

Representations of the Other in Duiliu Zamfirescu's *Viața la țară*

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Abstract

An impressive number of articles, (monographic) studies, edited volumes and doctoral theses have already been written about the other/otherness/alterity, as concepts shared not only by literary criticism but also by numerous social sciences. This approach brings forward representations of the other as they appear in a Romanian novel also translated into English which was famous ever since its publication, namely Duiliu Zamfirescu's Viața la țară. The whole text was scoured with the purpose of identifying the elements of alterity to create a corpus recording all the instances where heroes and heroines discuss with or about the other, interrelate with the other or even misbehave in relation to the other. The 34 excerpts were collected into a corpus which was further submitted to analysis and revealing seven sets of such representations scattered throughout the novel, but not all of them were discussed herein because of their repetitive character. In general terms, irrespective of his/her identity, the other is described directly or indirectly. In the case of the former category, the characters pertaining to the category of the self give details about their friends or, maybe, the narrator himself intervenes with details. In the case of the latter category, the other presents himself/herself through personal deeds, opinions and more or less harmful gestures. The attitudes of the self towards the other seem to depend on the other's ethnical group and they encompass a rather limited repertoire of opposite manifestations which include both respect and disrespect, friendliness and distance, neutrality or even an absolute lack of interest.

Keywords: ethnonym, ethnicity, Romanian novel

Introduction

The concepts of the *other/Other* have been used in studies within the field of humanities, in close relationship with *otherness* and *alterity* (Evans 2006: 135-136) [1]. Shared by several sciences, *the Other* has been in the focus of literary analysis interpreting it with both its general and its field-specific meanings. The other/Other, otherness and alterity have sometimes been used interchangeably and author's specifications emphasized the particulars of each of these concepts. Observing the

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Lacanian distinction, our operational term in what follows will be *the Other*.

Historiographical approaches refer to the Greek origins of *alterity* and find similarities between Plato's methods and those applicable in the study of *the other* or of *alterity* within the confinements of psychoanalysis (Evans 2006: 146-147), theology (Caimie and Pucherova 2012) and philosophy (Ittig 2010: 15). These three concepts have also been among the tenets of cultural anthropology (Scheidt 1997: 3), sociology and self-knowledge (Capetillo-Ponce 2003) as well as literature (Al-Mwajeh 2005). Critical literature distinguishes between *absolute* and *radical alterity* (Levinas 1969) or between *self-centered* and *alterity-centered alterity* (Al-Mwajeh 2005: 2). In addition, among other issues, it also refers to *alterity-oriented postmodernists* (Al-Mwajeh 2005: 7), *postmodern ethics of alterity*, *alterity-blind institutions* (Al-Mwajeh 2005: 9), etc. With such well-defined concepts advanced by theorists in the late 1960 as well as with in-depth analyses making the object of doctoral theses (Scheidt 1997, Wright 2012, Ittig 2010), it would seem rather far-fetched to analyse the heroes and heroines of a 19th century Romanian novel as well as their relationships and the background social atmosphere in terms of *otherness* or *alterity*. It would seem so because, in most of the studies on the other, the two concepts are a perfect fit for postmodernist literature (see Johnston 2014).

Material and work method

Although the concepts of *alterity/ other/otherness* have been mostly referred to in critical literature with their in-depth interpretations, there have been recorded instances where more flexible interpretations of the concept are obvious (Burrow 1979, De Armas Wilson 1996). The current interpretation is based on an inspirational model (Burrow 1979) which discusses medieval literature through the lens of alterity. It also focuses on *the Other* and for that matter it relies on a simple definition - "In a more general and older sense, the phrase *the Other* has long been used by philosophers and social scientists to refer to anyone who is not I - the Other actually *defines* me because it is the ultimate signifier of everything I am not" (Childers and Hentzi 1995: iii) - where *I* is any member of the Romanian community.

Our study applies the concept of *the Other* to a late 19th century novel to discuss the self-other relationships in a less dense community living within the borders of two modest villages, Ciulniței and Comănești.

Viața la țară, the novel which opens the first family chronicle in Romanian literature, *Ciclul Comăneștenilor* (the Comaneshteanu Saga), was first published in instalments between 1894 and 1895 in *Convorbiri literare*, a popular literary periodical of the time. A few years later, in 1898, the novel was published in full by Editura Carol Müller, a publishing company in Bucharest. The novel enjoyed such huge success that, between 1899 and 1922 (the year when its author passed away), 50,000 volumes had already been sold.

Translated into English by Lucy Bing and prefaced by Marcu Berza, the novel with a new title, *Sasha*, was published in London in 1926. The novel is a filmic representation of life in the late 19th century Romanian countryside. This social framework is populated with children, with old men and women, with young men and women from all walks of life. Their everyday existence brings them into a universe where they have to interrelate with people sharing their mutual sets of values and with people who come from other ethnical communities and who implicitly have their own values, customs and traditions. Their belonging to these other ethnical groups generates particular attitudes of the self. It is true, there is a huge difference between this very simple Romanian rural world and the present-day postmodernist interpretations underlying the concept of *the Other* and its related notions of *otherness* and *alterity*, but nonetheless, they are indicative of a certain feeling of distance if not even hostility on the part of the self as opposed to the other. The gallery of heroes in the novel prove themselves to be fairly tolerant; some others behave in a humiliating manner, acting rather brutally towards the other.

Findings and commentary

The 19th century rural life in Romania, as presented in this novel, joined together natives of the two above mentioned villages and people coming from other regions of the world, which also include the Romanian principality of Transylvania.

Our research recorded seven manifestations of *the Other* with the following examples of ethnonyms: *jidan* (Jew), *neamț* (German), *țigan* (gypsy), *englezoaică* (English woman), *muscal* (Muscovite), *grec* (Greek) and *lipovean* (Lipovan). When the group of people who were going to meet Matei at the railway station on his home coming after seven years spent abroad to complete his education and becoming a doctor is described, Berlă, the Jew working at the inn (Zamfirescu 2009: 39) [2] is also spotted

among the people. The same word, *jidani* (actually a pejorative ethnonym, which could have been replaced by the attitudinally-neutral word *evreii*) is used in relation to a money lender or rather a pawnbroker whose name is not mentioned but who is described as “a bloody Jew from the Inn with Lime-trees: he asks 17 per cent and says that to a boyar like you ...” (Zamfirescu 2009: 51) [3].

Although, in the Romanian culture, Germans have had a good reputation not only as good mechanics but also as very good professionals, trustworthy, dedicated and hardworking people, the one in this novel is a bit different from the stereotypical image. He most often appears to be as drunk as a door nail, which makes him very hard to rely on. The second reference to this character of the novel portrays him both physically and behaviourally, as follows:

“... there entered Hermann, the mechanic, dirty and all covered with grease; he had grease even on his ears. As usual, he was drunk.”

“What do you want, Mr Hermann?”

“I’m asking for forgiveness, I cannot work for you.”

“Why can you not work for me?”

“You don’t give me food to eat, you don’t give me any drinks, and we must keep working and working.”

“Get out, get out, you shall be given everything you need.”

“I’m asking for forgiveness, I cannot work anymore.”

“All right, go to have a rest and come later to have a talk.”

And so she left him mumbling, and came back to her meal. The German went back to the barn where he fell asleep in the hay while Stoica, the gypsy, was making the threshing machine work. When he woke up he stopped thinking about quitting his job. (Zamfirescu 2009: 52-53) [4].

And so, in the above paragraph, a new representation of *the Other* is introduced, namely Stoica, the stoker, a gypsy living in the village with his family. He had just done his military service and was back in the village to make an honest penny. He is shown as a good and skilled stoker (see the preceding paragraph), but yet, in spite of this, neither he nor his father enjoys the respect of the people they work and live with. These excerpts are indicative of the way people show ‘respect’ towards gypsies:

At the time Dumitrache, the gypsy, was also at the pub. Nobody knows why and how Micu slapped the gypsy dizzy.

"Hei, Micu, is this the way you behave?" the gypsy said when leaving... the people were laughing at the poor and furious gypsy who went to his son to complain. [...]

When he heard that there was a "Romanian" to dare hit his father, that father of his, a soldier recently back home from the regiment after doing his military service, he got full of rage. He took his old man by the sleeve and brought him back to the pub.

"Who is the one who hit my father?" the people would laugh and winked to the shepherd. Stoica came to him.

"Hei! You... Did you hit my father?"

"Well!"

"Well, hit him again! He said grinning as if he wished he saw whether someone dared do such a thing in his presence."

Micu stood up in all his height and when he slammed Dumitrache again, the gypsy saw stars.

Frowned, Stoica stepped aside.

"Hei, you! Come on, hit him again!" Micu was ready: he slapped Dumitrache again. Then, upset, Stoica grabbed his father by the sleeve and he took him out, saying:

"Come on, father, let's go home; can't you see he's dead drunk? Behind them there was huge laughter inside the inn.

The booing and the screeching accompanied the poor gypsies until they got out of sight.

"And so he took three slaps instead of one", said the Greek in a moralizing manner.

Matei laughed at the Greek's story which he had heard from by word of mouth." (Zamfirescu 2009: 144) [5]

The teller of this anecdote is simply the Greek, a gifted speaker, who is also the owner of a pub. The ethnonym is his only name, he has no other element of identification and neither has its pub. In their everyday speech, people simply call his pub "at the Greek's" ("He had a little drink at the Greek's", Zamfirescu 2009: 93) [6].

Another hero whose name is his ethnonym is the Lipovan. A hard working person and a good family head, the gardener who grows melons is described at his working place, where he is fully responsible for his work and who needs no supervisor to keep an eye on him, and where he welcomes his guests hospitably and respectfully:

The Lipovan with his wife and two daughters were loading hay into a cart. Barely had they seen him when they came to him. The man wearing nothing on his head, but a red shirt over his trousers

reached him and kissed his hand; and so did the women. Then, one of them ran into the hut and brought a clean board and a piece of cloth, while the Lipovan was taking out of a pitch an enormous melon which he cut on the board. The melon was wonderful. The blade dipped into the flesh, the Lipovan put it in front of the guest and then he stepped aside. (Zamfirescu 2009: 97) [7]

He is also generous and careful: "The Lipovan chose the best he had in the pitch. Matei put the melons carefully..." (Zamfirescu 2009: 99) [8]. He is attentive and full of solicitude towards his guest: "The Lipovan hurried from where he was and in a second he untied the harness and tied the horse next to the others" (Zamfirescu 2009: 99) [9].

A respectful attitude is also felt, but this time, by Sasha's younger sisters, Mary and Victoria towards Miss Sharp, the English governess living under the same roof with them, and who is hired to look after and educate them properly. Miss Sharp has her own code of manners (Zamfirescu 2009: 82) [10] which does not allow the two young ladies to do a lot of things, and which they won't disobey, even if the governess is away on holidays. Whenever they are about to do something which is forbidden by the respective code, they rhetorically ask themselves "What would Miss Sharp say..." (Zamfirescu 2009: 52) [11]. She is also very keen and analytical: "The English woman's whipping looks would move from Mary to Victoria and backwards because they were about to burst into laughter upon seeing Scatiu's funny head. The governess used to have a hidden discontent for..." (Zamfirescu 2009: 177) [12]. Self-centered, Miss Sharp "would turn into a personal matter all sauces and English preserves surrounding her and at which the old man would laugh" (Zamfirescu 2009: 177) [13].

Costică Oțoianu is a penniless but proud Muscovite who appears just once throughout the novel: "... I was passing by at Fialcowsky's when Costică Oțoianu [...] makes me get on into a hackney, and here we are ready to go... he had not a penny in his pocket, but you know a Muscovite will be a Muscovite"[14] (Zamfirescu 2009: 86).

To all these representations of the other, an addition stands questionable: are the Romanians from Transylvania *the Other* or not? Romanians stand for the self in this novel; Floarea and Micu who have come from the county of Fagarash to make money, and send it home to support their families are also Romanians. As a first fact, they speak Romanian, and they were the same kind of clothes. But still, they are different from their equals, the other peasants working as servants for

the boyars, in that, unlike the others, they are more organized and able to keep things clean and in order. Besides, everybody knows them to have come from a distant place and to have their own way of living, which makes them be accepted as *the other* and not as the *Other*. In Lacanian terms, they are a projection of the ego, of the ethnical group representing the majority.

Concluding remarks

The characters in this novel live a simple rural life, but they develop complex relationships with one another. All in all, the characters in this novel roughly divide into the rich (the countryside boyars, the priest, people working in the law system of justice, or in the local or national administrative structures) and the poor (the peasants working in the fields or on the boyar's farm, the craftsmen – the mechanic, the blacksmith, the stoker). In between there come very few people such as the innkeeper, the owner of the pub, and the pawnbroker(s). So the distance between the two communities seems to determine their relationships: people who play a key role in everyday life do have a name: the English governess is always “Miss Sharp, the English governess”, Hermann in “Mr. Hermann” for Sasha Comăneșteanu, the lady landowner who needs him to keep the threshing machine in operation so as she may have her produce safe in the barn; to the peasants working shoulder to shoulder to him, he is simply “the German” (i.e. “neamțul”). The countryside pub is not a place for the rich, so its owner is always “the Greek”, but Stoica, who is shown to be a better mechanic than Mr. Hermann is “Stoica, the stoker” for the rich and “Stoica, the gypsy” for the poor. The Lipovan who works hard to grow sweet and delicious melons is again just “the Lipovan”.

Except for the humiliation the gypsies have to put up with, the relationships of the other with the self are decent and smooth. The rich do not patronize the poor, they hardly show a sign of superiority or a tendency towards humiliating the other and tolerance is dominant.

The current approach was intended to determine the representations of the Other in the universe of a late 19th century novel and reactions of the self toward people embodying these representations, which actually describe the roots of Romanian tolerance manifested nowadays when eighteen nationally- and state-acknowledged minorities coexist within the Romanian borders.

Notes

[1] Evans (2006: 135-136) describes Lacan's distinction between *the other* (as a reflection and projection of the EGO) and *the Other* which has a well-defined meaning. "The big Other designates radical alterity, an other-ness which transcends the illusory otherness of the imaginary because it cannot be assimilated through identification. [...] the Other is thus both another subject, in his radical alterity an unassimilable uniqueness, and also the symbolic order which mediates the relationship with that other subject."

[2] "Berlă, jidanul de la han..." (Zamfirescu 2009: 39). The English versions of the Romanian excerpts in the current approach are my translations; nevertheless, the original extracts will be quoted in what follows.

[3] "Un afurisit de jidan din Hanul cu Tei: cere 17 la sută și zice că la un boier ca d-voastră ..." (Zamfirescu 2009: 51).

[4] "...intra Hermann mașinistul, murdar și uns de untdelemn până și pe urechi. Era ca de obicei beat.

- Ce vrei, domnule Hermann?
- Mă rog de iertare, eu nu poți să slujești pe d-voastră.
- De ce nu poți să slujești?
- Nu dai să mănânci, nu dai se bei, tot sa lucrăm, sa lucrăm.
- Du-te, du-te, că are să-ți dea de toate.
- Mo rog de iertare, nu poți să mai slujești.
- Foarte bine, du-te de te odihnește și vino mai pe urmă să vorbim.

Și astfel îl lăsă bolborosind și se-ntoarse la masă. Neamțul se duse înapoi la arman, unde adormi în paie, pe când Stoica țiganul făcea să meargă mașina. După ce se trezi, nu se mai gândi să plece" (Zamfirescu 2009: 52-53).

[5] "În vremea asta se afla la cârciumă și Dumitrache țiganul. Cum și ce fel, nu se știe, Micu dete o palmă țiganului de-l ameți.

- Așa faci, nea Micule?... zise țiganul ieșind... Lumea râdea de bietul țigan, care, furios, se duse la fiu-său, să se tânguiască. [...]

Când auzi el că s-a găsit un "rumân" care să îndrăznească să dea în tatăl lui, al lui, soldat întors tocmai atunci de la regiment, se făcu foc. Luă pe bătrân de mâneacă și-l aduse din nou cu el ca cârciumă.

- Care-i ăla, mă, care a dat în tata? Oamenii râdeau și făcură cu ochii la baci. Stoica veni la el.
- Mă nea... ăsta, tu ai dat în tata, mă?
- Păi!
- Ia mai dă una, mă! zise el rânjind, ca și cum ar fi vrut să vadă dacă îndrăznește un așa lucru în fața lui.

Micu se sculă în picioare cât era de lung, și când aduse din nou o palmă lui Dumitrache, văzu țiganul stele verzi. Stoica se dase la o parte, încruntat.

- Ia mai dă una, mă! Micu era gata: cârpi din nou pe Dumitrache. Atunci Stoica, supărat, luă pe tată-său de mâneacă și-l scoase afară, zicându-i:
- Hai, tată, acasă; nu vezi că-i beat mort?

În urma lor era un hohot în tot hanul. Huiduielile și cârâieturile însoțiră pe bieții țigani până pieriră din ochii lumii.

"Și-așa a muncatu trei scatolți în locu de una", zise grecul, ca morală.

Matei făcu haz de istorisirea grecului, pe care o auzise de prin snoave." (Zamfirescu 2009: 144).

[6] " - A băut un pământ la grec." (Zamfirescu 2009: 93).

[7] "Lipoveanul cu femeia și cu două fete încărcau un car cu fân. Îndată ce-l văzură, veniră la el. Omul, cu capul gol și cu cămașa roșie peste pantalonii, se apropie de el și-i sărută mâna;

femeile de asemenea. Apoi una din ele alergă înăuntru colibei și veni cu un fund curat și un ștergar, pe când lipoveanul scotea dintr-o groapă un pepene enorm, pe care-l tăie pe fund. Penele era minunat. Cu custura înfiptă în miez, lipoveanul i-l așeză dinainte, și apoi se dete la o parte” (Zamfirescu 2009: 97).

- [8] “Lipoveanul alege ce avea mai bun în groapă. Matei îi așeză cu grije...” (Zamfirescu 2009: 99).
 [9] “Lipoveanul se repezi de unde era, și într-o clipă desfăcu căpăștrul și legă calul lângă ceilalți” (Zamfirescu 2009: 99).
 [10] “...pravila guvernantei Miss Sharp...” (Zamfirescu 2009: 82).
 [11] “Dar ce zice Miss Sharp ...” (Zamfirescu 2009: 52).
 [12] “Privirile fulgerătoare ale englezoaicei se plimbau de la Mary la Victoria și înapoi, fiindcă erau unflate de râs la vederea caraghiosului cap al lui Scatiu. Guvernanta avea un dispreț ascuns pentru...” (Zamfirescu 2009: 177).
 [13] “...ea făcea chestiune personală din toate sosurile și conservele englezești ce o înconjurau și de care râdea bătrânul.” (Zamfirescu 2009: 177)
 [14] “... treceam pe la Fialcowsky unde Costică Otopoanu [...] mă urcă în muscal și haide n-avea lescaie în buzunar, dar muscalul, muscal.” (Zamfirescu 2009: 86)

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