# The Gazing Eyes of Europe

MARINA CAP-BUN

**Résumé:** *L'ouvrage se concentre sur une modalité spéciale de légitimation de la littérature et de la culture roumaine du XIX^e^ siècle. En reniant énergiquement toute association balkanique, en réaffirmant obsessivement la latinité de la langue et du peuple roumain, l'intelligentsia roumaine tentait désespérément de démontrer par tous les moyens notre européenïté. Pour représenter la légitimité, ils usaient de la métaphore des „yeux attentifs" de l'Europe rivés sur nous.*

**Keywords:** *legitimacy, identity, rhetoric, culture, discourse.*

The Romanian cultural discourse in the nineteenth century defines an ethnically embodied type of sensibility influenced by a number of obsessions concerning identity, easily recognizable in different types of texts (journalistic, literary, theatrical etc.). Their narrative rationality is constantly imbued with specific local passions. In their fundamental book, *The semiotics of passions: from states of affairs to states of feeling*[1], Greimas and Fontanille explained that cultural specificity is defined by this very articulation of the passions. Any enunciation praxis, specific to a cultural zone, progressively leads to a discursive model, in which the emotional configurations are determinant and the discourse always adapts to common imagery of the creator of the text and his target readers or spectators. Thus, cultural communicational interactions produce distinctive outlines, norms and principles, which finally portray the collective subconscious.

In our case, the emotional substance of the public dialogue is always connected to the quest for legitimacy at multiple levels. The typology of narrative interlocutors and of the roles they adopt depends directly on the kinds of passions they are obsessed with, and their excesses are always a source of comical effects and ruthless parody. In current Romanian self-reflecting cultural discourse, stereotype literary patterns generate various rhetorical devices, and the metaphor of the *gazing eyes of Europe*, watching over us, ready to grant any progress or to condemn any hindrance, which I intent to investigate here, is definitely one of the favorites.

Why particularly the eyes of the anthropomorphic figure of Europe? Visual perception is a synthetic and sophisticated cognitive mechanism due to the symbolic essence of the eye, a particular aspect of the archetype of light, especially the light of the mind, which is a combined result of both rational and emotional impulses. Nothing fully exists until visualized by the legitimating eyes of the capricious Europe, which brings form and order out of our chaotic emotional self-representations.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the eyes are closed and this part of Europe was practically ignored by the Western nations.[2] But the impetuous historical events: the failed revolutions of 1821 and 1848, and especially the Union of the Romanian Principalities in 1859, and the Independence War of 1877 could not be legitimated unless they were recognized by the Great Powers of Europe. The only way of gaining a legitimate status was to make the eyes of Europe open widely and remain gazing upon us, a universally acknowledged necessity, which soon gives birth to an obsessive metaphor identifiable in all kinds of public communicational interactions.

In *Bucovina,* a bilingual (Romanian and German) publication edited in Cernăuți in 1848, George Hurmuzachi appeals to "Europe, which fixed its eyes on both principalities, watching their endeavor for freedom."[3] Ten years later, Bolintineanu wrote in the *Program* of his journal *Dîmboviţa:* "we will try to convince Romanians that their utmost joy would be to declare one day: we are a nation, which by its merits made Europe marvel."[4] G. Sion, in his *Introduction* to *Revista Carpaților* (1860) was equally confident in our capacity to gain the legitimating consideration of Europe: "The epoch of rebirth destined for Romanians stimulates them to become worthy of the sympathy and admiration of civilized countries."[5]

Why should the alert eyes of Europe watch the Romanian events with interest and admiration? The strongest, most frequently invoked reason was our Latin origin, professed as an important insignia of legitimacy in the nineteenth century. Subject to the scholarly debate of Școala ardeleană (The Transylvanian School), the topic is also present in literature, theatre, and all the forms of public discourses. Used and abused, the theme of our Latin origin, which Maria Todorova described as "cultural Narcissism,"[6] becomes a common cliché and consequently generates excesses. Occasionally it is combined with the rejection of any kind of Balkan associations.[7] Other times, Romania's historic destiny of being the Eastern border of the civilized Latin Europe implies additional channels of legitimacy. Nicolae Bălcescu insisted that

> Under the protection of the naked chests of the Romanians, on which the barbarians sharpened their sabers, Western Europe was able to cultivate sciences in peace and to attain its wonderful development.[8]

At those moments of great tensions in international politics, the problem of the recognition of the internal historic events by Europe, especially the Union of the Romanian Principalities, which had been accomplished by means of an ingenious juridical and diplomatic subterfuge,[9] was a source of great passions expressed in all the forms of public speech. All the personalities of the time, as well as their prominent Western friends, made huge efforts to attain this form of legitimacy.

One of the important European supporters of the Romanian intelligentsia, who initiated the major internal changes at that time, was the French poet Alphonse de Lamartine. In 1846, a Society of the Romanian Students was founded in Paris, and it was immediately placed under the high patronage of the famous romantic poet. Upon their return home, they continued to work under his guidance. In a letter written in 1886 to Vasile Alecsandri, from London, Ion

Ghica (1816–1897) recounts all the details of this guidance.[10] Informed of their planned revolutionary movement, Lamartine sends his personal associate, Dr. Mandl, to Bucharest to instruct his Romanian friends not to take any action before an agreement with the Turkish administration, which was to be facilitated by general Aupick, the new ambassador of the French republic in Constantinople.

In 1859, the Moldavian poet Vasile Alecsandri (1821–1890) visited Lamartine, with whom he had been closely acquainted, to request his support for the Union, as Minister for Foreign Affairs in the French Government. He recalls this moment in his evocation of the French poet, at his death in 1869, in an article published in *Convorbiri literare*. The outstanding writer and political thinker Alecsandri was one of the most active figures in this process of opening the eyes of Europe, mirrored in both his literary works and in his political articles. His monographer G. C. Nicolescu mentions that: "Whilst in the capital of France, the writer never missed the opportunity of defending the cause of the Union and of championing the closer relations between these two Latin nations."[11] In the autumn of 1848, at the beginning of his exile in Paris, Alecsandri appealed to his French audience to explain the context and consequences of the Union of Romanian Principalities:

> After several centuries of hardships, these two provinces have now risen in response to the call of France, that clarion-call that has awakened all oppressed nations. The events linked with the revolution of the Romanian people are well known to all of you; the papers have published the facts in full. What I wish to call to your attention is the powerful echo that the voice of your country has aroused in mine. Of all the recent conquests of France, the most complete, the most lasting, and the one you are the least aware of is the moral conquest of the Romanian nation.[12]

It is obvious that Alecsandri assumes here that the eyes of France and Europe, finally wide open, were effectively watching the historic events in Romania.

In literary representations, the same rhetorical device is even more sophisticated. Sometimes the metaphor of the European eyes is conventionally represented by a Western traveler whose curiosity keeps waxing with every mile of his journey through the Romanian Principalities. Vasile Alecsandri, the first European figure of Romanian Literature, used this literary convention in his prose writing *Balta Albă* (The White Lake, 1847), which was to be republished in the French review *L'Illustration* in 1854. The text narrates the fictional experience of a French painter who, on his way to the Orient, decides to break his journey in order to visit Walachia, which he discovers as a new, unexplored land:

> 'I must shamefacedly confess, my dear gentlemen,' he said, 'that until I arrived in these parts I had never even suspected the existence in Europe of Moldavia and Walachia. I do not regret my ignorance for, like a new Columbus, I had the joy of discovering by myself these beautiful lands and of realizing that, far from being inhabited by cannibals, they harbor so delightful a company.'[13]

The painter's "amazement" at this discovery becomes the main theme of the text and the entire adventure is filtered through his Western European eyes: "Everywhere around me I *saw* a different world, which I had never even dreamt about. (…) I kept *gazing* incessantly to the left shore of the Danube."[14] In only a few hours, his bewildered eyes were constantly staring to the ludicrous mixture and clash between Western and Oriental influences in Walachia, experiencing different emotions: amazement ("I woke up from that agreeable amazement"[15]), perplexity ("just imagine the revolution inside my brains"[16]), fear ("my poetic admiration suddenly turned into a concern, which was a close relative to fear"[17]), astonishment ("the things I *saw* aggravated my astonishment"[18]), joy ("I was filled with wonder and joy"[19]), happiness ("the happiness of a man who, being lost in a foreign country, hears the language of his motherland"[20]) , delight ("That feast, which was meant to overbalance all my ideas about the savage Walachia, aroused my unexpected delight!"[21]).

The entire allegory of the stunned Western European eyes becomes an efficient disguise for the message of social and political criticism, as will be the case with the dramatist Ion Luca Caragiale (1852–1912) in the next generation. In an article published in *Moftul Român* in 1893, he assesses the special preparations of the capital in order to welcome the young royal couple. Caragiale ruthlessly criticizes the bad taste of the kitsch ornamentations:

> God! What forms! What a mixture of colors, what a miserable execution! What a lack of artistic taste! Should the genius of ugliness, of baroque and of monstrous have presided over the work it could not have come out worse. The capital has the air of a parvenu country woman, smothered in ribbons, laces, flounces, fake diamonds, and painted feathers.[22]

In the Western European eyes of Mary of Edinburgh, "Thackeray's gracious fellow country-woman,"[23] Bucharest should make a terrible impression. Caragiale assumes that she would exclaim in sorrow: "What country of snobs!"[24] Why was Thackeray chosen, of all the famous English writers? Probably to suggest a subtle association between *The Vanity Fair* and the cheap and vulgar carnival of the ornamentations he describes. Like Alecsandri, he emphasizes the disturbing mixture and the contrasts of any kind, assuming that they are hardly comprehensible for a foreigner.

In his most famous comedy, *O scrisoare pierdută* [A lost letter, 1884] Caragiale parodies the much used and abused rhetoric figure of the gazing eyes of Europe. During the election process of a small mountain town, two local political candidates confront each other, both trying to legitimate their discourses by means of their attitude to Europe. The conservative lawyer Farfuridi makes an empty, incoherent speech, in which the gazing, magical, almost Orwellian eye of Europe watching over us is one of the key arguments:

> If Europe… should fix its eyes on us (…) for Europe to come and recognize with a moment before, from which we could say it depends… as in – allow me – as in 21, allow me, in 48, in 34, in 54, in 64, in 74, and the same in 84 and 94, and etcetera, as far as

> it concerns us… so that we should give an example to our sisters of Latin tribe nevertheless![25]

The major tension induced by the (il)/legitimating gaze of the Great Powers disrupts the orderly course of his speech. His unfortunate anti-discourse becomes a representation of his chaotic emotional quest for legitimacy.

Cațavencu's response, demagogic in tone, yet permanently punctuated by applause from his group of electors, rejects all of Farfuridi's ideas. He is for decentralization and he does not recognize control by Europe. Although he tries to step on the apparently solid ground of localism, the liberal Cațavencu also perceives the European eyes as a source of anxiety: "and to menace you incessantly with Europe."[26] In fact, Europe becomes their main subject of controversy:

> Farfuridi: Yes! progress! progress without conservatism, when we can see clearly that Europe…
> Cațavencu: My dear sir, I do not want to know anything about your Europe, I want to know about my Romania and Romania only… The progress, my dear sir, the progress! In vain you come with bugbears, with anti-patriotic inventions, with Europe, to flatter the public opinion (…) Europe should mind its own business. Do we meddle in its business? No… So it has no right to meddle in ours… [27]

In this struggle between the myopic nationalistic view and the long distance glasses of European recognition, none of them wins the elections. Caragiale's final choice was for Agamiță Dandanache, a candidate imposed from Bucharest, whom the author saw as *more foolish than Farfuridi and more caddish than Cațavencu*. Like Cațavencu, he too found a compromising love letter, which he used as his main political weapon. He had no political values or beliefs of any kind, yet he was "in every Parliament, with every party, as an impartial Romanian should…"[28] His legitimacy comes from his family's political tradition and he would never accept to be left aside from the political games of power:

> it wouldn't have worked for me not to be elected. I and my family, ever since '48… fight and fight… all the time… and to think that I should be left out in the cold just at present… without a constituency… very nearly not elected, old chap.[29]

Apparently, he needs no other validation. However, we must keep in mind that the revolutionary events he evokes had gained the benevolence of the European eyes decades ago.

The theme of the hallucinating European eyes watching over us was far from being forgotten in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and Romania's integration into the European Union in 2007, the ultimate form of consolidating our European identity, revived not only the rhetoric of the nineteenth centuries, but also its identity-linked obsessions.

## WORKS CITED


1 Algirdas Julien Greimas and Jacques Fontanille, *The semiotics of passions: from states of affairs to states of feeling,* translation by Paul Perron and Frank Collins, foreword by Paul Perron and Paolo Fabbri (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

2 Ion Ghica gives one of the most sincere accounts of that situation: "No one knew Romania abroad, not even by its name! We could cry at the top of our voices that we are Romanians, Trajan's great-grandchildren, still no one listened to us or understood what we tried to say." See Ion Ghica, *Letters to Vasile Alecsandri* (Bucharest: Albatros Publishing House, 1973), 91.

3 The quotations from Romanian journals are reproduced after volume *Din presa literară românească a secolului* XIX, (Bucharest: Albatros Publishing House, 1970), 140.

4 *Ibidem*, 176.

5 *Ibidem*, 177.

6 See Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

7 John Reed, who covered the Eastern front during World War I, reported from Bucharest: "If you want to infuriate a Romanian, you need only to speak of his country as a Balkan state. 'Balkan!' he cries. 'Balkan! Romania is not a Balkan state. How dare you confuse us with half-savage Greeks or Slavs! We are Latins.'" John Reed, *The War in Eastern Europe* (New York: Scriber's, 1919), 273, cited in Todorova, *op. cit*., 46.

8 *Din presa literară românească…*, 162.

9 Because of Ottoman opposition, Austria, and Great Britain, the Principalities could not overtly proclaim their Union, but they elected the same ruling prince in both countries, as the international treaties were not explicitly prohibiting that.

10 Ion Ghica, *op. cit*., 176–200.

11 G. C. Nicolescu, *Vasile Alecsandri* (Bucharest: Meridiane Publishing House, 1967), 113.

12 Cited in G.C. Nicolescu, *vol. cit*., 113.

13 V. Alecsandri, *Prose writings*, (Bucharest: Albatros Publishing House, 1974), 108; all further references will be given to this edition; this fragment is translated by G. C. Nicolescu, in *vol. cit*., 108.

14 *Ibidem*, 108.

15 *Ibidem*, 113.

16 *Ibidem*, 117.

17 *Ibidem*, 113.

18 *Ibidem*, 117.

19 *Ibidem*, 114.

20 *Ibidem*, 114.

21 *Ibidem*, 122.

22 *Din presa literară românească…*, 344.

23 *Ibidem*, 344.

24 *Ibidem*, 344.

25 I.L. Caragiale, *Opere* 1 (Bucharest: Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, 1959), 173–174.

26 *Ibidem*, 175.

27 *Ibidem*, 177.

28,29 Ibid., 201; this fragment is translated by Eric D. Tappe in *Ion Luca Caragiale* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1974), 29.

30 *Ibidem*, 199; also translated by Eric D. Tappe in *op.cit.,* 28.


**"Ovidius" University of Constanța**