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Aristocracy Ex Machina

Processes of Representation in Fiction and the Legitimation of Power in the Reshaping of Imperial Identities

Sara de Athouguia Filipe
European University Institute

Abstract: From the second half of the nineteenth century, the European aristocracy faced numerous challenges to its traditional power. A wave of political changes across empires led to the necessity of ‘rebranding’ the aristocratic elite. In increasingly democratized and modernized societies, the aristocracy had to defend the legitimacy of its traditional power and status: the integrity – and even the existence – of the group was at stake. Aristocrats, sooner than it is commonly perceived, understood that ‘if they wanted things to stay as they were, things would have to change’.

Literature was used to debate and to justify traditional power, not only because of the influence that aristocracy held in the cultural sphere, in what concerns the readership, the patronage and the creation of fiction; but also because literature allowed to comment on social and political matters in a very direct manner. It is not surprising, thus, that many representations of aristocrats in late-nineteenth-century fiction have accentuated the separation between ‘who *is* the aristocrat’ and ‘who *should* be the aristocrat’; the implications of this split, however, are not so obvious.

This paper shall describe the consequences of this growing discursive division to the collective identity of the aristocracy, by arguing that when elites perceive threats to their political power and/or social influence, they tend to create discourses composed by processes of de-identification and re-identification, in order to preserve and to legitimise power, often reshaping their identities. ‘Aristocratism’ goes beyond a descriptive technique or a plot device: it articulates power by and against others, for and against the empire/establishment, and it is a significant instrument for the continuity and coherence of a collective identity. Moreover, ‘aristocratism’ presents fictional dynamics and actual negotiations of identity and memory that can raise new questions about the identity of political and social elites, and about their crises.

Key words: Aristocracy, Identity, Elite, Literature, Empire

“You should study the Peerage, Gerald. It is the one book a young man about town should know thoroughly, and it is the best thing in fiction the English have ever done”, says Lord Illingworth to Gerald, during the Third Act of the play *A Woman of No Importance*¹. Aristocrats were not only ‘peers’, in the sense that they influenced politics in the high chambers of parliaments and assemblies (and, to a large degree, their political power also manifested itself out of these formal political institutions); but they influenced society and culture too. In this context, art was a vital element of the persistence of the aristocracy as the political and social elite *par excellence*; and, perhaps due to an awareness of the framing of art within this resilience of characteristics of *ancien régime*, Oscar Wilde equates the ‘peerage’ with a notion of ‘fiction’ in the abovementioned play.

In addition to the significance of high culture as “an important ideological instrument”² for the political classes, literature had exceptional advantages in guaranteeing the idea of a hierarchical society conducted by an aristocratic elite. This political potential of literature in the nineteenth-century European scenario had two principal causes. The first is implicit in the nature of literature as a form of art, because “unlike music or painting, it dealt with words and hence could comment directly on political or social matters”³. The second concerns aristocrats as readers, patrons, and also creators of fictional works, because literature often described, reproduced, or (re)created ‘myths, narratives and traditions’ that conferred a particular identity to the aristocracy as a group and, by doing so, literature supported many kinds of aristocracy that, no matter how distant they could be from the *real* aristocracy, were based on the collective memory “that constitute who a group is and how it relates to others”⁴.

In this paper, I aim to analyse the identity of the European aristocracy, offering my interpretation of certain trends of its fictional representations, in a time when the society in general, and the nobility in

particular, underwent so rapid and widespread changes that these can, indeed, be seen as constituting a “pan-European phenomenon”⁵. It is unavoidable to mention such changes, since they are important to understand both the aristocratic response to them and the impact of those responses on the communication of a certain aristocratic identity; however, I will not explore the political functions of the European aristocracy, although they were undoubtedly significant with regard to the membership of this group. Yet, as others have already mentioned, “in order to analyse identities, it is not only helpful to transcend national borders, but also to shift our focus away from clearly defined political, courtly or military functions”⁶.

The defining elements of the European Aristocracy

After this brief introduction and delimitation of the topic, it seems pertinent to proceed with a definition of what the aristocracy really *was*, since the following sections of the paper have the goal of contrasting this aristocracy with fictional aristocracies, by analysing the many uses of a fragmented aristocracy in a discourse of legitimisation of the traditional power.

The problem with defining ‘aristocracy’ is that it usually means too many things and it often means nothing. Firstly, because the word itself is embedded in political claims and prejudices that can be held accountable for a persistent teleological discourse of what ‘aristocracy’ ought to become when faced with ‘modern’ challenges. If we look at a post-First World War Europe, then it might seem obvious that aristocracy was doomed to disappear from the political, social and economical scenes. While formulating his theories of the decline and fall of political elites in 1916, the man responsible for introducing the word ‘elite’ in social sciences, Vilfredo Pareto, presented the idea that *history is a graveyard of aristocracies*. Naturally, he meant it in the context of his theory of circulation of elites, a pioneering societal cycle theory; however, the parallel meanings of the phrase seem particularly fitting to those times and they surely had echoes, even if unintended, in the way how social sciences perceived aristocracy for a long time. Secondly, because we all have a particular – and frequently personal – idea of what ‘aristocracy’ means, and of who an aristocrat was, thanks to a myriad of artistic sources. These are the reasons why it is important to look back and to gather diversified clues, in order to explain what I consider to be the aristocracy, who I consider to be an aristocrat and why so.

Contrary to what the phrase by Pareto might have suggested by the time it appeared, it is now clear that, although “all aristocracies are elites, not all elites are aristocracies”⁷. One crucial distinction that has been broadly made in specialised literature is that aristocracy is a hereditary elite; and despite personal nobility might be found in some cases – as in Russia, for example, with the Table of Ranks established by Peter the Great – there was the assumption that ‘hereditary distinction’ was superior and that “personal ennoblement was simply a way-station on the road to full heredity”⁸.

This emphasis on ‘heredity’ is constant in the works by the specialists on the aristocracy in the late-eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, either the ones who characterise it in terms of decline of power and the ones who describe it in terms of adaptation to new challenges. This is certainly the most agreed upon feature of the aristocracy, and also the first to be mentioned in numerous analyses, in spite of the different forms through which this information is conveyed. Lieven (1992), for example, says that “aristocracy is best defined as an historical, hereditary ruling class”⁹, while Wasson (2006) formulates it as “aristocrats were nobles”¹⁰, stressing that nobles received their rank from monarchs and transferred it to their eldest male child or, as in the Russian Empire, where entail or primogeniture were never developed¹¹, to their offspring. Referring the English aristocracy, Beckett (1986) describes it as “a governing class, a social estate or rulers and leaders”¹².

Clearly, there is a problem with the definition of the aristocracy as a ‘class’: on the one hand, it oversimplifies what aristocracy is, but, on the other hand, as Wasson (2006) pointed out, “there is no suitable alternative”¹³. The aristocracy was an elite precisely because it was the ‘upper class’, the ‘governing class’ and the ‘ruling class’; but this descriptive effort does not appear to be sufficiently robust as a conceptual framework. The aristocratic power over political, social, economical, and cultural spheres has many – more often than not, intertwined – layers and nuances that the term ‘class’ is not capable to grasp.

Another characteristic of the aristocracy widely concurred is related to the land. Cannadine (1990) said about British aristocracy that “land was wealth (...) land was status (...) and land was power”¹⁴ because, at least until a certain period, the correlation between wealth, status and power was territorially defined. In other empires, land property is an equally important requirement for the aristocratic membership, and it continued to be until the end of the First World War, although it did not mean automatic admission to the ‘elite’: “living ‘nobly’ was generally seen as an essential aspect of aristocracy”¹⁵.

I want to highlight this specific feature of membership, the so-called ‘living nobly’, because it draws attention to the most determinant traits of aristocracy as an ‘elite’ and as a ‘group’: first, its deep, and at some times paradoxical, relationship with political power (which comprises the aristocrats’ influence in court; as members of parliaments, assemblies and diets; as leaders of local government; and often in the state service); second, and no less important, the collective ‘aristocratic’ values, such as “a sense of exclusivity, peculiar notions of honor, of being the sole bearers of high culture and civilization, of being the guardians of the general interest”¹⁶. In my view, this is closely connected to another characteristic that is referred by some historians, like Heinz Reif (1999): the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances¹⁷. This is, perhaps, the reason why the thesis by Arno Mayer (2010) is so resonant, despite his arguable reasoning for the First World War: “while Europe may be said to have had a single aristocracy, it had as many nobilities as there were nations”¹⁸. I do not intend to imply, and I think neither did Mayer, that there was a single, let alone unified, European aristocracy as an ‘elite’ or, otherwise, the imperial arrangements and results after the Great War would have been quite different. Instead, I interpret his words in the terms of a wider variety of options that aristocrats had, when compared to what Lieven (1992) calls the overlapping group composed by the gentry: “their characteristics and functions were not precisely the same. Nor did the gentry have as many options as great landed magnates when faced with the challenges of the nineteenth century”¹⁹. Nevertheless, this particular, tiny breach in the definition of aristocracy raises interesting questions because, in fact, if “on the one hand, nobles realized the need to adapt to economic, social, and political changes (...) on the other hand, too much adaptation would undermine their distinction as a caste apart”²⁰ and to change was so important as to conserve in a modernising context, as reference theorists like Bourdieu would say, and others, like Anthony Cardozo (1997) would reaffirm²¹.

Leonhard and Wieland (2011) turned their magnifying glass away from these recurrent descriptions of what aristocracy was and added the claim to be a ‘total elite’ as a characteristic of a group, existent in almost all European societies, known as nobility or aristocracy²². The distinction of this group rests, thus, on a dual acknowledgment: by others, externally, and by the ones who regarded themselves as being ‘nobles’, internally²³. Their analysis went beyond the aristocracy as an ‘elite’ – they even mentioned Otto Brunner and his study, *Adliges Landleben und europäischer Geist*, that describes the nobility as a primarily intellectual phenomenon.

About the ‘aristocracy’ beyond the idea of ‘elite’, I should briefly refer the study of the nobility in France by Monique de Saint Martin (1993). Her analysis enters a broader discussion of the construction of noble identity, although the time period of her analysis is delimited roughly from the 1900s. The construction of this identity, de Saint Martin argues, results from a collective and individual idea of being ‘noble’. In her view, then, nobility is mostly a *croyance*, a belief²⁴. This raises numerous questions on the diversity of aristocracy across Europe, and also on “how the concept of an ‘elite’ has become associated with nobility research, not only as an analytical research term, but also as a self-image of nobility, closely linked to notions such as calling, leadership and race”²⁵.

The aristocratic identity and the challenge of ‘new’ imperial identities

It is important to contrast the abovementioned traditional characteristics of the aristocracy – hereditary nobility; wealth; power/influence over political, social, and cultural spheres; land propriety; and the belief, acknowledged internally and externally, of ‘being noble’ – with the political and social changes occurring in the European empires from the 1860s onwards. In many cases, these changes collided with the traditional identity of the aristocracy, both in its formal, political roles and in its informal, social roles.

The changes I am referring to have some variations from empire to empire, but they are in essence ‘imperial changes’ that transformed the manner in which the aristocracy legitimised its monopoly of political power to a considerable extent; in some cases, the reforms have even transformed the traditional role and status of the aristocracy. Such changes are framed in political trends that could be described simply as an increasing democratisation and modernisation of the empire, and often mean, for instances, the enlargement of the franchise, or an administrative reform, or an increasing parliamentarisation of politics.

Notwithstanding the political and social impact of these changes, the ability to accommodate change is, as I have already mentioned, another crucial feature of the aristocracy. Even before the nineteenth century, the aristocracy had already shown an extraordinary resilience during periods of profound changes, as, for instances, during the process of state formation, and facing the emergence of new social groups. For Asch (2003), who analysed the transition of nobilities in Europe from 1550 to 1700, the noble self-perception and the noble culture underwent drastic changes during this period. He

considers that “the social structures which defined the status, authority and ethos of the new nobilities were (...) quite different from those which had defined the identity of the nobility a hundred years earlier”²⁶, even if there were decisive elements of continuity. Bitton (1969) also argues that the transition French nobility underwent around the same period was a kind of identity crisis²⁷. Changes with such a large scope, and causing a sort of identity crisis – in the sense that there was the need to reformulate the manner in which this collective identity was communicated – can be argued to have occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century, until the First World War. The aristocracy of this period, however, reacted to those challenges in a different fashion, namely through literary means.

In this context, it is perhaps more accurate to see the aristocrats behaving more like an ‘institution’, as George E. Marcus argued, instead of behaving like a ‘class’, since the members of this elite have the feeling of sharing something with each other and the conscious need of communicating this feeling. This nuance of the aristocracy as an ‘institution’ matters to the way a member acted (or reacted) and also to the aristocratic collective identity, because “imperial and colonial elites defined themselves against their lower-class compatriots and also against one another”²⁸, sometimes even by and against the empire. The manner in which aristocracy behaved like an institution by ‘communicating the feeling of sharing something’ was, therefore, decisive for the reaction to or the accommodation of some changes and for the discursive reformulation of an aristocratic identity.

The reshaping of imperial identities during the second half of the nineteenth century was occurring in the context of a society created by and for the western liberal bourgeoisie²⁹, inspiring the comparison between old and new elites that was a “characteristic strategy of the literature of this period”³⁰. This comparison was not intrinsically disadvantageous to the aristocracy, since there was a considerable compatibility between the values of the middle-class and those held by the aristocracy³¹ and also because “nobles firmly occupied and controlled access to the high social, cultural, and political terrain to which the bourgeoisie aspired”³². It meant, nevertheless, that aristocracy would have to legitimise the place it traditionally occupied, when a new wealthy and educated group had the potential to compete for power. On the other hand, the tacit alliance between the middle-class and the aristocracy is often forgotten, although it is of great relevance, since both were “acutely aware of the dangers of democratized politics and, more generally, of the growing centrality of ‘the masses’”³³ and perceived those political changes and challenges as being threatening to the power of their groups and, consequently, to their identities. Besides, the upper-bourgeoisie had some of the same strategies as the aristocracy to deal with those challenges.

The biggest challenge posed to the aristocracy as a ‘total elite’ and as an ‘institution’, however, was in the sphere of politics³⁴, where, simultaneously, the power aristocracy had retained could sow some hope for its preservation. In politics, aristocrats were not only dealing with growing bureaucracies and the consolidation of state power, but also with transformations that directly challenged and threatened their identity and role. I have already referred one of them: the spread of democracy or of democratic ideas and claims. The other has particularly insidious implications for the maintenance of shared interests and shared spaces that established the criteria for political cooperation³⁵ with and within the aristocracy: nationalism. The implications of the core premise of nationalism for the aristocratic identity are obviously dangerous: the egalitarian concept of ‘we are all brothers of the same blood’ is threatening to a group that, during centuries, had made its identity revolve around notions of lineage and exclusivity³⁶. Ultimately, the retreat from ‘democratic sociability’ had a potential to isolate and to insulate the aristocracy from the increasing trends of democratisation and nationalisation of the everyday life in the late nineteenth century³⁷, that could blur the aristocracy’s comprehension of mainstream political sentiment³⁸.

In order to summarize my point, it can be said that the new imperial identities were based on the premise of a gradual, and highly complex transition from ‘subject’ of the empire to ‘citizen’ of the empire, in a time when, although through different processes, to varied extents, and in diverse contexts, “the privileges of citizenship were extended far beyond the ‘Select few’”³⁹.

Multiple aristocracies: representations in fiction and their implications

Due to the morphology of this paper, it will not be possible to draw detailed distinctions between aristocracies across Europe. What interests me, instead, is to interpret examples of the manners in which the aristocracy was portrayed, by connecting these portrayals with a new discourse of legitimization of power by the aristocracy in the context of all the changes and challenges that I have already referred. Although I choose to present very specific literary examples, because of their pertinence for the description of processes of de-identification and re-identification, the illustrated phenomenon can be found in the literature of other empires. In these varied literary cultures, the aristocracies of fiction intended to create a *doppelgänger*, by using multiple aristocratic characters in order to make a clear

distinction between ‘who is the aristocrat’ and ‘who should be the aristocrat’. Aristocrats could be villains, monsters, or heroes; and this discursive ‘otherness’ constitutes a process of de-identification and/or re-identification within an aristocratic group.

The membership and the core values of the aristocracy did not suffer drastic changes in their representations in fiction, nor were they argued to be in need of change; the crux of the argument was then to legitimise the power of the aristocracy in ‘modern’ terms, yet being faithful to the classical idea of ‘rule of the best’. According to this argument, not only aristocrats were the best to rule by blood (heredity), but they were also the best due to their education, and to their moral standards. This fictional model of who should be the aristocrat has to be seen as more than a mere revival: it proposes a substitution of certain elements and/or attitudes of the old system, that was, at least apparently, coherent with the political changes that took place in the empire. By doing these discursive substitutions, literature was used as a mean “to control the way in which the changes worked and even to counteract the logic of some of the changes altogether”⁴⁰, aiming principally to preserve an aristocratic, hierarchical mentality.

Some novels even include precise indications of who an aristocrat is (or should be), often given by writers who belonged to the nobility themselves. One of the most paradigmatic cases of these types of indications is in the Russian literature. The Russian realism was, indeed, very prolific, not only in what concerns the prominence of its writers and the number of influential works, but also as a direct mean of social comment, in which discourses of legitimisation of a certain kind of aristocracy were included.

This literary ‘phenomenon’ in the Russian empire is not particularly surprising though: when determining social status for both higher and lower ranks, education was as a crucial factor in the ‘distinctiveness’ of the aristocracy that “dominated at court and in the chanceries, in regimental messes, in salons and ballrooms, in theatres and lecture halls”⁴¹. Besides, as Reyman (2016) argues, the Imperial Table of Ranks and the logic of service (that also characterises the Russian aristocracy) were highly influential on the Russian literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, although this influence dissipated after the reforms of Alexander II, which, among other consequences, led to the emancipation of the serfs, thus transforming one of the most important spheres of an aristocrat’s life: the land. For this reason, Reyman considers that Dostoevsky “was the last writer for whom the system of rank mattered”⁴²; and I would add that, in the following period of the Russian realism, writers were more concerned with a description of aristocratic lives, by revealing their virtues and struggles, through the contrast between the criticism of a certain type of aristocracy and the praise of other.

The Russian ‘phenomenon’ of literary production led Virginia Woolf to classify the Russian literature as the best in the world⁴³, but it does not imply in any degree that we should treat Russia as a ‘special’, ‘exceptional’ case. According to the Reyman’s argument about the importance of the Table of Ranks, if we search for clues about aristocracy in the Russian literature, there is a high probability that, more often than not, we will bump against the question of ‘service’. Although ‘service’ was a characteristic of the Russian aristocracy, it was often exaggerated as being ‘unique’, or a distant exception in the European reality, when, actually, “the civil service as a normal practice of noblemen is known also of other European countries”⁴⁴. Moreover, in the second half of the nineteenth century, a great “divergence among writers of noble status in their relation to the service emerged”⁴⁵. We should, hence, be careful and look at the Russian literature without the common prejudice of the service as an element that would clearly set the Russian aristocracy apart from its other European counterparts, because we could lose some other information.

Nevertheless, the logic of service is, indeed, important to writers, to their narratives and plots, and to their characters. The description of a high-ranking civil servant may reveal some interesting perceptions of the aristocracy or disclose relevant information about the aristocracy itself. In *Anna Karenina*, for example, the love triangle between Anna, the “conformist bureaucrat Karenin and Count Vronsky, the vibrantly human aristocratic Guards Cavalry officer”⁴⁶ can be interpreted as a reflection of attitudes expressed by the Russian social elites, revealing a certain aristocratic disdain for the bureaucracy⁴⁷. It is, thus, important, to differentiate the characters in order to understand the idea they intend to convey. Konstantin Levin, for instances, is one of the main characters, does not belong to the imperial service, and holds strong opinions about who an aristocrat is:

*Aristocratism, you say. But allow me to ask, what makes up this aristocratism of Vronsky or whoever else it may be – such aristocratism that I can be scorned? You consider Vronsky an aristocrat, but I don’t. A man whose father crept out of nothing by wiliness, whose mother, God knows who she didn’t have liaisons with... No, excuse me, but I consider myself an aristocrat and people like myself, who can point to three or four honest generations in their families’ past, who had a high degree of education (...) and who never lowered themselves before anyone, never depended on anyone, as my father lived, and my grandfather. And I know many like that. (...) We’re the aristocrats, and not someone who can only exist on hand-outs from the mighty of this world and can be bought for twenty kopecks.*⁴⁸

These words obviously carry a specific idea of aristocracy, and also the ‘belief’, as de Saint Martin would put it, to belong to the group. Levin works in the narrative as the ‘good double’ of Vronsky: while the first embodies a set of virtues and characteristics that determines who should be considered to be the true aristocrat, the latter has a dubious family line, and engages in an ‘immoral’ relationship with a married woman. In the same novel we have, then, multiple aristocracies, that were incorporated into the narrative as an aristocratic discourse. This discourse defended a specific idea of an aristocracy that was argued to be historically and morally the most apt to be the leader of the social and the political life, even in (or particularly because of) a context of political change that promoted the creation and/or development of new imperial identities that the traditional elite perceived as having the potential to jeopardise its leadership.

The representation of the aristocracy in *Anna Karenina*, and particularly the example given above, illustrates a process of de-identification (Levin saying to Oblonsky that, although Vronsky is considered to be an aristocrat, he does not regard him as one) and re-identification (when Levin continues by explaining what, in his view, is the ‘true’ aristocracy and he places himself in this group). These processes emerged when there was the perceived need to reformulate what aristocracy meant; however, this reformulation was not so much internal as it was external. Despite the moral evaluation that Levin presents of Vronsky’s character as a member of the aristocracy, the criticism does not present a new model of membership; he says, instead, that he knows many people who lived the ‘true’ aristocratic life. This can be seen as a negotiation of collective memory, since it presupposes further distinctions between aristocrats that go beyond what was historically necessary to the membership, without changing the rules that dictated who belonged to the aristocracy.

The perceived need to ‘rebrand’ the aristocracy in a modernising empire constitutes ‘aristocratism’ as the model of a legitimatising discourse of the persistence of this kind of leadership, in spite of an increasing democratisation of politics and society and of the gradual prioritisation of meritocracy in civil service and public life. Aristocratism is, thus, the adaptation of an *ancien régime* discourse to a legitimisation of power in ‘modern’ terms – an aristocrat should not only be born an aristocrat, but he should also live as one, in order to respect the accountability that the public opinion began to demand from those in positions of power. This did not change the collective identity of the aristocracy – neither was aristocratism intended to do so – but it was a vital discursive element to the preservation of the coherence of this particular identity, when the imperial identities shaped during a time of reforms seemed to collide with its traditional position and interests. Aristocratism was crucial in this literary culture, precisely because it placed the aristocracy in a changed empire, reaffirming its purpose(s), and protecting its collective identity and its pertinence in future arrangements.

Besides, literature often offered a description of the manner in which anti-aristocratic sentiments and discourses of aristocratic legitimacy crossed paths, either by their personifications, by general comments of the narrator about the action, or even through the structure of the novel. Aristocratism always presupposes some kind of ‘doubling’, and this effect is based both on a moral legitimising discourse and on the criticism of the aristocratic leadership.

‘Useless creature, aristocratic trash’, calmly commented Bazarov (...)

‘By your way of thinking do the words ‘useless creature’ and ‘aristocrat’ mean one and the same thing? (...) I assume that you have the same opinion of aristocrats as you have of aristocratic trash. I feel it my duty to inform you that I do not share that opinion. (...) everyone knows me to be a liberal man, a lover of progress; but that is precisely why I respect aristocrats – real aristocrats. (...) remember my dear sir, (...) the aristocrats of England. They do not give up one iota of their rights, and that is why they respect the rights of others; they demand what is due to them, and that is why they themselves perform what is due from them. The aristocracy gave England freedom and maintains it. (...) I want only to say that aristocracy is a principle, and in our day and age only amoral and worthless people can live without principles. (...)’⁴⁹

This is part of a dialogue between Bazarov, the nihilist protagonist of the novel *Fathers and Sons* by Turgenev, and Pavel Kirsanov, who then proceeds speaking of his notions of *bien public* and duty, to which Bazarov responds by saying that ‘aristocracy’, ‘liberalism’, ‘progress’, and ‘principles’ are useless, foreign words. It is clear from his disdain that Bazarov represents the opposition to the aristocratic leadership, and, like radicals, he defined himself “in terms of opposition to landownership and aristocratic influences”,⁵⁰ in spite of his noble origins. Kirsanov, on the contrary, introduces the idea of the aristocrat as being the best keeper of the commonweal, because an orderly and peaceful society is part of his personal interests: he maintains his privileges, while protecting ‘the rights of others’ – this is, according to Kirsanov, the ‘real’ aristocrat who deserves his respect. This can be seen as a negotiation of identity, because Kirsanov gives the example of the British aristocracy to enumerate the qualities of the aristocracy: even though he was not part of the British aristocracy, he was part of an aristocracy; and that

was seemingly enough because the shared values should make the Russian aristocracy more and more similar to the one he refers, due to the modernisation of the empire.

The description of a fragmented aristocracy – or of multiple aristocracies – constitutes what I call ‘Aristocracy Ex Machina’. Like the original expression (‘Deus Ex Machina’), an aristocratic discourse is introduced to solve some kind of critical circumstance that, in the specific case of the aristocracy, is related to the adaption to a changing political scenario and it is aimed to keep a coherence, even if only of a discursive nature, between the aristocratic identity and the reshaped imperial identities. Literature was the stage for a new argumentation for the legitimacy of the aristocratic political power and influence over society, but it could also become the opposite. Either way, the aristocrat had great influence over the plot, the chosen narrative techniques and structures, and that type of character, sometimes just due to his noble position, was often determinant, or at least add something relevant, to the resolution of the main problem.

This use of aristocratism in nineteenth-century literature unified responses to new questions about the place that the aristocracy was to occupy in modernised empires, by preserving, on a fictional level, a distinct collective identity that had united the European aristocracy for centuries. Literature provided, hence, an imagined community that intended to reaffirm the position of the aristocracy during a period when its leadership was questioned not only by other social strata, but principally by the empire. The aristocracy had historically been a valuable ally for the Crown, but the transformations promoted or conceded by the internal restructuration of the empire could threaten the position and, consequently, the integrality, of the aristocracy. The need to modernise had led to the implementation of political changes that had unavoidable repercussions on the society; and the implications of these political changes to the society, in a long term perspective, could get out of control and transform the aristocracy to such an extent that it would no longer have a distinct identity. Yet, aristocrats knew that change was necessary and they were more flexible than what is sometimes perceived; besides, they had the advantage of controlling all spheres of public life.

Literature, like the other spheres, was not without dangers. Ultimately, if it could be used to defend the persistence of an aristocratic leadership, it could also be used to defend the emergence of an *anti*-aristocratic leadership. Although the latter was against the traditional leadership, it was also a kind of aristocratism, since i) the aristocratic characters were still central to the plot; and ii) the discourse of a new kind or new group of leadership was still based on moral arguments. For instances, the monsters created by the literature of the *fin du siècle*, like Dracula, were aristocrats, fought by a new ‘Crew of Light’ that was guided by science and technological progress, but above all, by a sense of moral entitlement to rid the world of ancient ‘shadows’.

Literature as a source in analyses of the identities of elites

There is a wide range of possibilities provided by literature to an analysis of a ‘national’, or an ‘elite’ identity. In my view, literature of fiction is particularly useful in the study of the identity proclaimed by those with actual influence over its production, because, although the literary sources “may work (...) as an effective telescope over society”, we must be aware that they “convey the view of a cultural elite”⁵¹. Literature has more limitations when it is used as a source to an analysis of the identity of groups that did not influence its creation, and neither were involved in its production; nevertheless, it can enlighten important elements or discourses that construed and communicated an identity. Firstly, because “by helping to create language, literature creates a sense of identity and community”⁵²; and, secondly, because literature “offers us a model, however fictitious, of truth”⁵³. This model, fictitious or not, is an evidence for the manners through which cultural, social and political elites perceived their own identity and how they did portray it – and it can also shed light to the reasons why they did communicate this identity through fiction.

Some authors (historians principally), have used literature in order to describe some events and to contrast what was depicted in fiction to what was happening in ‘the reality’. Yet, and although fiction has been a marginal element in the field of history, it can be very useful as a guide to mentalities⁵⁴, particularly in an analysis of a collective identity in a historical perspective, as it is the case of the aristocratic identity. For this reason, I argue that literature is especially pertinent in historical analysis of elites, and particularly of their identity. With regard to the literature of the nineteenth century, it might be said that it is intrinsically aristocrat, since this literature defended “the old pre-revolutionary values, the aristocratic values of individual possibility, of the pursuit of perfection, of grace, of harmony, of particular sorts of goodness, truth, and beauty”⁵⁵ that were at the core of a collective identity; those values were based on tradition, therefore supporting a hierarchical society that was consonant with the interests of the aristocracy. Consequently, literature presents discourses that have an ‘aristocratist’ stance: in a time

when the continuity of an elite identity – in this case, the aristocratic identity – was perceived as being threatened, these discourses were developed, in order to legitimise the preservation of power by political and social means.

The method that I propose in order to investigate the aristocratic collective identity is simplistic; but it can be particularly effective in an analysis of the communication and acknowledgement of an identity, and also of the claims of membership to the elite. Furthermore, when the interpretation of fictional aristocracy raises doubts, it may be tested by the contrast to specific, personal, non-fictional sources, as letters, for instances. What I propose is, then, an interpretative approach to the works of fiction that have relevance to the inquiry of an aristocratic identity and its discourses of affirmation and legitimisation as a total elite. The doubling effect of the representations of the aristocracy in fiction has to be considered in the context of an analysis not only as descriptive, but also as formative of discourses that 1) are based on processes of de-identification (when an element rethinks the belonging of a peer or his own belonging to the group) and re-identification (when an element of the group redefines what it means to belong to the group and the characteristics the members of this group should possess); and that 2) have the purpose of legitimising the power of the elite. I believe that this methodological assumption can be employed in analyses of other elites and literary sources, with few adjustments to different historical and literary contexts.

Literature as a form of art is crucial to give an answer to our human need to overcome the limits imposed by nature to our own lives, through the stimulation of our imagination; but it is also extremely significant in a historical study. Firstly, it brings us closer to the people of the past; secondly, the works of fiction have themselves an important place in history, and some of them have even influenced our civilisation, our mentalities, and sense of belonging; and thirdly, the fiction produced in a certain period of the past can help to describe with more detail the history of its time. In the context of elite studies, literature is also very significant, because it was produced by and for elites, and with regard to its content, it had the elite as a reference, regardless of if it was taken as a positive or a negative reference.

During an interview in 1982, Adriano Sofri asked to Carlo Ginzburg what he would advise to young people who wanted to study history. Ginzburg replied: “To read novels, lots of novels”⁵⁶ – and it seems an excellent answer, not only with regard to the study of history, but also with respect to the comprehension of the identities of the past.

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Sara de Athouguia Filipe is a Ph.D. researcher in the Department of History and Civilization of the European University Institute (Florence, Italy). Her research project focuses on the responses of the aristocracy to the political changes of the period from 1860 to 1890, through a comparative analysis of three empires.