultural societies.

Following the romantic ideology, the historian, novelist and prominent politician Mihail Kogalniceanu advocated an original Romanian literature inspired by local history and collective memory in the newly founded literary magazine *Dacia literara* (*Literary Dacia*). A wide array of genres – poems, short stories, novellas, travel diaries, essays – were accommodated in the only three issues of *Dacia literara* to appear in order to help institutionalize a Romanian national literature and Romanian as a national language. Around 1848, Romanian writers also put into circulation their (re)presentations of nationhood in conferences that deeply influenced public life and public opinion. These tremendously popular events enhanced the communication between collective and individual levels of collective memory, currently involved in national identity projects (Ref. 11, pp. 46–52).

The fate of the 1848 Identity Model

The 1848 paradigm of Europeanism, as imagined and implemented by *les bonjuristes*, held away until the end of the Second World War, when Romania was taken over by the Soviet Union. The interwar period can be seen as the climax of the Romanian aspirations to a European identity and cultural modernism.

In the 20th century, Francophilia, as an essential engine of the local Eurocentric cultural project, was adopted by a brilliant team of intellectuals with no peripheral frustrations or local inferiority complexes, who were quite inclined to

elaborate on their identity theoretically: they formed a veritable galaxy of cultural 'Stars', who helped shape the European idea in a different manner than did the generation of 1848 (Ref. 3, pp. 169–180) They settled in Paris or constantly commuted between Romania and France, deciding to behave fully as Europeans, and thus to kick-start what in retrospect can be regarded as a complex process of 'co-optation' of Romanian culture as part of the European Republic of Letters:

> If we add to this the idea that accomplishing the recognition of literary value depends on an exclusive group of agents previously installed and recognized within the field of this international republic, and not on local or national markets, we have a perfect image of co-optation. (Ref. 12, p. 431)

By the simple fact of being born Romanians, these intellectuals perceived Europe as their own true homeland. As Edward Said put it: 'most people are aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two and the plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions' (Ref. 13, pp. 170–172).

An example in point is Princess Marthe Bibesco, who spent every six months of the year in Paris and the other six on her estate in Romania. Like the goddess Persephone, she divided her life between earth and hell. A heiress of the Byzantine Mavrocordats, Marthe Bibesco was also the relative of a Napoleonic general through her mother-in-law, the princess of Caraman-Chimay. In her veins 'flowed Romanian, French, Greek and Italian blood, and by an intense anamnesis she had remembered the past of all the European families, principalities and peoples who had nourished the creativity of her ancestors', one of her contemporaries contends (Ref. 14, p. 67).

By the end of her life, Marthe Bibesco, completely assimilated into French literature, had published more than 30 volumes in Paris and Bucharest, some of which were prize winners of the French Academy. After the Second World War, General Charles de Gaulle awarded her the *Légion d'Honneur* for her literary endeavours in French. She devoted the last 30 years of her life to a massive book that she never completed: *La Nymphe Europe*. The title is highly suggestive as it embodies the idea of Europe as a feminine effigy: a Nymph. In her book, this particular way of representing Europeanism progressively evolves into an autobiographical discourse (Ref. 15, p. 1976).

This detail bears proof of the visibly personalized, self-referential way of assuming Europeanism that marks the identity options of Romanian writers in the 20th century. To the initial 1848 identity project they added a basic self-reflective dimension (Ref. 16, p. 10).

Mircea Eliade, prose writer, philosopher and famous historian of religions, obsessively needed to redefine his cultural status in Western Europe, which in Montesquieu's terms normally should have identified him with a *Huron*. However,

his impressive diary, spanning his entire life, as well as his *Essays*, published in Paris, briskly retorted against his most redoubtable cloisters: territorial roots (Ref. 14, p. 76). Focusing on an intellectual, cosmopolitan homeland, Marthe Bibesco, Emil Cioran and Mircea Eliade assigned new values to the sense of belonging, already consecrated by Romanian literature. For them, Europe was a 'supranational cosmopolis' (Ref. 17, p. 268) and opposed to a narrow, territorial nationalism. Their Europeanism transgressed and rendered irrelevant the topographical sense of identity cherished by local cultural memory.

The critique of the French brand of Europeanism

Any consideration of the construction of a Eurocentric Romanian cultural identity cannot overlook the project inspired by the German models of action and thought: a significant but less emphatic retort to the French-oriented one. Parallel to the public and joyful cultural Francophilia, this rather quiet type of Europeanism was promoted by Romanian graduates from the universities of Berlin, Gießen, and Vienna.

By the end of the 19th century, starting with King Carol I, the Hohenzollern monarchy endeavoured to modernize the country socially, politically and economically and to build a European Romania. In this new context, the Eurocentric nostalgias, aspirations and ambitions nurtured a pro-German alternative for Romanian identity.

In retrospect, this pro-German option should be evaluated in close relationship to the so-called colonizing *Mitteleuropa* project. It is common knowledge that even in Germany, more so than the catholic Habsburgs, the protestant dynasty of Hohenzollern was perceived as heir to the '*Idea of Mitteleuropa*' (Ref. 18, p. 169). The '*weltpolitische*' version of *Mitteleuropa* was based on the civilizing mission of German culture, science and technology. In its most simplistic presentation, one of its common denominators was the projection of a substantially expanded German empire into a new European order (Ref. 18, pp. 165–172).

Whether inspired and nurtured by the *Mitteleuropa* ideal or not, the pro-German alternative in modern Romania is worth mentioning, since it displays the same dynamics as its Francophile opposite: the top-down propelling; the move from the periphery towards the centre and a striking self-colonizing drive. It also closely followed the same temporal pattern, and had both an 1848 and a post-1848 turning point.

In the wake of the 1848 revolutions, the cultural society *Junimea* (*Youth*) launched a speculatively articulated critique of the superficial and hasty import of ill-assorted French models, denounced as '*forms devoid of substance*'. This insightful phrase launched by the chief of *Junimea*, Titu Maiorescu – philosopher, literary critic, outspoken politician, and sometime Prime Minister – is still used in contemporary Romania to promptly decry any inappropriate import of

civilization and culture, nowadays especially from the European Union area. In his plays, written in self-exile in Berlin at the end of his life, one of the most prominent national writers of the 19th century, I.L. Caragiale, a forerunner of Eugene Ionesco and member of *Junimea*, provided insightful literary X-rays of the golden age of *Little Paris* and the *Belgium of the Orient*, both depicted as products of a ridiculous French cultural mimicry.

As with the French-oriented project, its German alternative was endorsed in the first half of the 20th century and between the two world wars by a charismatic group of key intellectuals, mostly writers and journalists, who endowed it with a salient narcissist dimension.

The charismatic unofficial leader of this group was the writer, journalist and outspoken politician Nae Ionescu, who was educated in Berlin. From a theoretical stance, he elaborated on the relationship between the pro-French Europeanism, spectacular and emphatic, and its perhaps more efficient but less spectacular German counterpart. According to Ionescu, the pro-French post-revolutionary trend in modern Romania was mainly rhetorical, touching exclusively upon political discourse and education. In the meantime, he maintained, and to a larger degree than commonly expected, that Romanian culture – including the urban face of *Little Paris* – showed, although disguisedly so, deep and essential German marks.

Nae Ionescu was one of the most vocal and prestigious critics of the self-imposed Romanian modernization, which mimicked the so-called French way: 'I would call it *an exchange mentality* as opposed to *a production mentality*' (Ref. 19, p. 147). The memorable expression '*the exchange mentality*' points to the constant paradigmatic dimension of the imagery connected to Romanian identity construction.

The adepts of Nae Ionescu constantly insisted on the theatrical and the ludicrous aspects of Romania's fervid worship of the French *Saint Model*, and of the country's aspirations for cultural modelling itself upon France. Nonetheless, we cannot ignore the fact that the German-oriented self-colonization that Ionescu's followers preached eventually fed into the extremist nationalist movement of the 'Iron Guard'.

Concluding remarks

Starting with 1848, collective memory and cultural identity in Romania were reshaped, especially in the context of European Modernity. The modernist paradigm of nationalism opened up new ways of linking nation-building to the needs of modern societies and the interests of modern professional elites.

The move from the periphery towards a prestigious cultural Center, especially towards Paris, the capital of European modernism, can be seen as the main dimension of the endeavour of any marginal community to become integrated

and 'visible.' Pascale Casanova draws a careful distinction between this process on the one hand, and on the other that of colonization, which represents an opposite type of move, from the centre towards the periphery (Ref. 20, p. 90). However, Casanova does not offer an appropriate label for the first process.

As a basically centripetal move, internally generated and promoted, the construction of a European Romanian identity cannot be assumed under the current label of *colonization*. I would rather identify it as a *self-colonizing drive*, quite opposite to the *imperialism of the imagination* – a centre towards periphery move – devised by Vesna Goldsworthy[21] to account for the steady and spectacular West-European process of inventing the Balkans.

In a similar way to what happened in some other European areas, in Romania the national identity project propelled by the intellectual elites helped to draw together previously disperse territories, such as Walachia, Moldavia and Transylvania (Ref. 22, p. 45). As Habermas contends, this was also the case of Italy and Germany: 'The nation is, above all, a political project that engenders a sense of cohesion. In the cases of Italy and Germany, the construction of the nation took the form of a top-down approach, whereby the intellectual elites sought to gather support for their political projects' (Ref. 23, p. 410).

In the construction of Romanian collective memory and identity, a logic of homogenization seems to have been at work. Consequently, the local culture can be described as a field in which the forces of identity exerted a *centripetal* pull towards centralization, linguistic standardization and unity, against any centrifugal forces of cultural difference (Ref. 24, p. 33).

Although 100% elitist, this project has been successfully sold to the general public, which cherished its own brand of popular proto-nationalism.[25] In this process, literature, as the main supplier of the national repositories of memory and representation, played an important part as mediator. The local Eurocentric Self – cosmopolitan, modern, liberal, secular, dynamic, democratic, and urban, as it was devised and displayed in a variety of ideological packages, and according to diverse institutional strategies – has been engineered into the comprehensive idea of a National Literature.

References

1. V. Nemoianu (1989) *A Theory of the Secondary: Literature, Progress and Reaction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).
2. B. Anderson (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books).
3. M. Spiridon (2004) *Les dilemmes de l'identité au confins de l' Europe. Le cas roumain* (Paris: L'Harmattan).
4. E. Gellner (1983) *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell).
5. L. Wolff (1994) *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilisation and the Mind of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

6. M. Anghelescu (1998) The Romanian Revolution of 1848. Moving Images, *New International Journal of Romanian Studies*, **I**(1–2), 44–51.

7. I. C. Bratianu (1938) To Napoleon III. *Acte şi cuvîntări*. Vol. 1 (Bucureşti: Cartea Românească), pp. 31–32.

8. M. Spiridon (2003) *Eminescu. Proza jurnalistica* (Bucuresti: Ed. Curtea Veche).

9. E. Cioran (1956) *La tentation d'exister* (Paris: Gallimard).

10. A. Gelley (1993) City-texts: representation, semiology and urbanism. In: M. Poster (ed.), *Politics, Theory and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 237–261.

11. M. Halbwachs (1992) The reconstruction of the past. *On Collective Memory*, edited, translated and with an Introduction by Lewis Coser (Chicago, London: Chicago University Press).

12. F. Cabo Aseguinolaza (2006) Dead or a picture of good health? Comparatism, Europe and World literature. *Comparative Literature*, **58**(4), 418–435.

13. E. Said (1979) *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books).

14. M. Eliade (1986) *Briser le toit de la maison. La créativité et ses symboles* (Paris: Gallimard).

15. M. Bibesco (1960) *La Nymphe Europe, I, Mes vies antérieures* (Paris: Plon).

16. S. Totosy de Zepetnek (2002) Comparative cultural studies and the study of central European culture. In: S. Totosy de Zepetnek (ed.), *Comparative Central European Culture* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press), 1–32.

17. S. Suleiman Rubin (2006) Introduction. 'The Idea of Europe'. *Comparative Literature*, **58**(4), 267–270.

18. L. R. Johnson (2002) *Central Europe. Ennemies, Neighbors, Friends* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press).

19. N. Ionescu (1990) *Roza vînturilor, 1926–1933* (Bucureşti: Cultura Naţ ională), pp. 146–148.

20. P. Casanova (2004) *The World Republic of Letters*, translated by M. B. de Bevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

21. V. Goldsworty (1998) *Inventing Ruritania. The Imperialism of the Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press).

22. J. Krejci and V. Velimsky (1981) *Ethnic and Political Nations* (London: Crom Helm).

23. J. Habermas (1998) The European nation-state: on the past and future of sovereignty and citizenship. *Public Culture*, **10**(2), 397–416.

24. J. Donald (1988) How English is it? Popular literature and national culture. *New Formations*, **6**, 31–47.

25. E. J. Hobsbawm (1990) *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Program, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

About the Author

Monica Spiridon is Professor of Semiotics and Twentieth-Century European Culture at the University of Bucharest, and has numerous publications in scholarly

periodicals. She has written books and chapters in books on semiotics, comparative literature, cultural studies, and twentieth-century East-Central European intellectual history, which have been published in Romania, Western Europe, and the United States. She is a member of the ICLA Executive Committee (1997–2003), acting president of the ICLA Research Committee on Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, founder and member (2003–2007) of the Executive Bureau of the European Network of Comparative Studies (ENCS), and Chair to the Experts Panel for Literature of the European Science Foundation (programme ERIH).