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Reading “Princepele” through the Eyes of the Doomed – Queering Nationalism and Masculinity in a Communist Romanian Novel

Ov Cristian Norocel

“Oppositional” criticism opposes not only existing structures of power but the very history that gives power meaning. Opposing the past does not mean dispensing with it; insofar as the losses of the past motivate us and give meaning to our current experience, we are bound to memorialize them (“We will never forget”). But we are equally bound to overcome the past, to escape its legacy (“We will never go back”). (Love 2001, 491)

Heather Love’s quotation is a good starting point for an essay that attempts to queer a novel saturated with nationalist conceptions of what masculinity ‘truly’ is. Presenting a picture of 19th century Romanian society, its author, Eugen Barbu, attempted to put forward a subtle nationalist propaganda under the guise of a communist critique of ‘l’ancien régime,’ and by doing so he paved the way “for opening the nationalist past to the socialist present.” (Korkut 2006, 144) The novel was titled in archaic Romanian “Princepele,” intended to be a counter-reading of Machivelli’s “The Prince” (1992). Published as it was during the brief cultural blossoming at the end of 1960s, it addresses the multifaceted issue of power, and pertains to a critique of the deviant, embodied by effeminate men, masculine women, corrupted aristocracy and foreigners, and heralds the Romanian peasant as sole manifestation of desirable masculinity. Nevertheless, the book carries a homoerotic current that may be used in queering it, and thus to destabilize and provide with an alternative reading of nationalism, and to

dislodge patriarchal masculinities from their hegemony. In so doing, I hope to unveil those masculinized memories that nationalism has sprung from, as Cynthia Enloe (1989, 44) puts it, and following this line of reasoning to question the significance of remembered masculinized humiliations, and see what masculinized hopes made possible such a literary work.

Eugen Barbu, a member of the Romanian Academy and a writer most devoted to the Ceausescus, the Romanian dictatorial couple, combined in “Princepele” old official writings, personal letters from the 19th century, and other documentary sources, with a communist party discourse heavily impregnated with nationalist rhetoric, and produced a novel that for the first time portrayed the abnormal, in its most abject and repulsive way: the queer. The irony, if one may say so, was that Barbu without the slightest attempt to justify himself or to engineer a nonexistent dissident image would become, after the overthrow of the Ceausescus, one of the founding members of the first nationalist Romanian party: the Greater Romania Party. The communist coverage aside, the novel may be considered a genuine work of a nationalist writer, or at least an earlier literary piece that offers a glimpse of his later doctrinarian fervor. Staunchly criticized by some, especially for his servile attitude towards the Ceausescu regime, vilified for plagiarism in one of his later books, Barbu was also considered one of the few authors that managed to continue a line of literary innovation started at the beginning of the twentieth century, and who shamelessly

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wrote “a poetics of a decaying universe” (Negrici 2002, 139). To say the least, his personality was then as it is now as controversial a topic as it was his writing.

Writing “Princepele,” Barbu elaborated a moralizing satire, in which he illustrated the different facets of power, because power is arguably central to the novel but in a way that is a reversed reading of Machiavelli’s famous opus (Maier 1970; Ciopraga 1977; Negrici 2002). In other words, Barbu omnisciently employed Princepele, Evanghelina, and Ottaviano to portray the ‘perverse’ effects power may have on people; at the same time, Ioan the Wallach embodied righteousness and ‘normality.’ In a Foucauldian reading (Foucault in Fontana 1979; Foucault 1991; 2006), it can be argued that the first three characters embody the official power discourse, while the latter is the character that articulates the resistance and defiance to power. However, his eventual triumph emphasizes his being part of a “national narrative” (Munn 2008, 146) of Romanian incorruptibility and steadfastness. From this perspective, the tension between the two aforesaid interpretations renders a queer reading all the more interesting.

Enter “Princepele”: The ‘corrupted’ ruling foreigner and the melancholy of power

My analysis focuses on the named novel, “Princepele,” which was first published in 1969; a consequence of its success, it was reprinted five times until 1977. Taking place at the dawn of the 19th century in one of the Romanian principalities, Wallachia, the novel describes a circular, repetitive movement. A new foreign prince was appointed to the throne of Wallachia by the Sultan of Ottoman Empire, while the former was beheaded. The new prince (Princepele) was installed in a pompous ceremony. A master in chiromancy and other occult practices, a courtier from Italy (messer

Ottaviano), joined the princely court. The country was plundered and justice was a forgotten word. More sooner than not, Princepele would be sharing the same fate as his predecessor and he too would be beheaded from the will of the same Sultan, to be replaced by yet another prince, who would too be crowned with similar sumptuousness. Inescapably, the novel ends with the arrival of a new astrologer at the Wallachian court. In other words, the atmosphere of the novel is that of a twilight horizon, with the prince, aristocracy, clergy, and all others playing endlessly a never ending drama (Ciopraga 1977, xi). It was the time of Phanariote reigns, of Greek princes foreign to the land, and Princepele’s real name was bound to not be remembered. As such, he was Princepele, but nothing else; for Barbu offered the reader the masculinized memory, as Enloe argues, of an archetype, that of the oppressor, one of the countless many that occupied Wallachia. Barbu vaguely described him as a graying man in the middle of his life (Barbu 1977, 48–49); what defined him better was an acute sense of the ephemeral:

‘Here power is just a mere appearance, a dream either short or long... Sometimes it lasts for a few months, sometimes for a few years, and most often than not it ends up at Edikulé [a much-feared prison of Ottoman era in Istanbul] in a bloodbath. We are Phanariotes; our nobility grows bigger as more heads are falling in the family.’ (Barbu 1977, 49)

Princepele, a survivor of the intrigues at the Turkish Ottoman imperial court, came to Wallachia with his determined mother, Evanghelina, who helped him gain the throne, and his wife and children. They were surrounded by a corrupt and uneducated aristocracy, which they regarded with contempt. Illustratively, Evanghelina portrayed them as “stuffed ganders” that hardly knew how to dress and lacked any sophistication in their language. She continued commenting that Florence and Mantua,

examples of Italian refinement and courtesy were distant realities, the greedy Romanian upper-class that surrounded the ruling family being but former street-merchants in Istanbul, with their heads “blunted from the weight of the loads they were carrying. They are but scum, nothing else...” (Barbu 1977, 86) The Romanian aristocrats were thus revealed by Barbu to be a degenerate copy of the Machiavelli’s Italian ruling class, and even more so they did not belong to the place, the only activities they engaged in being “intrigues and money-counting” (Barbu 1977, 87). Disconnected to the needs of common people, unable to rise over their low upbringing, they were a strong contrast to the sophisticated air of messer Ottaviano, with his alembicated talk about freemasons and alchemists (Barbu 1977, 353–354).

What brought together the depraved aristocracy and their rulers in their transient reign was their thirst for power, but as Barbu underlined, abusing absolute power deprived them of vitality. Melancholy was what haunted Princepele and his reign, and that translated into his sustained efforts to destroy the nation he ruled, a symbolic parasite overpowering its temporary host. In his confrontation with messer, he revealed how he viciously destroyed “all that meant love for the fatherland in this country,” (Barbu 1977, 52) and estranged the natives from their forefathers. Terrorized and corrupted, Romanians learnt quickly that theft was better valued than honesty, and drinking was as glorious as fighting. Princepele went to such length that forced Romanians to forget their mother tongue; Greek and Turkish words were added to, or replaced old Romanian ones in a process signifying a corruption of the old European spirit embodied by Romanian language (Barbu 1977, 53).

Unlimited thirst for power and sophistication constitute the glue keeping together these characters, on a spiral of homosexual desire, deceit and death. The connection between sophistication and homosexuality is amply

discussed by Joseph Litvak in his “Strange Gourmets: Sophistication, Theory, and the Novel” (1997); he regards sophistication as a “gay inflicted shame, which is then linked to excess and artificiality”. He adds that sophistication “arouses the suspicion that it is *impure*, contaminated from the outset by the desiring, and thus disgusting, body” (*Italics in original*) (Litvak 1997, 6). However, sophistication is just the surface of much darker aspects of Barbu’s characters. Soon it was revealed that Princepele represented the absolute other, not only a mere Greek ruler appointed by the Ottoman Turks on Romanian throne. The messer brought forth another side of Princepele’s personality, illustrating his complete depravity, because it was Ottaviano that stormed his heart.

[Pricepele] remembered of the sun burnt soldiers of those quiet legions with whom he had lived, of forgotten bivouacs by the light of the fire camp, of the shouting of the sentinels, and once more he felt in his nostrils the unbearable smell of the army latrines. It was there where he fell into the habit of men living among men, horses and yatagans. (Barbu 1977, 62–63)

In Barbu’s conceptualization, homosexuality could not have a better location, or source so to speak, than the latrines, a fatidic place impregnated with the smells and proofs of rejection/dejection of the “abject others” as Kristeva (1982) would argue. As such, homosexuality must be understood by the readers as something they need not look at, or talk about. Or as Edelman puts it, “the satisfaction that such relief affords,” and in here referring to the intestinal relief, and thus the remembrance of the latrines, “abuts dangerously on homophobic abjectified desires” (Edelman (1994) in Stockton 2006, 17). Nonetheless, Princepele appeared later as an incarnation of “homo duplex,” in the sense that in him, action was always divorcing from speech, and his speech was always obscuring the direction and meaning of his acts. As consequence of that, he never fully

explored his homosexuality, nor did he fully assume it (and thus never suffered the implied punishment); an alternative key to his “exhaustion with power” may reside in the “heterosexual melancholy” (Butler 1997; 1999) Princepele experienced as a result of his very refusal of grief and incorporation of loss as a result of him loving another man. It is revealed that Evanghelina “had rushed him into marrying his unappealing wife [...] or better said, into marrying to her wealth” (Barbu 1977, 63). In a Butlerian reading, power and wealth were thus the surrogates for homosexual desire, but once a position of virtual absolute power attained, melancholy and yearning for another man began to haunt Princepele; however, power did not impact him solely.

Evanghelina: the masculine woman and the lust for power

The author embarked on a vitriolic critique, making use of a moralist, heterosexist satire, when portraying Princepele’s mother, Evanghelina. Gathering all spite and hatred, Barbu introduced a power-driven woman that did not embody female beauty in its traditional conception. Even more so, her ‘unnaturalness’ was further emphasized by messer Ottaviano’s discussion about the ideal “*donna di palazzo*,” epitome of femininity in Italian Renaissance. What the messer described was a woman chiefly characterized by “‘*la dolcezza femminile*’ [womanly sweetness], freshness and frailty and not by virility” (Barbu 1977, 87); in other words, a subservient woman embodying a delicate appendix to, and a prized trophy for a patriarchic masculinity. Contrasting to that, Evanghelina had a “roaring laughter and her big breasts were moving like full, heavy sacks under the rich garments. She was tall, with a horse-like figure, as a Kazakh; she was standing upright and she was radiating contempt [...]” (Barbu 1977, 86) Bobby Noble discusses in “*Masculinities Without Men*” (2003)

how conservative ideas about gender impose a male identity on those people with a male body, and analyzes how gender, once presented as an immutable biological essence is intimately tied to physicality, identity, and authority (Nobel 2003, x); Barbu, I argue, turned this upside down when describing Evanghelina, in an attempt to underline her violation of the heterosexual conventions of patriarchy. Most importantly, through describing Evanghelina Barbu reminded of the disfiguring effects of her ‘thirst for power.’ In Barbu’s view, the character’s internal engine appeared to be her wish to be where the power was, or the power holders were positioned, inasmuch as to replace them, and thus to turn herself into a source of power, which she would eventually succeed; a proof to that, Evanghelina claimed:

‘For ten years I had always the yatagan belted onto me and I lived on a horse’s back, sleeping like mercenaries on the saddle. I always kept poison in my bosom and if you care to know, I slept [among other countless Ottoman bureaucrats and Sultan’s servants] even with the hostlers from Tekié just to get the power for my son. I dreamt of seeing my son prince in Kara-Wallachia and to accomplish this I humiliated myself beyond imagination. They [all those who slept with me] have defiled me with their lusts, regardless, but I felt nothing, for strong is he who has a single thought: to finish his work, the one he was born for. I wanted to get here and here I am! [...] No, here I never discussed but I ordered!’ (Barbu 1977, 88)

Judith Halberstam argues in her opus “*Female masculinity*” (1998) that inquiring into the manifestations of masculinities without men may offer a different angle on the construction of masculinity, but warns that at the same time “female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing.” (Halberstam 1998, 1) In this light, I would argue that Evanghelina opens

up the novel for the transgression of gender boundaries and identification. Barbu, seeking to prepare for the revelation of 'real' Romanian, "nationalist masculinity," (Anand 2008, 164) described her having the appearance of "a Kazakh", and her "roaring laughter" complemented her manly steadfastness to acquire the Wallachian throne for her son. However, Barbu did not delve into the intricacies of female masculinity, and he symbolically discarded her as a self-standing totality; she could thus find her completeness only through the male bodies that could either possess hers (the Ottoman dignitaries, the Sultan's servants, etc) or her son's bodily presence being confirmed power over his Wallachian subjects. Barbu had Evanghelina bear the insignia of 'abjection,' and positioned her in direct relation to Ottaviano. In doing so, he attempted to project a heterosexist order (Foertsch 2007, 33), and as such to diverge the potential to challenge "the 'naturalness' and biological essentialism of the sex/gender system" (Noble 2003, xii) that masculine women may embody. Nonetheless, her personification of power in Wallachia, second only to Princepele's, and the subordinate position messenger occupied at the court and his reaction to her volition, indicate at least Evanghelina's emblematic tough "imperfect replication of masculinity" (Halberstam 2001, 429), seconded by Ottaviano's corresponding feminization.

The author's intention for moralist, heterosexist satire was translated into the evolving relationship between Ottaviano and Evanghelina according to the heterosexual canon. As a consequence, Barbu constantly reminded readers about the genders he had assigned to his characters, since Romanian, like other Romance languages, allows for a distinction between the genders of its subjects apparent in the narrative. Because of that, I argue, the characters' transformation appears incomplete, bearing the signifiers of a different gender but still being constrained by the narrative frame to a different signification. Thus, Barbu indicated the incongruence that ran from the surface into the depth of these characters, and added

thick strokes to his satirical description of a queer world where everything was but deceit and falsity. His portrayal of Evanghelina may be considered a manifestation of the typical bashing of female masculinity manifest within patriarchic discourse, since, "unlike male femininity, which fulfills a kind of ritual function in male homosocial cultures, female masculinity is generally received by hetero- [...] normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach." (Halberstam 1998, 9) What Barbu did was to prepare his readers for the appearance of the 'true' Romanian masculinity.

Ioan the Wallach: the face of 'normality' and the resistance to power

Indeed, these complicated and transgressive characters were in antithesis to the "son of the motherland," to whom the author gave an illustrative, national name: Ioan the Wallach. From his first apparition he came to underline the different worlds were living in the oppressors, embodied by the Greek Phanariotes, and the oppressed Wallachian peasants, the 'true' Romanians. This falls in line with Halberstam's (1998, 4) argument about the heavy dependency of masculinities that embody the norm on the other minority masculinities for imposing themselves on the hegemonic position. In this light, Barbu seems to treat the abject anti-heroic characters in his writing, be those masculine women or effeminate men, as a necessary counterweight to the appearance of the idealized type of masculinity and his establishment as the desired norm:

They stopped at the end of the field. In front of them, leaning over the wooden plough, a white haired man was struggling to bring to life this deserted land, wearing only a long, dirty lapped shirt. He

came to the Prince barefooted, with big muddy peasant feet, holding in his callous hands some worms he had picked from the ground. (Barbu 1977, 68)

The traditional masculinity was hence presented in a steadfast attempt to preserve life in the country, not to destroy it, nor to pervert its meaning. Ioan was restoring the balance for he was the man who faced the life's hardships and was willing to work the land even with primitive tools, because his duty was, above all, to keep the native earth alive. Joane Nagel comments on masculinity and nationalism that such terms as "honor, patriotism, cowardice, bravery and duty are hard to distinguish as either nationalist or masculinist, since they seem so thoroughly tied both to the nation and to manliness" (Nagel 1998, 252). Going further, there is an indubitable erotic current marking the close relationship between the peasant and the land that waits to be inseminated by him, and the whole scene was given the resonance of a mystic ceremony (Barbu 1977, 68-69). To little surprise, Barbu's understanding of the Romanian peasantry fell very much in line with Ceausescu's particular translation of communism in Romania, apparent in his official speeches of the time. These would become a mantra in the coming decades, and would constitute later the bases of post-communist Romanian nationalism:

'[The] peasantry has for a long time been the class which engaged in the battles for the protection and defense of the existence of our people, for the development of our nation, for liberty, for independence and a better life, for the revolutionary transformation of society. It has been the peasantry which assured the integrity and liberty of our country over the centuries.' (Ceausescu in Korkut 2006, 145)

The power invested in Ioan was revealed in his arrant description of Princepele's reign. Those attributes mentioned by Nagel (1998) became

apparent in Ioan's advice to his prince. I argue that Barbu presented Ioan as the stable stone surviving the roaring passage of an angry river, to use a well known metaphor of the time's propaganda. The wisdom of the centuries seemed to rest on Ioan's shoulders; he claimed a certain moral superiority because he was the only one able to anticipate the circular trajectory of reigning on the Wallachian throne:

'Today is yesterday's butcher, as tomorrow will kill the present day, so do something, your Highness, to save your soul. This is what I have asked all other rulers I served.' 'Were they many?' 'Enough.' 'Reigning in Wallachia is just a mere appearance, I was told. When one has just gotten used to ruling here comes the executioner to take his head off.' 'Delay his coming then.' 'How?' 'Who knows? You have unjust laws. All that destroys contains destruction in itself. A lot of heads have fallen, I witnessed bloodsheds [...]. Disdain and pity, this is all what is left after all that happened.' (Barbu 1977, 80)

But clairvoyance was not Ioan's monopoly, for the author let his readers know that Princepele's reign was sitting under a curse. The corpses, signs of "death infecting life" (Kristeva 1982, 4) were not fully displayed, but the falling leaves resembled "black scarves", and embodied "an omen to bitterness" (Barbu 1977, 80), and thus the central stage was prepared for what was yet to come. For those who could read the signs, the riddle was easily solved; it was just a matter of time until fulfillment. To justify in a sense his narrative line, Barbu transformed Ioan into the voice of his nation, being able to foretell the dreams of his country-fellows and to emphasize the 'wrong' positioning of the Phanariote Princepele at the head of Romanian principality. Even though people were bowed with "their face into the dirt", they wished for "other rulers, native ones, who know their customs and do not insult them and do not plunder them" (Barbu 1977, 74).

Ottaviano: the face of 'abnormality' and the corruption of power

Now I suggest taking a step back and remembering the world of this novel. There still is one major character that emphasizes further the alterity of Pricepele and his mother, and their moral decadence. This character unites two major narratives and ideological threads. On the one hand, it was him, messer Ottaviano, who represented the threatening West. His Italian name, his mastery of the Tuscan dialect, his dark knowledge and claimed ability to turn clay into gold indicated him as the corrupted son of Rome, and thus an ideal antithesis to the purity of Romanians, represented by wise Ioan the Wallach. On the other hand, it was Ottaviano who awakened dormant homosexual desires in his prince and 'master.' Even more so, it was his ambiguous sexuality and gender signification that over-emphasized Evanghelina's own miss-representation, her own 'freakiness.' Ottaviano was described by Barbu as Princepele's counterpart in deceit and depravity in that he "seemed to be a madman with that profound, innocent, yet sinful blue gaze in his eyes and with that fresh mouth full of vices, lies and inventions." (Barbu 1977, 37) His loathsome character was gradually unveiled in the book. One most suggestive chapter about Ottaviano's abjection was the feast when bodily experimentation was primordial as the word "carnival" itself suggested ("quando vale la carne"). It marked the apogee of the forbidden relationship between Princepele and Ottaviano, when their homosexuality was openly displayed under the guise of an allegoric raft.

Heading to the [...] balcony, standing up, phosphorescent and naked, the gods Thoth and Horus were entering the stage now. Morbid flute music was accompanying their slow floating. Everybody turned speechless, amazed by what they were seeing. Standing one next to another, there was the messer, with his childlike face, with his

hair like harvested wheat, holding Princepele's hand. They were handsome, they were fabulous, they resembled two archangels; it was the end of our days. (Barbu 1977, 166)

There is a persistent air of doom, a recognizable scent of sulfur in the above quotation. Deathbed Greek music (the flute), Egyptian mythology (Thoth and Horus are the main gods in the Egyptian pantheon), and Christian references (the archangels are leaders of the heavenly legions of angels) compose an ensemble of obvious unnaturalness and morbidity; at the same time it unveils a certain fascination with the two. However, they were already sentenced, and their condemnation was timely communicated to the readers, for they forecasted the "end of our days." Struggling to present the un-naturalness of the homosexual couple, Barbu subsequently put into Ottaviano's mouth a few sentences that were specifically addressed to a heterosexual audience/readership. The discussion between Princepele and messer at the end of the great feast no longer belonged to them, as a man-loving-another-man couple, but it signaled, once more, their incompleteness, their partnership in death so to speak, since the referencing to the river across which the dead souls are carried in Greek mythology (the Styx) indicated such an interpretation

'Did we cross the Styx?' asked the messer. The other did not reply. He was watching the skies with a hand abandoned into the waters. 'Your seed is cold and sterile like the devil's' added Ottaviano and smiled sadly with those lips of his reminding of those of an innocent child. (Barbu 1977, 167)

The question that comes forward is why would any man-loving-another-man be interested if the "seed," especially their seed, was sterile? Who may be interested in direct procreation, who would be interested in the survival through the Child, if not a heterosexual couple, or in this case an implied heterosexual readership? I think the best reaction to this omnipresence

of the symbolic child is Edelman's irreverent "[f]uck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; [...] fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop." (Edelman 1994, 29) None of the above were troublesome to Barbu, it seems, because he was an intrinsic part of the heteronormative discourse. As such, the narrative unveiled even darker and abysmal corners of Ottaviano's personality. Addressing the same heterosexual audience, Barbu introduced yet another aspect, another cliché I would argue, about homosexuality. Since their seed was sterile, there must have been other means of 'spreading' their abnormality. In his "death drive" (Stockton 2006), the messer extended his circle of depravity, and lured the rather primitive offspring of local aristocracy. Ottaviano, portrayed naked, "was slowly moving his hips as if he were asleep and all he was doing was sleep and death." (Barbu 1977, 283) The ritual initiation was accompanied by messer's flagellation, but instead of the promised purification Ottaviano's skin remained white, luring his victims (Barbu 1977, 283). The corruption of young boyars was consistent with a class critique, specific to a communist discourse that strived to present local aristocracy as altered by its vices, despite its leading position within the time's society. However, their debasement was simply an undertone to the overall morbid air that surrounded young Ottaviano. The class aspect was sidelined in favor of an examination of deviance, and Barbu depicted the immoral and easily corruptible aristocratic youth engaged into a homosexual orgy to further emphasize their lack of true masculine attributes, their exclusion from the caste of 'real' Romanians.

[One of the young boyars chasing Ottaviano] 'Allow me to enter you through the same gateway your prince does!' he said it panting. 'Let me come inside you, there where he is unfettering his seed every night!' Suddenly Ottaviano turned back to him, grabbed a torch from the wall and pushing it almost into his friend's face, said 'Shut up! It is he who is my woman!' (Barbu 1977, 284)

Desiring the messer's body they had become less manly, and less Romanian, was Barbu's sentence. The author equated homosexual sex with a feminization of his characters, a regression on the gender hierarchy he so insistently put forward. His attempt was very much in line with what Connell (1992, 736; 2005, 162) identifies with a continuous heterosexual negation of the masculinity of homosexual men. This can be paralleled to a certain extent to Leo Bersani's argument from "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987) in which he discusses the association made at the level of public discourse between women and gay men and their implied feminine sexual passivity in anal sex. In a similar vein, Alan Sinfield argues that by equating homosexuality with effeminacy, the sexual categories are policed and kept pure (Sinfield 1994, 26). From this perspective, Barbu's readership was embodied, yet again, as heterosexual, and thus unable to understand a man having sex with another man than through the feminization of the passive partner, or even of both. In doing so, he extended the threat of abjection and enforced a hierarchy that exacted heteronormativity as the grid of intelligibility. This reminds of Kristeva's argument that the "abject or demonical potential of the feminine does not succeed in differentiating itself as *other* but threatens one's *own and clean* self, which is the underpinning of any organization constituted by exclusion and hierarchies." (*Italics in original*) (Kristeva 1982, 65)

Closing the circle: the punishment of deviance and the power of the future

Nevertheless, Barbu did not try to be apologetic about homosexuality. He made his position clear to his readers and the narrative eventually lead to the event that actually was so transparent through the whole epic construction. Put simply, the climax was the symbolic punishment of the homosexual couple and their death. Such a book rich in mythological references could

not have a less sophisticated high point. The way Ottaviano was sanctioned by his princely companion for his dishonesty and lack of virtue was highly symbolic. Princepele promised Ottaviano that he would die like Dennis, the tyrant of the ancient Greek city of Syracuse:

‘Make him kneel! Tear off his clothes!’ Princepele was still holding the struggling fish. ‘He will be your last lover!’ he said and the following moment the Messer felt it into his entrails. It was moving frantically, trying to escape from the flesh’s trap. Ottaviano started screaming, feeling his insides torn apart. (Barbu 1977, 362–363)

Undoubtedly, this was the moment when eroticism was at its closest to the death’s embrace in the novel’s pages. The struggling fish was not only a symbolic phallus but also one last male lover. Barbu explicitly assigned a gender to it and thus used the masculine form to define the fish, and not the more common neutral version. At the same time the fish was the messenger of death, so to speak, and “he” would punish/purify the messer and enter him and tear apart his bowels through his unworthy/unholy rectum. Noteworthy is Barbu’s preference, bordering with obsession, for the rectum and entrails. He considered it the place of sin and he attempted to exorcize it, in his own manner, inflicting death on Ottaviano. The scene’s queerness possibly resides in the ceremonial assassination performed by one of the partners onto the other, rather than a more traditional Christian stoning to death. On the contrary, Barbu performed his own rituals, and hence did not follow strictly into the footsteps of Orthodoxism. Therefore, he also punished the ‘century old’ religion in one final chapter, before closing the ritual circle and having Princepele beheaded. What he offered to his readers was a cynical and ironic interpretation of a mad Hadrian worshipping his Antinous

[On the wall] where Princepele and his wife were supposed to be painted, only their clothes were on place. For their well-known

faces were replaced with the messer’s! Evanghelina was painted too, but only her dress and armchair, for in her chair, too, was resting Ottaviano. [...] The wasteful and lustful son was walking with the messer’s sweet face, and in the scene of the Death of the Rightful, it was the messer who appeared. [...] Virgin Mary the Enlightener was him too, in women’s dresses, laughing with a perverse smile, and Mary of Magdalene was also him, showing her under-dresses to those who helped her cross the Jordan. (Barbu 1977, 373–375)

The description of the church morphed into a pagan temple for the worship of male love is of a rare narrative virtuosity. On the one hand, Orthodoxy as national religion was questioned and ridiculed for its preferences for funerary churches, walled monasteries and murals depicting the Holy Bible and Gospels. Far from Protestant austerity, or from monastic ascetic fervor, Barbu offered a queer interpretation of religion, transforming the church from a “house of God” into a hymn devoted to Ottaviano whose face was painted everywhere on the walls. Only one hidden corner was reserved to his nemesis, Princepele, a possible reminder of love, lust, betrayal and death: “under an arch, and hardly visible at the candles’ light stood the face of Pilatus of Pont holding a fish in his right hand” (Barbu 1977, 375).

On the other hand, it may be also read as portraying the different faces of the obsession with power and deviance. It may be the Phanariote Princepele, or his mother; or even more disturbing, it could either be the righteous, the woman, or the man, in a word, it is ubiquitous. However, this character of homosexual ubiquity, in Barbu’s opinion, needed to be contained at the level of alterity, and only those exposed to such exterior influences and not men enough (like the young boyars) may fell into its trap. Nationalism envisages masculinity in a way that does not leave room for ambiguities (Anand, 2008; Munn 2008), and Barbu followed this recipe in portraying his Romanian hero, Ioan the Wallach. Quite ironically,

the only true male, and true Romanian as it was implied, was a sixty year old peasant, that despised sophistication and preferred wilderness to any human companionship.

Even though “the sacralization of the Child”, and thus the over imposition and triumph of heteronormativity, especially of healthy masculinity ideals as they were promoted by a nationalist propaganda, “necessitates the sacrifice of the queer” as Edelman (1994, 28) notes, the insistence with which Barbu looked into the lives of his ‘negative’ characters, the painstakingly details of their relationships, their deadly/death rituals, talk about the author’s own fascination with the queer, the freak, and the abject. Indeed, the queers were punished, killed, and exiled in the pages of his book, but what Barbu described in his novel was a very vivid portrayal of non-heteronormativity, of ambiguity and unintelligibility. His novel, surprisingly, marked the entering into the Romanian literature of clearly different characters. Their queerness was not disclosed secretly, under the guise of heavy symbolism and enigmatic metaphors, but rather put forward in a very direct manner. They were not hiding in the anonymity of the cities, but they were the power of the city. They were the city. It may be so because in his attempt to portray ‘the right,’ Barbu was forced to give voice and shape to ‘the wrong.’ In order to define the normal he necessarily needed the abnormal. However, by emphasizing the novel’s circularity, Barbu underlined that the queer world he described was contained to an amorphous past and a bygone social order, and thus unable to ‘contaminate’ Ceausescu’s rein over Romania. Ironically enough, while trying to demonize a whole group, he gave queers a reference point, a key to understand and interpret their own freakiness. Maybe this is what makes Barbu’s novel most queer at a time when homosexuals, lesbians and other freaks did not even exist in Ceausescu’s discourse about Romania.

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