

THE NARRATIVE OF CLAN CLUSTERING IN TWO AMERICAN NOVELS

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Abstract

Bruce Benderson's *The Romanian* (2006) and Andrei Codrescu's *The Poetry "Lesson"* (2010) promote a somewhat clannish agenda, enduring in story telling despite the pluralistic kind of society the North Atlantic mainstream culture pledges to build. Way too diverse in kind and nature to be safely defined, this view of the world readily available in Western narrative fiction accounts for much of the bias still displayed presently by the novel genre. Explicitly, the cultural backdrop of (Eastern) otherness against which the plot unfolds is the litmus test of the professed inclusive values of the cosmopolitan Westerner. The metropolitan cultures' competence in policing the civilizational divide between the many worlds available inside and outside the American-European cultural continuum shows through the pages of the books. For example, the two English-written novels dwell on the marginal Romanian identity in order to narrate the world-making patterns of fictional invention. The American Bruce Benderson employs extensively the stock language of orientalism, while the American-naturalized Romanian Andrei Codrescu touches on the identity narratives of his home country. Conclusively, I find that both narrators largely exemplify the value-laden language of narration in terms of instrumentalizing the ethos of the E. U. enlargement and the European heritage.

Keywords: tribalism, Romania(n), West(ern), narrative

Rezumat

Romanul lui Bruce Benderson „Românul” (2006) și cel al lui Andrei Codrescu „Lecția de poezie” (2010) prezintă o agendă oarecum clanică, persistând în povestire în ciuda tipului pluralist de societate pe care cultura „mainstream” nord-atlantică se angajează să o construiască. Mult prea diversă ca fel și natură pentru a fi definită cu siguranță, această viziune asupra lumii ușor accesibilă în ficțiunea narativă occidentală explică o mare parte din prejudecățile încă afișate în prezent de roman ca gen literar. În mod explicit, fundalul cultural al alterității (orientale) pe care se desfășoară intriga este testul turnesol al valorilor incluzive declarate ale occidentalului cosmopolit. Implicarea culturilor metropolitane în dirijarea diviziunii civilizaționale dintre numeroasele lumi disponibile în interiorul și în afara continuu-mului cultural americano-european se vede prin paginile cărților. De exemplu, cele două romane scrise în limba engleză se concentrează pe identitatea românească marginală pentru a nara modelele de creare a lumii într-o invenție ficțională. Americanul Bruce Benderson folosește pe larg limbajul tradițional al orientalismului, în timp ce românul naturalizat american Andrei Codrescu atinge narațiunile identitare ale țării sale de baștină. În concluzie, considerăm că ambii naratori exemplifică, în mare măsură, limbajul bogat în valori al narațiunii prin elemente raportate la instrumentalizarea etosului extinderii UE și a moștenirii europene.

The aesthetic credentials of the novel genre best convey the adjustment to the social environment both narrators and readers live in. Irrespective of the time-honoured tradition of beauty appreciation, the cultural meaning conveyed by narration is relative to the purpose it serves. Mostly, it has to do with producing and circulating narratives of "social cohesion" (Bruhn, 2009, p. 30) or disruption. The current reinterpretation of the pragmatist and Marxian paradigms in the memory studies shifts the stress (simplistically said) from use-value and cultural institutions (focused on economics and class) to memory, i.e. to "knowledge with an identity-index, [...] knowledge about oneself; that is, one's own diachronicity, be it as an individual or as a member of a family, a generation, a community, a nation or a cultural and religious tradition" (Assmann, 2010, p. 123). Tracking down collective memory helps to better understand the unspoken suspicion of the other lurking in the background of most public narratives, be they fictional or not. Particularly, the device of narration proper turns out to be informative of clan clustering on two levels. Firstly, some narrators go to great lengths to campaign on behalf of the people they feel deserve their services. Secondly, the actual plot development re-tells the characters' dealings with each other, as observed through their social outcomes. The aim is to emphasize the benefits of strong emotional and cultural ties between one individual or another and an easily recognizable ethnic, professional or sexually-oriented group.

The need to reproduce ancestral patterns of resilient group loyalty is plain to see in the novels of Bruce Benderson, *The Romanian*, and in Andrei Codrescu's *The Poetry Lesson*, respectively. Essentially, the commitment to a particular 'band of brothers' of which the narrator is obviously a member keeps together the narrative address. Beside the outspoken gay and academic credentials of the two stories, a Western political culture (and eventually identity) is outlined in their unfolding, with the side effect of a Eurocentric narrative meant to display the various attributes of the current American mainstream culture. The Eurocentrism of the fictional address is a matter of describing a counterfactual civic-minded response from the readers. This response is engineered by narrative fiction mostly in terms of character delineation and self-assertive language. The narrative voices are out to secure (poetic) justice for themselves and their people. In doing so they resort to the in-progress fairness policy of Brussels and to European cultural heritage. My interest lies with the mainstreaming of the Romanian narrative attempted by the two writers through advertising 20th century Romanian history – members of the Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen dynasty, the communist regime, Transylvanian exoticism, Balkanism, etc.

In the two novels, on the one hand, identity markers such as formal schooling, sexual orientation, etc. are foregrounded in the story. On the other,

the characters' ethno-national conditioning is never scrutinized, although the very plot is structured around the ethno-symbolism of an American (gay or literary) identity, as explained by the ethos of the E. U. enlargement and by the cultural and aesthetic traditions of the old world. Apparently, "historic nationhood [and] everyday nationhood" (Smith, 2009, p. 134) are mentioned to the extent to which they credit the aesthetic autonomy principle, historically at play in the reception of art since modernism. This is particularly true considering that both stories seem to demand similar recognition, mainly on account of their cultured take on the theme of gay identity and teaching. This is to say that homosexual culture (*The Romanian*) and literary education (*The Poetry Lesson*) are framed in such a way as to promote a conspicuously Eurocentric view of the subject matter.

Well-known ideological underpinnings, pertaining to the way current metropolitan cultures of the world – USA and EU – are fictionally represented, bring together these otherwise strikingly different two contemporary novels. Their competence in policing the civilizational divide between the many worlds available inside and outside the American-European continuum is exactly the same. Unambiguously, their address succeeds in broadcasting a narrative (i.e., loose and disjointed) comprehension of the competing views on globalization most successful in the 1990s: the "end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 288) and the "clash of civilizations" (Huntington, 1996, p. 28). The novels merge them together into an all-encompassing and self-contradictory storyline about the North Atlantic exchange of ideas, people and money. The end result comes across literally as an "imagined political community" (Anderson, 2006, p. 6) that works irrespective of national borders, even if it does not necessarily boast trans-Atlantic national commitments. To all extents and purposes, the two English-written novels dwell on several marginal identities in order to narrate the so-called free world. The world-making patterns of fictional invention fuel the grand narrative of the West in the eyes of the outsiders – the Romanians, the African Americans, the gay community, etc.

Essentially, the narrative voices spell out contrastive associations that are part and parcel of popular culture, which is insistently quoted: "Europe marches gloriously into the North American model" (Benderson, 2006, p. 4); "It seemed to me that American kids were younger than European kids, or at least I was older when I was their age" (Codrescu, 2010, p. 65), etc. The process of acknowledging their sources is of great concern for the authors of *The Romanian* and *The Poetry Lesson*. The referencing is sophisticated enough to introduce the already mentioned euro-centric language of storytelling. Reverence for the oldest part of the free world is meant to showcase the best of the European highbrow culture. These stories are told from the perspective of the clan enclave each author advertises for. The agenda of Bruce Benderson is overtly acknowledged on account of his commitments to the me-

moir genre. He covers the closeted homosexual life of a Romanian hustler by contrast to the “frills of the out gay life cherished by today’s contemporary Western gays” (Benderson, 2006, p. 54). Benderson engages in a propaganda battle for the sympathies and the prejudices of his people in the face of state-enforced discrimination. Anyway, on the both sides of the hetero/ homosexual fence seem to stand equally entitled victims of the recriminatory 20th century cultural paradigms. In the words of Andrei Codrescu, even the conventional “heterosexuality, marriage, and all the negative emotional baggage those two carried became philosophically suspect. That sliver of cultural difference [...] was fertile enough to give birth [...] [to] Queer Studies” (Codrescu, 2010, p. 57). In the same rather irreverent manner, various other social subgroups are mentioned as being on the cultural fringes of the society: “a skinhead-styled subculture of abstinence and heroism with tints of racism and survivalist ethos” (*idem*, p. 54); “in every American city of the twenty first century there was now a hole-in-the-wall where disaffected and affluent youth sat between walls festooned with sickles-and-hammers, wearing Che Guevara™ tees” (*idem*, p. 53). As a matter of fact, this is a hands-on approach to calling names and making accusations by means of creative writing, besides exemplifying notions of bias in education. Everything is staged by *The Poetry Lesson* in effective academic terms that even define the “chauvinistic days” (Codrescu, 2010, p. 12) of the 1960s, when it was safe to broadcast “a phrase implying something hierarchical and unsavory” (*idem*, p. 13). Surprisingly, both these 21st century American novels are littered with exactly the same (mildly) objectionable content.

Coming back to Bruce Benderson, his nine months stay in Romania is used as a test for ranking the rate of partiality to ‘your people,’ whoever they are: homosexuals, Romanians, Americans. The text suggests that all those concerned seem to have experienced first-hand such dramatic events. In other words, his story instrumentalizes the issue of otherness, which is inadvertently exemplified by his own reading of Romanian identity. It pre-emptly criticism about his orientalisising and objectifying Romanians by the instrumental use made of his Jewish and gay credentials. Thus, preconceived ideas that injuriously affect the subject are unleashed on all: on homosexuals, on the Romanian identity, on the Roma community. This is an unfortunate instance of essentialism. The novel indicts mainstream heterosexual culture with demonizing ‘his people’ (mostly on account of their inherent otherness), while the text parades the same non-contextual (and disparaging) reasoning, used to define the East and, particularly, Romania. Accordingly, the reader is given plenty of historical insight into the issue. For example, the German-born kings of Romania “feared its Oriental and Byzantine elements and were shocked by its Latin sensualities” (Benderson, 2006, p. 66).

Facetiously, the naturalized American Andrei Codrescu does the same when it comes, for example, to his students. He speaks on behalf of those who hold the right to teach publicly in the universities of “our country” (*idem*, p. 53): “I pissed smugly on academia, which is a way of saying that I pissed on myself, which I do, regularly, to extinguish my pretensions” (*idem*, p. 98). Witty or not, the literary discourse deals in stereotyping the other in terms that eventually resort to biased reporting on race and ethnicity. It happens even if the very (aesthetic) disclaimer of fictional invention tries to play down an essentially offensive language. *The Romanian* is quite blunt about it and does not target exclusively Eastern Europeans: “African-Americans, who approached one another like members of a cult, all obsessed with the culture of Germany. In their eyes I saw a perverse audacity in favoring a country once known for its racism” (Benderson, 2006, p. 257). Likewise, in *The Poetry Lesson* racial colour is openly mentioned as an educational reference not for African people but for the Caucasian: “Letitia Klein’s hair was fiery red, hence her nickname, “Red”. In fact, now that I let my eyes roam over the heads of my poetry students, all their hair ran the gamut of red, from shades of golden-red to glowing embers. [...] a room full of red” (Codrescu, 2010, p. 86).

According to the authors, the benchmark against which to measure these adventurous statements of theirs should be the already mentioned, inconsistent storytelling pattern that quotes popular (mis)conceptions of Europe. Ultimately, it is a narrative trail that links the places, the people and the facts of the old world. They are made to fit into the ideological reading of reality ideal for the needs of the group on whose behalf the writers speak. The two of them are very matter-of-fact about it. Alongside Benderson, who is the ambassador of gay emancipation and self-consciously Jewish, Codrescu openly acknowledges his Romanian descent (yet there is no mention of him being Jewish – his last name was originally Perlmutter), his teaching job or his migrant history (“the many zigs and zags I made between cities and countries” (*idem*, p. 63)) in the plot of *The Poetry Lesson*. This is the cultural background that effectively underplays the occasional glaring bias present in the fictional (aesthetic) reporting on social reality.

Both narrators indulge in rephrasing a holistic comprehension of a virtual continental unity verified on the European, as well as on the American soil. Decisively, the need to perceive and actually to produce a coherent Western identity in these two novels mainly hinges on the narrative evidence of European values, genealogies, etc., not to mention the American ethnicity. Nonetheless, the steady flow of information about both the E. U. and the European civilization legitimizes the sometimes contentious fictional rhetoric, while explaining the American comprehension of the world.

These two stories amount to the attempt of the novel genre to exhibit a Eurocentric outlook on the “cultural foundations” (Smith, 2008, p. 1) of various national, sexual or professional identities. They target the mass culture

and the emerging national tradition of Europeanism. Its rise among "European citizens first at the individual level, and then over the past 30 years at the aggregate level" (Bruter, 2005, p. 4) is appropriated by instantly recognizable fictional language. From the classic, pan-European, Hellenistic and Roman heritage to the possible core values of inclusiveness sported by Brussels, all seems to make sense. For example, the tabloid "story of a Romanian rentboy, abject passion and problematic sex" (Benderson, 2006, p. 256) is also "the time worn story of Pygmalion" (*idem*, p. 122). Equally, the half-humorous pedagogical insights of the poetry teacher are revealing of literature's dependence on the rarefied world of aesthetics as well as on pop culture stereotypes. For example, over quite a number of pages Andrei Codrescu makes a case for loving domestic cats. They are thought to be somehow representative of both the American national character and beauty: "Self-consciousness is a beautiful thing if the self is conscious of its beauty. Need a self so beautiful also be self-conscious? In this matter, cats have it all over us" (Codrescu, 2010, p. 108); "America is a pet-loving nation and cats are our national pet" (*idem*, p. 104). Irrespective of such idiosyncratic statements, the author is obviously able to rephrase the rhetoric of collective consciousness in a rather entertaining manner, which is definitely not the case of the more politically committed Bruce Benderson.

However, it turns out that the novel genre enacts a rather widespread idea that "one should move away from simplistic assumptions concerning linear trends towards greater tolerance in the West" (Rother & Medrano, 2006, p. 177). Meaning that, storytelling acts out the cultural narrative of fear and bigotry best summarized by a tribal politics of suspicion, which I want to believe has always been at the heart of literary realism.

The retrograde cultural policy both novels rely on is a matter of partisan politics and literary realism. Everything has already been said in the optimistic assessment that "literary realism's democratizing impulse opened channels of sympathy to all people, including the members of groups systematically misrepresented in the elitist art of the dominant culture" (Wongham, 2004, p. 6). The partisanship of novelistic realism is readily available to all misrepresented or culturally dominant readers. Similar assumptions regarding the accuracy and fairness of narrative representation are blown to pieces due to similar announcements casually made by Bruce Benderson: "this will confirm my conception of Romania as a well of occult belief that enriches art and literature but that also provides fodder for irrational constructions" (Benderson, 2006, p. 233). Once more, Andrei Codrescu seems to follow the lead of the gay advocate who looks to Europe for answers about the essentially American world he lives in.

In a less panicked way, the narrative voice of *The Poetry Lesson* suspects that the poetry of one character he actually shares with Bruce Benderson, the

British-born Queen Marie of Romania, is “full of shepherds” (Codrescu, 2010, p. 54). The wife of King Ferdinand and mother of Carol II, this “grand-daughter of Queen Victoria” (Benderson, 2006, p. 17) was first a “frightened seventeen-year-old English bride in a strange Eastern country” (*idem*, p. 46). The reader finds out that she then blossomed “into a figure synonymous with Romanian identity, nationalism and pride” (*ibidem*). Of course, she wrote poetry.

If read together, *The Romanian* and *The poetry Lesson* prove that the services rendered to her adopted country by Queen Marie have never actually ended. She is repeatedly mentioned as the one who “brings Romania to the attention of the West” (*idem*, p. 17) in quite a number of ways. For example, she seems to have had “the most touching one-night stand in the history of poetry” (Codrescu, 2010, p. 6) with “a lumber baron in Washington” (*idem*, p. 6) in the 1920s, while on an American tour. Allegedly, Missy, as she was affectionately known, decisively helped “enlarging Romania rather than partitioning it” (Benderson, 2006, p. 45), in the aftermath of World War I. “Queen Marie’d been a flapper, friend of Isadora Duncan and Rodin, among others” (Codrescu, 2010, p. 6) – a fashionable woman of the roaring ‘20s who showed independent behaviour, though Queen of a European country. Her professed Romanian identity, her friends and connections, even her present-day museum in Washington (set-up by the grateful baron) shapes the image of the oriental Romanians into something less strange and even offensive. She has become a cultural icon that translates Romanian otherness into the familiar language of a westernized social reality.

These two novels of Bruce Benderson and Andrei Codrescu work to advance the agenda of Romanian alignment to European values and, ultimately, to put on the map the interwar Romania of Queen Marie once more.

Conclusively, I find that both narrators largely exemplify a value-laden language of narration in terms of instrumentalizing the ethos of the E. U. enlargement as well as a rather popular notion of the European heritage. The cultural backdrop of otherness against which the novels’ plot unfolds is their major achievement and highlights the professed standards of Western European progressiveness. This only comes to reinforce a number of widely held beliefs about the gay community, the Romanian identity, the European citizenship, etc. As a matter of principle, they either go unmentioned or are glossed over in mainstream reporting on social reality. Taken for granted or considered way too political, they are thought to be controversial enough to grab attention and trigger strong popular emotion. I have briefly mentioned them in my attempt to come to terms with the transparently clannish agenda advertised by the academically-oriented language of the narrative. Mostly they elaborate on various unsavoury practices exposed by the literary discourse for being, each and every one, alive and kicking throughout the Western world.

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