

DISCURSUL UTOPIC ROMÂN ÎN SECOLUL XIX ROMANIAN UTOPIAN DISCOURSE IN THE 19TH CENTURY

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Abstract

This work constitutes a chronological analysis of the utopian discourse in the Romanian principalities of the 19th century, as influenced by the main currents of thought of the previous century. This was the primary impulse that led to the revolutionary movement by the middle of the century, and the subsequent obtainment of unification and independence.

Key words: *utopia, ideology, Romanian Countries, revolution*

Cuvinte cheie: *utopie, ideologie, Tările Române, revoluție*

The European 18th Century was pre-eminently a century of utopias. The fascination of utopian projections (*„Montrer comment s'allument et s'éteignent les feux de l'Utopie au XVIII siècle!”* Bronislaw Baczko would exclaim admiringly⁹) was decisive in the crystallization and implementation of a series of ideas which – throughout the French Revolution – hallmark not only the *enlightened century*, but the very development of the European civilization and culture.

In the Romanian Principalities, the 18th century does not yield any utopian work. The civilization and, ultimately, taste gap is considerable and difficult to overcome. The reflections of the Age of Enlightenment could only be glimpsed by the Romanians only towards the middle of the 19th Century. It is the classical case of a border space which, at least until 1848, had not been organically connected to the essential, political and social, European flow of ideas.

As for the Romanian Countries, there is no doubt that, laid down, blown about, at times paltered with, social ideas, ranging from liberalism to Saint-Simon's or Fourier's scientific pseudo-utopia, circulated there as well; yet, the lack of a real feedback and the late or anaemic reactions cannot be of much help in our attempt to make a judgement about the impact such works might have had.

The ideological conscience of the Romanian cultural and political elite was subjected rather to the much-talked-about *Dinicu Golescu complex*, which translated into the birth of an acute sense of historic immediacy and the necessity of quickly skipping stages in order to diminish to any degree the enormous civilization gap between the two compared parts of Europe. It was about a convulsion of the creative conscience, accompanied by the kairotic feeling of the necessity of immediate recovery action. In fact, given its recurrence and topicality all throughout our modern history, what was being proposed was an essential change in the appearance, a *metanoia* – if, with sympathetic irony, we could call it that. By necessity, one more ingredient associates itself to this state of conscience – that is, the prophetic and messianic feeling of *setting up*. Everything had to be thought of, designed, and constructed: institutions, laws, structures, and infrastructures. In a word, a *social model* had to be built from the ground up.

As a people, the Romanians had to regain self-consciousness. The feeling of abyss, of absolute gap between the Romanian and the Western cultures, of *lethal jump* as experienced by the likes of Ion Codru Drăgușanu while wandering through the West, had to be superseded. Under the

⁹ "Show how the fires of Utopia ignite and die in the 18th Century!" [in French in the original; translation mine]. Bronislaw Baczko, *Lumières de l'Utopie* ["Utopian Lights: the Evolution of the Idea of Social Progress"], Payot Publishing House, Paris, 1978, passim.

circumstances, the road to utopia was open – certainly, tradition lacking, not at the level of the great classical utopias, nor at that of coherent utopian visions, but at the level of rather sporadic reflexions of utopia.

The first Romanian utopia-related experiences are merely experimental laboratories on the plan of Fourier. Two young boyars, Teodor Diamant și Manolache Bălăceanu, organize a strange experiment, essentially utopian, yet, taking into account its actual completion, preposterous in many ways: *Falansterul de la Scăieni* (the Scăieni Phalanstery).

The experiment is interesting not only from the point of view of sociology, but also because it utilizes a number of well-established utopian topoi: *confreres* and *hive* (in accordance with the aparian terminology of Fourier, himself inspired by Mandeville), community of goods, a *sui generis* calendar devoid of holidays, rigorous division of labour, autarchy of the whole undertaking, and extremely restricted contacts with the exterior.

The experiment ends predictably, in dissolution, after one year of the Phalanstery's existence and the exile of the two project initiators. Everything shuts down lamentably, in derision and disgrace, which should not come as a big surprise: in a culture which would soon give birth to, and be marked by, Caragiale, the utopia could only find its way through one door only – *the farce*¹⁰.

The utopia will become topical again with the crystallization of the social and political ideas which made the 1848 Revolution possible.

Due to the phenomenon of skipping stages, the ideology of the enlightened and that of the revolutionary intellectuals around 1848, although expressing two distinct historical ages separated by a natural gap of over 50 years, come to interfere and, to a great extent, overlap on Romanian soil. The ideology of the participants in the Revolution of 1848 will regain enough of the framework and ideas of the Illuminist thinking (first and foremost, the Revolution's idea of an egalitarian, libertarian, and just society), which not only will it not reject, but it will integrate and valorise at a higher level. The late echoes of the French Revolution will truly resound in the ideological model and the praxis of the generation of 1848. The illuminist utopia, in particular the French one, brought about the cult of Reason, of Nature, and of the People, which turned into the religion of the future, as well as the social projections – that is, the mythos sublimated into revolutionary ethos.

The 1848 utopian echoes are not particularly coherent. They combine and hybridize with the prophetic and the messianic as well as with very many elements of the revolutionary imaginary. It is, therefore, extremely difficult to distinguish in this crucible of ideas the exact amount to which every writer is indebted to Saint-Simon, Fourier, Proudhon, messianism, and apocalypticism as well as how much utopia and revolutionary mythology can be found in one work or another. The impulses, ideas, actions, reactions, philosophies, and currents mingle by necessity; they are fatally impure and hard to encapsulate into one formula alone.

Closer to the utopian spirit at this moment in time seems to be C.A. Rosetti, an adept of the social, anarchic, and universal republic, and, perhaps, Bolliac, owing to the idea of community of goods which, from industry to the arts, the peoples of the world must possess conjointly. Nonetheless, other revolutionaries, such as Bălcescu, Ghica or Ion Ionescu de la Brad, are firmly against the socialist utopia. In fact, all the above – and D. Brătianu or Kogălniceanu could just as well be associated to them – considered the legacy of the French Revolution very maturely, analyzing it critically and adapting it wisely to the specific reality of their country. The utopia was moderate and modelled decisively by the revolutionary canon¹¹.

Genuinely utopian, on the pattern of the Augustine view of *Civitas Dei*, is Ion Heliade Rădulescu. In the description of the divine city, Heliade, whose sacerdotally-messianic obsession is

¹⁰ George Achim, *Iluzia ipostaziată. Utopie și distopie în cultura română* ("Hypostasized Illusion. Utopia and Dystopia in Romanian Culture" [translation mine]), Limes Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, pp. 185-187.

¹¹ Cf. Paul Cornea, Mihai Zamfir, *Gândirea românească în epoca pașoptistă (1830-1860)* ("Romanian Thinking in the Age of the 1848 Revolution", 1830 – 1860 [translation mine]), E.P.L., Bucharest, 1968, pp.12-13.

generally known, puts forth an unusual combination of the socialist and the mystical discourses¹², all against the background of a regressive utopia inspired by the gospels and highly orthodoxist. Heliade belongs to a baroque mental typology and, consequently, has an irrepressible urge towards histrionism, egotism, and memorable grand gestures. His Augustine revelations are intertwined with clear-cut Fourierian features. The nebulous, apocalyptic Christian Providentialism is superimposed over the doctrinaire concepts pertaining to the socialist and revolutionary sets of props in a heteroclite mix (or, rather: bricolage): *Sacred Property, People Bridegroom, People Christ, Dominating Justice*. Heliade's integrationist and internationalist humanism, potentiated by the apocalyptically-eschatological dimension of the divine city, reveals once more the writer's natural propension for utopia. Heliade's type of utopian propension is characteristic of the Romanians in the first half of the 19th Century. After being *promesse de l'histoire*¹³, the utopia withdraws in the revolutionary catechism of the time, accompanying the Romantic visionarism.

The period prior to the Revolution helped the Romanian cultural elites discover and appreciate ever more strongly the utopia in its classical canonical form. A few years before 1848, Heliade confesses that he is going to translate Morus' *Utopia* and Bacon's *The New Atlantis*. Here, though, we need to mention that the first translation of a utopia-like text had been made by Samuil Micu who, between 1800 and 1803, rendered into Romanian several chapters of *The True History* by Lucian of Samosata (the said translation would be published by Nicolae Lascu in 1942).

In 1848, painter I.D. Negulici translates and illustrates *Călătoriile lui Guliver în țări îndepărtate* ("Gulliver's Travels into Remote Countries"¹⁴) as part of the *Encyclopaedic Library*. It was only later, though, that translations of proper utopias would appear instead of, rather, literature of anticipation interspersed with utopian elements.

Such an example of future-directed utopia is the piece of writing *Un vis curioz* ("A Strange Dream") by George Radu Melidon (1831-1837), published around 1857, in Iași, in the magazine *Almanah de învățătură și petrecere* ("Almanach of Learning and Feast")¹⁵. Close to anticipation, the short story has an obviously utopian urban and social design which is projected on the oneiric canvas of the futurist immersion, itself a literary convention and textual device often met with in the work of the utopians. The procedure results in the coagulation of a few utopian visions whose cohesion is remarkable for the Romanian literature of the mid-19th Century. The former student of the Academia Mihăileană ("Michaelian Academy") succeeds to configure a surprise space of exquisite urban organization, a coherent imaginary vision narrated in a fluent and, at the time, quite well-established language, which helps the story acquire a discreet charm, the appanage of true-born storytellers.

A more evidently utopian character and a higher consistency of the narrative discourse are displayed by the startling novella *Spiritele anului 3000*¹⁶ published by the adolescent from Ploiești Demetru G. Ionescu in *Revista junimii* ("Young Men's Magazine") in Bucharest in 1875. The class-book-like name of the writer, who is only 17 years of age, would hardly allow anyone to suspect that the author is none other than the conservative politician of later years Take Ionescu (1858-1922). Even though he will give up his literary preoccupations when politics and the frequent ministerial duties take complete hold of him, the then young Take Ionescu has a propensity for writing; as a high-school student, he will publish poetry, prose poems, short stories, and literary

¹² D. Popovici, *Studii literare IV/Santa Cetate. Între utopie și poezie* ("Literary Studies IV/The Divine City. Between Utopia and Poetry" [translation mine]), Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 1980, passim.

¹³ "promise of history" [in French in the original].

¹⁴ Translation mine. Original title of Swift's 1726 novel: *Gulliver's Travels: Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World by Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and Then a Captain of Several Ships*.

¹⁵ G.I. Melidon, *Un vis curioz* ("A Strange Dream"), in *Un vis curioz - Pagini de utopie românească, selectate și prezentate de George Achim* ("A Strange Dream – Excerpts of Romanian Utopias, selected and presented by George Achim"), Risoprint Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2003, pp. 25-36.

¹⁶ Demetru Ionescu, "Spiritele anului 3000" ("Spirits of the Year 3000"), in *Un vis curioz - Pagini de utopie românească, selectate și prezentate de George Achim* ("A Strange Dream – Excerpts of Romanian Utopias, selected and presented by George Achim"), Risoprint Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2003, pp. 37-80.

reviews. He will first publish in the school magazine *Revista tinerimii* ("Youth Magazine"), then, throughout the year 1875, in *Revista junimii*. After that, his literary concerns will fade – unfortunately so, we would say thinking of his obvious literary gift, his alert and imaginative epic discourse, or his talent in the art of portraiture, which is manifest primarily in exaggeration and caricature. From then on, only the political figure and the strong rhetorician will speak, whilst the writer, though having undoubtedly lent some of his gift to the former two, will mostly ignore himself.

It is difficult to circumscribe accurately the text we are dealing with to the corresponding genre. Such writing is, equally, literature of anticipation, satire, and utopia. We tend to believe that *Spiritele anului 3000* is closer to the latter species. Moreover, we can perceive Take Ionescu's novella as the first authentic utopia in Romanian literature, published, as it was, ten years before Ion Ghica's work *Insula Prosta* ("Prosta Island")¹⁷. Ionescu's text offers a typically utopian social vision; it reshapes a political model of the future with outstanding coherence of vision, and this model is propped by the anticipatory vector of the temporal *raccourci*: a Confederate World State, with its capital at Liberty City, insularity, an urban model of high functionality and aesthetics, a General Council of the world's elected leaders, scientific progress, exemplary order and reformed morals – that is, just as many well-established topoi of the utopian discourse. The perspective is completed by a few other textual surfaces which set forth social regulations that are specific to this type of projects: disbanding of the armies, world's supreme court of justice, invalidation of racial distinctions, human colonization of the world, climate changing, etc.

Spiritele anului 3000 remains a work of significant discourse lengths and alluvia, but its merit resides in its offering a first sample of coherent social utopia which strictly obeys a great number of the rules of utopia writing.

A utopia by excellence, though, can indeed be considered *Insula Prosta* which Ion Ghica (1816-1897) publishes as a *Scrisoare către Vasile Alecsandri* ("Letter to Vasile Alecsandri") in 1885. The text is thought-provoking owing to the ambiguity which places it at the borderline between a lecture in economics and a utopia while it borrows from both – the vision also has a negative pendant, later developed in the short story *Două călătorii în vis* ("Two Travels in Sleep" [translation mine]).

The background and project imagined by a septuagenarian Ghica are essentially utopian: careful architecture and minute urban planning (with distinct concern for the decorative), agriculture enhanced by irrigations (the fields are segmented by the ubiquitous canals which, ever since Morus, have had all the utopian authors obsess over), efficient animal husbandry based on selected races, agriculture based on rational parcelling of the land and judicious crop rotation, a sui-generis system of rural property inheritance benefitting from the advantages derived from lot indivisibility, which ensures production continuity, and so on. The industries are missing, which could look like an oddity when the author is a fervent supporter of liberal economy. The main reason is the lack of raw materials, which are compensated for by "agriculture, pisciculture, ship traffic, and commerce" first, then by craftsmen – from carpenters to... modistes. On the island, the number of forces in charge of maintaining the peace is reduced to a minimum since there are no conflicts there; lawyers can be found, but lawsuits are so few, lawyers do not have much of an activity.

The economics dissertation is always present in the ex-cathedra, erudite, and sententious tone of the author. Ghica pictures himself as a true guide who has access to the infallible truth and is intent on propagating it to the masses. He vituperates indefatigably against the revolutionary, Communist, anarchic theories of Marx or Bakunin and sanctions them promptly:

These are the kinds of aberration the human spirit can yield when it loses sight of the

¹⁷ Ion Ghica, *Insula Prosta* ("Prosta Island"), in *Scrisori către Vasile Alecsandri* ("Letters to Vasile Alecsandri"), Minerva Publishing House, Bucharest, 1967, pp. 260-303.

*primordial principles of morals, rights, and duties*¹⁸.

The 21st-Century commentator, who can take a retrospective and detached look at the social ravages and the inhumane outbursts of last century's Marxist ideology, can only have an admiring attitude to the visionarism and the sharp political feeling of the old liberal at the end of the 19th Century.

We shall not dwell here upon the tendencies promoted by some of the Romantics, of embracing the regressive utopia which is akin to myth and oneiric passeism. Such a psycho-mythical recuperating impulse is tightly bound to the nostalgia for the reconfiguration of a virtual social model belonging to a *felix aurea aetas*¹⁹.

At the end of the 19th Century, the utopian discourse is ever more indelibly marked by anticipative, sometimes catastrophic, tendencies, so that we are witnessing a gradual leaving behind of the canonical model of the classical utopia and the gliding towards a frontier territory which brings the genre close to anticipation, scientific projection, black catastrophic vision, satire, and even the dystopia's still nebulous limb.

¹⁸ Translation mine.

¹⁹ "happy golden age" [in Latin in the original].