THE SEA AND ITS NATIONAL AVATAR IN ROMANIAN ROMANTIC LITERATURE: FROM THE SMALL TO THE GREAT UNION

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Abstract: *The following paper analyses the emergence of an imaginary of the sea in Romanian Romantic poetry. As Dobrudja and the Black Sea were integrated into the Romanian state rather late, after the War of Independence, it is not until the 19th century that we can speak of a visible literary and cultural presence of the sea, in particular of the Black Sea. A 'mare nostrum' of the Ottoman Empire for most of the mediaeval and modern period, the Black Sea is assimilated into the national imaginary mainly due to Vasile Alecsandri's re-imagining its space from the perspective of ancient history and a translatio imperii to the East. Through Ovid and his cultural legacy, Romania and Romanians are symbolically viewed as the descendants of the Roman Empire in the backward, orientalized Balkans. Though not writing in particular about the Black Sea, Dimitrie Bolintineanu's collection "Florile Bosforului"[The flowers of the Bosphorus] introduces the image of the sea as the exotic Other. Mihai Eminescu, whose unconscious image of the sea overlaps with that of his native forest lakes, takes over the national idea from Alecsandri, and in "Doină" [A doina], circumscribes the national borders to the Black Sea and the Dniester.*
Keywords: The Black Sea; Romantic poetry; national identity; the Balkans; the Forty-Eighters.

Is there a Romanian imaginary of the sea?

In an article published in *Dilema Veche*, Adrian Romilă contends that any imaginary of the sea develops on the basis of a long-established familiarity with the space of the sea and is articulated "by its constant use as a vital and oneiric element" (2021). Although geographically close to the Black Sea, throughout the Middle Ages and the modern period, Romanians, living in small principalities often dependent on the whims of the Sublime Porte, were more economically and socio-politically dependent on rivers such as the Danube and the Dniester. For a long time, the Black Sea had been a *mare nostrum*, the internal lake of the Ottoman and later of the Russian Empire. However, starting with the 19th century, with the opening up of the country towards the West and a newly-acquired taste for voyaging, as well as with the development of the concepts of nation and nationhood, an imaginary

of the sea is being slowly articulated, and after Dobrudja becomes part of the Kingdom of Romania in 1878, this imaginary takes shape around a new reality: the Black Sea.

As Sorin Antohi remarked in *Romania and the Balkans*, the Black Sea and Dobrudja did not play any important role in shaping Romanian identity until the 19th century (2002). The foundational narrative of the Romanian people as descending from the Dacians and the Romans, with Ovid as a tutelary genius, is in reality a Romantic myth of the Forty-Eighters, later developed and shaped by several historians, of which the most notable was Nicolae Iorga.

In the 18th century, while the Transylvanian School, whose obvious political aim was advancing the rights of Romanians and gaining cultural and religious autonomy inside a multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire, emphasized Latinity at all costs, the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, under the Sublime Porte's suzerainty, were ruled by Phanariot princes, whose administration achieved "the Balkanization" of the two principalities, "a process by which the political system, societal structure, everyday life, high and low culture are brought closer to the Levant" (Antohi, 2002). Further, he contends that "[i]t is precisely this legacy of the Phanariot century that constitutes for most Romanians the core of their self-identity dilemmas, controversies, and crises" (Antohi, 2002). Since the process of modernization (closely connected to nation-building after the Small Union of 1859) involved creating stronger ties to the West as well as repudiating what was perceived as the backward Oriental mentality, Romanian self-narratives oscillated between celebrating and rejecting their Balkan roots and traditions in the process of 'self-colonization'60 that entailed adhering to Western values, attitudes and mentality. Therefore, in the long process of nation-building during the 19th and 20th centuries, Romanian identity shifted from Balkanization to de-Balkanization and re-Balkanization, as a result of (often) divergent policies which favoured either a rapprochement or a distancing from the Oriental / Levantine / Balkan traditions.

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60 Self-colonization, as theorized by Alexander Kiossev in *Notes on Self-Colonizing Cultures* is the process whereby certain (national) cultures become conscious of a lack at the core of their identity and thus "import alien values and civilizational models by themselves" and "lovingly colonise their own authenticity through these foreign models" (1995: 2). These cultures can be often found, Kiossev argues, at the periphery of Civilization: they are neither central enough, nor too backward and so their uncertain status is productive of a certain anxiety which then prompts them to adopt the values of what they regard as a 'superior' culture. Romania can no doubt be classified among such countries – first and foremost on account of its peculiar geographical location, "at the Gates of the Orient", a border country, neither here not there. This location prevents Romanians from being able to identify completely with the Oriental or the Balkan element, while at the same time implies being perceived by Western Europeans as a kind of 'Orientalized' Europeans.

As for the Black Sea, its history, as Adrian Romilă notes, is "much poorer in events and mythical accounts" (Romilă, 2015: 105) than the Western marine histories or that of the "huge Mediterranean", as this sea was essentially only "a source of raw materials for the coastal states" (105). Moreover, Romanians "have never had the vocation of great journeys and neither were they great ship-builders, though maritime trade had flourished during numerous periods"[61] (105). Though the imaginary of the Black Sea is scarce in the epic pirate histories that constitute the topic of Romilă's fascinating study on *Pirați și corăbii. Incursiune într-un posibil imaginar al mării* [Pirates and ships. A journey into a possible imaginary of the sea], the sea itself has nevertheless awakened "poetic, intimate, geographic nostalgias" (2015: 105), turning into a poetic, literary and cultural topic. This is understandable, Romilă argues, for two reasons: the modern Romanian nation had little or no time for day-dreaming, and it gained access to the sea only later, in the second half of the 19th century, when it became politically independent.

Since Dobrudja and the Black Sea had been areas formerly belonging to the Ottoman Empire, with a long history of international trade and ethnic mingling, it comes as no surprise that they are integrated into the Romanian cultural imaginary quite late and also with some difficulty. It takes time until they are assimilated into the shifting Romanian self-identity and once incorporated, they turn into an ideological battleground. The study of the relations between the production of a Romanian Black Sea space and national self-identity[62] is central to the understanding of any Romanian imaginary of the Black Sea: as Romilă observed, the marine history of the sea is in itself insufficient, rather scarce in facts. On the other hand, an essential "characteristic of the pontic space would be its ideological modelling" (106): although for Romilă this modelling takes place at the "intersections and consequences of the European political and social ideas" (106), the imaginary of the sea is shaped in the crucible of nation-building. In a nutshell, the Black Sea space becomes a symbollic battlefield where different ideas of the nation and of what constitutes 'Romanianness' (a bone of contention between westernizers and nativists/ autochtonists) confront and contest each other. This is the main reason why the cultural and literary images and

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61 All the translations of the Romanian literary and critical sources are mine.

62 In sociology, the term "self-identity" is frequently used to refer to the modern processes of self-identification, which turn from passive identification with existing structures in traditional societies to a "reflexive project of the self" (Giddens, 1991: 5), as Anthony Giddens defines modern self-identity in *Modernity and Self-Identity*. The distinction between "national identity" and "national self-identity" is therefore not one of substance, for the sources of identity remain the same, but resides in the processual nature of the latter, which implies more agency and entails less reliance on traditional structures. To put it shortly, "identity" is a given, "self-identity" a choice.

representations of the sea in general (and of the Black Sea in particular) are often contrasting, even from the very beginning, in the Romantic literature of the Forty-Eighters from Wallachia and Moldavia.

The sea and its avatars in Romanian Romantic poetry

Thus, in the relatively short history of Romanian literature, the Romantics were the first to approach the topic of sea and use it as a literary motif. Among them, Dimitrie Bolintineanu stands out as the one who made extensive use of the motif in his poems. One of the first mentions of the sea in Romanian literature may be lost to the average modern reader. In "Dorința" [The desire], written in an orientalized language which indicates the exotic theme of the poem, a young lady is dreaming of a wealthy seraglio, from whose high windows she would like to look upon the "deniz", on whose "polished waters", the girl wants to sail with her Ottoman court. This happens long before the modern revolution, before any idea of the emancipation of women, so the girl's most ardent desire is "To be a happy slave, / [...] Even a favourite of the sultan, / And mother of a Șehzade" (Bolintineanu, 1905: 130). This first image of the sea is connected to what Romilă called "the oneiric element"[63] (Romilă, 2015: 111), for the sea brings with it all the legendary wealth which attracted the pirates: earrings and rubies, gold slippers and purple veils.

Yet it is not the Black Sea that constitutes the watery poetic universe which fascinates Bolintineanu, but the Propontide (an ancient name for the Sea of Marmara) and Bosphorus, the place "where art meets nature / To form the most ravishing background" (Bolintineanu, 1905: 111). In his authorial note to the entire collection, Bolintineanu details his fascination for this particular landscape, putting it down to the Romantic Byronian concept of beauty as *coincidentia oppositorum*[64]:

> "The Turks call the Bosphorus: *Bogaz bogassi*. Through this canal the Black Sea communicates with the Propontide or the Sea of Marmara. It has a length of almost 40 kilometres and its width varies from four to one kilometre. The shores of this canal are famous for their picturesque beauty, for the delightful gardens stretching along the shores and on the neighbouring hills […].
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> There is nothing more beautiful in the world, as seascape, than this strait. Here nature has a particular quality, that of never tiring the eyes looking at it. The infinite variety of the pictures produces this phenomenon. Thus every moment brings

63 In his *History of Romanian Literature*, Călinescu calls it "an enchantment" (2003: 219).
64 In "She Walks in Beauty", Byron plays with the contrasts of light and darkness (the Renaissance chiaroscuro) to define Romantic beauty: "She walks in beauty, like the night […] And all that's best of dark and bright / Meet in her aspect and her eyes" (2005: 315).

> something new, either in the design or the colours of this magic picture. The sky, under the influence of the air currents running between the two seas, as well as the shores so varied in their shapes contribute to this eternal battle between shadows and sun rays, and bring forth the great variety”[65] (1905: 398).

The collection “Florile Bosforului” [The flowers of the Bosphorus] includes poems inspired both by his exile, after the failure of the 1848 revolution, when he first escaped to France, then sailed from Vienna to Bucharest on the Danube, headed for Constantinople and further south-east, until he reached Egypt, and by his journey, as an advisor of the new prince of the United Principalities, Alexandru Ioan Cuza, to Constantinople. Ostensibly written under the influence of French Romanticism – “Florile Bosforului” had been inspired by the Orientalism of writers such as René du Chateubriand, Gérard de Nerval and Théophile Gautier – this poetic collection has, nevertheless, a distinct Balkan air, given Bolintineanu's familiarity with the customs and atmosphere of the Ottoman Empire. It appeared both in Romanian (1865) and in French (1866) – together with other poems – in an anthology entitled *Brises d'Orient. Poésies Roumaines (traduites par l'auteur lui-même)*.

The orientalism of an already 'orientalized' writer coming from the Balkans bears the mark of self-reflectivity and betrays a rift at the core of identity. “The flowers” are of course, in a Romantic vein, women who embody the exoticism of the Orient. They live in the seraglio, are kidnapped from Eastern European or Near Eastern countries, and often turn into the object of male desire and female envy. Some of them fall prey to the intricate plots in the palace, are strangled, thrown into the sea water, or stabbed to death for infidelity. They illustrate the submissive status of the Oriental woman, who becomes an object of pleasure and desire, a mere ornament one can dispense with at will. By celebrating the beauty and graces of these women, Bolintineanu appears to support the status quo of an empire which was already disintegrating: “the sick man of Europe”, as the Ottoman Empire

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65 Here is Bolintineanu's original text: “Turcii numesc Bosforul *Bogaz bogassi*. Prin acest canal Marea Neagră comunică cu Propontida sau marea de Marmara. Lungimea lui este aproape 30 kilometri, și lărgimea lui se schimbă de la patru la unul. Malurile acestui canal sunt celebre prin frumusețea lor pitorească, prin grădinile delicioase ce acoperă malurile și dealurile vecine [...] Nu este nimic mai frumos în lume, ca priveliște, decât această strâmtoare. Natura aici are o calitate particulară, aceea de a nu obosi niciodată ochii ce o privesc. Varietatea infinită a tablourilor produce acest fenomen. Astfel, fiece minut aduce ceva nou, sau în desen sau în colorile acestui tablou magic. Cerul, sub înrâurirea curentelor de aer ce-și comunică cele două mări, precum și malurile atât de variate în formele lor, grădinele, stâncile, văile, contribue la această luptă eternă între umbre și între raze, contribue la nașterea marii varietăți” (1905: 398).

was generally referred to at the time. On the other hand, in his observations on the shortcomings of Ottoman society, he criticizes the Islamic view on the subordinate status of women, noting that it was one of the causes of the generalized poverty of Islamic families on the margins of the empire (1968: 94). Idealization – catering to the Romantic taste for the exotic – and pragmatic realism – springing from his acquaintance with the neighbouring socio-cultural space merge stereotypes and cliches with useful insights of the reality of the Other.

The poems in the collection tell stories of Romantic love, beauty, treachery and death in a language which one of his commentators compared to a lake "on which float unassimilated forbidding neologisms" (Păcurariu, 1961: xxxv). At least that is the impression of the modern reader; after the literary language had been shaped by late Romantics like Eminescu, it is difficult to go back to the linguistic orientalism of Bolintineanu, whose language, nevertheless, was true to that of his age, full of what we perceive as barbarisms today: words of Greek and Turkish origin. The descriptions of "the flowers" are certainly very colourful. Each item of the complicated paraphernalia that adorns the women from the seraglio is identified and poeticized: the yashmak, the 'feregea' (a type of kaftan, made of silk or fine fabric, worn by rich women over their dress), the salwars and 'geanfez', a very thin taffeta material, the 'dalga', a silk tunic adorned with tassels, the 'selimyie', a silk fabric patterned with different types of flowers.

The legendary riches of the Orient are alluded to through the frequent mentions and comparisons with precious gems and materials: thus Esme is white as a pearl, her hair is like ebony, her mouth red like a ruby; apart from this, she holds her hair in place with a diamond pin (1905: 99). Nature participates in this show of Oriental luxury as well: the night pours "waves of gold" into the sea (1905: 100) or falls like a "necklace of rubies" (Bolintineanu, 1905: 114), the moon rises "like a silver necklace" (102) or "with a golden face" (103), the blue dome of the sky is pouring "flowers of gold" (110) or is polished with "gold and rubies" (110). The women in the seraglio (the 'hanim') smoke the hookah, and even play with daggers. Also, for more colour, the Bosphorus often appears in the poems under the toponym Bogaz (the generic Turkish name for strait). The sea, as well as its women, appear as the Oriental Other: a desirable Other, which seems to contradict its author's revolutionary socio-political programme. This apparent contradiction is in fact part of the stigma of 'self-colonization': the volume was written mostly to cater for the tastes of a Western (or westernized) audience.

This is why it was often criticized – and marginalized, for that matter – during the communist period: it seemed a bit odd and out of character for

the revolutionary poet66 and author of *Legende istorice* [Historical legends] to concern himself with the luxury and languor of the seraglio, the 'hanim' and the thousands rich fabrics which their shalwars and veils were made of. Yet among "the flowers" and bayaderes, Mehrube, a young woman kidnapped from the Carpathians, stands out as an example of love and sacrifice for one's country: although singled out to become the Sultan's favourite, she chooses death over the luxurious life of the harem. At least there is some resistance to the overall reification of women: Romanians are not only beautiful, but also patriotic.

The Black Sea space emerges as a background for incipient nationalism in another Romantic poet's work. Vasile Alecsandri was one of the key figures of the Romanian 1848 revolution, Romania's first minister of foreign affairs after the union of Moldavia and Wallachia and one of the founders of the Romanian Academy. Although Antohi notes that it took Eminescu's poetic genius "for the Black Sea to be first inscribed into the poetic imaginary" (Antohi, 2002), my contention is that it was Alecsandri who first circumscribed the Black Sea space into a national Romanian imaginary. It was less visible, however, in Alecsandri's work, due to his overall poetic sensitivity for the element of the sea: he wrote extensively about the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Sea of Marmara and Bosphorus, and the Adriatic.

It is true that before Alecsandri, the national idea had been symbolically connected to a ship and its voyage in a poem authored by Cezar Bolliac, another Romantic poet and 1848 revolutionary. When the first Romanian ship was launched in 1834, he dedicated a poem to the event, "La cea întâi corabie românească" [To the first Romanian ship]. In it he took the ship as a witness of the Romanian history, geography and culture, a messenger meant to disseminate this knowledge among what Bolliac calls "the free nations" of the earth: "Tell them that your people knows no treachery / That its trade is young, and it has no rules" (1950: 133), "Tell them that your land is a generous country / Not rich in crafts, but with a sunny weather", "That it has large forests with lots of wood / And its mountains carry great wealth" (134). The enumeration of the country's positive attributes (great natural wealth, sunny climate, peace-loving people)

66 In February 1848, Bolintineanu, together with other Romanian intellectuals, took part in the French Revolution in Paris; afterwards he participated in 1848 Revolution in Bucharest, only briefly successful, and brought out the newspaper "The Sovereign People", which promoted the cause of Romanian independence. After the Revolution was crushed by the Ottoman forces entering Bucharest, Bolintineanu went into exile. In 1857 he and other Forty-Eighters prepared the Union of Moldavia and Wallachia, and after the Union, he was appointed – again briefly - Minister of Foreign Affairs, and then Minister of Education and Public Instruction. In this latter quality, he founded the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy in Bucharest.

gradually develops into the idea of independence. Thus at the end the messenger-ship is poetically addressed and entreated to give testimony about the Romanian national ideal, liberation from the Ottoman Empire:

> "Beautiful ship, go, go, take flight!
> Run unto remote shores, and herald
> That a people who live won't die so easily!
> That although tyranny can kill a man;
> It cannot end a nation's life;
> Eventually justice will forever prevail." (134).

However, it was Alecsandri who gave depth to theme of the national ideal. A westernizer and admirer of France, Alecsandri was also among the first to illustrate the dilemma of Romanian modern identity in one of the poems from the collection *Ostașii noștri* [Our soldiers]: "Balcanul și Carpatul" [The Balkans and the Carpathians]. He turns the Balkans into a symbol of backwardness, fanaticism and Oriental cruelty and the Carpathians into symbols of liberation from Ottoman oppression. Both of them stand at the border of the Danube, confronting one other verbally (the Balkans, proud of their age, threaten the Carpathians to wipe them, together with the animal and human environment they support, from the face of the earth; in reply, the Carpathians warn the Balkans that their age has passed, humanity has entered a new era, in which there is no place for them in the "book of the world"), then physically, through two eagles flying high and attacking one another (Alecsandri, 1967a: 323-324). The motto of the Balkans is "slavery", while that of the Carpathians is "freedom": no wonder that in the end "the preying eagle from the barbarian Balkans" falls down, defeated by the Carpathian eagle, to the sound of freedom "singing on Danube's banks" (325).

It is quite interesting that Alecsandri uses "freedom" (the Romanian word is *neatârnare*, signifying freedom, independence or autonomy) as a rhyme for the sea (*mare*)[67]. Eminescu, whose rhyming vocabulary was generally more complex, and more varied than Alecsandri's, chose other words: *mare* [sea], in all its declination forms – plural, genitive – rhymed with *uitare* [forgetting], *depărtare* [distance], *cărare* [path], *scânteiere* [shine], and *suflare* [breath] (Dumitrescu, 1972: 50). The poem was completed five days after Mihail Kogălniceanu, Romania's prime minister at the time, had read the Proclamation of Independence in the parliament, on May 9th, 1877.

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67 Here is the quotation in Romanian: "Și vrei, Balcane gârbov, eu să mă-nchin la tine? / Dar n-auzi cum te râde și Dunărea și Marea? / Deviza ta-i sclavia, a mea neatârnarea! [And you, hunchback Balkan, want me to bow down to you? / Can't you hear laughing at this both the Danube and the Sea? / Your motto is slavery, mine is freedom!] (1967a: 324).

In another poem, written three years before “Balcanul și Carpatul”, Alecsandri infuses Trajan's Wall[68] with a symbolic meaning, re-imagining the earthen wall which crosses the space between the Danube and the Black Sea as a line “uniting two horizons”, and stretching

> “[…] like a furrow whose gigantic track
> had been dug, during the first century, by an ideal trireme,
> Or like the loosened rope of the huge arch
> worn by Decebal, the great monarch, in his battles against Rome”
> (Alecsandri, 1967c: 67).

The glorious Roman legions, together with the Dacian leaders in their chariots of gold are invoked as the legendary ancestors of the young Romanian nation: they are the two horizons which delineate the making of the nation. The educational value of the poem is supported by a long authorial note, detailing the organization of the Roman army, the types of ships they used as well as their arms and uniforms. Although historians do not unanimously agree on who were the exact builders of the fortifications known today as Trajan's Wall, they date as far back as the early medieval period, not to the first century A.D. Thus, the Romans and the Dacians claim the area between the Danube and the Black Sea for their descendants, represented in the poem by Murgilă the shepherd, playing his pipe – in 'mioritic'[69] fashion – next to the dog and “a herd of gentle sheep” (Alecsandri, 1967c: 69).

Alecsandri's last (and least successful) play focuses on Ovid, the Roman poet exiled to Tomis: believers in the national idea, all the Forty-Eighters stressed the Latin origins of the Romanians, to differentiate themselves from the neighbouring Slavic peoples. *Ovidiu* [Ovid], according to Mircea Anghelescu, had been inspired by Alecsandri's reading of B.P. Hasdeu's *Istoria critică a românilor* [A critical history of the Romanians], in which Hasdeu used Ovid as a source of information about the distant past of the inhabitants of the territory between the Danube and the Black Sea. But, where Hasdeu strived to be only a historian, Alecsandri turned into a visionary. His Ovid befriends two Getae, Sarmiza and Getor, and receives a crown of laurels after helping the Getae reject an attack of the Sarmatian

[68] Valul lui Traian (Trajan's Wall) is the name given to a type of fortifications (vallum) found in Romania, Moldavia and Ukraine. In Romania, there are three lines of fortifications (earthen walls) extending between the Danube and the Black Sea.

[69] Vasile Alecsandri was the first to publish the folk ballad “Miorița” [The ewe] - which later became one of the enduring symbols of Romanianness - in a slightly altered version compared to what Alecu Russo, his friend, had entrusted him.

tribes. At the end of the play, before dying, the Roman poet articulates a vision of the future in which Rome falls prey to the barbarian invasions, while the sacred fire of Latinity is going to be carried on by a people born in the East:

> "Oh, I do see and tremble, for time comes with a force
> To change Rome's sacred glory into a heap of ruins.
> And how, from far away the barbarian flood
> Increases, sweeping away the altars of the gods...
> I see Rome dying!... Alas! Rome is no more!
> Its power? Only myth! Its history? A fairy-tale!
> It was, its name and glory now wiped out,
> Oh, I see so much, so much, that I cannot express...
> I am so terrified... the words stick in my throat […]
> But wait... The heavy cloud is gone... light shines again
> Centuries pass... Oh! Wonder... Here in the East
> The sapling, son of Rome, will turn into an oak,
> And Istros will inherit the great name of Tiber.
> A new Rome will arise, a new world will be born.
> My grave will open... and from it in the future
> A long flood of life will come and bear fruit. […]
> Oh, Gods, no! The Latin nation will never die!"
> (Alecsandri, 1920: 139)

Thus, the Roman poet becomes the cornerstone upon which the Latinity of the Romanians as a nation is constructed. As the followers of the great Latin empire, they are endowed with a special mission among the barbarians of the East: that of carrying on the glorious name of Rome. No wonder that in 1862, when the administrative and constitutional union of Moldavia and Wallachia was completed under the rule of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the new prince chose Romania as the official name of the country. It was all part of the Forty-Eighters' national dream. Alecsandri's play is also among the first examples[70] of what might be called a literary protochronism, involuntary perhaps, as it had been inspired by Hasdeu, famous for his Dacianism.

As Theodore Ziolkowski noted in *Ovid and the Moderns*, Alecsandri's play established the exiled Ovid as the "tutelary genius" of Romanian literature and culture and as a "symbol of its cultural continuity since classical antiquity" (Ziolkowski, 2005: 115). After Dobrudja became part of modern Romania, the first Romanian literary magazine which came

70 The Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga also composed a five-act dramatic poem called *Ovidiu* [Ovid] in 1931, which, similarly to Alecsandri's play, ends with Ovid's prophetic vision of the rebirth of the Roman civilization in the Danubian-Pontic space.

out on 15th September 1898 was emblematically entitled *Ovidiu*: apart from a long dedication to the Roman poet, "this glorious figure of Roman classicism" (Vulcan, 1898: 1) featuring on the first page, it also included a poem, "Ovidiu în exil" [Ovid in exile]", penned by the chief editor, Petru Vulcan. Among the many objectives of the magazine, candidly stated in the editorial, Vulcan contends that "it is the desire of our love for the country to contribute […] to the strengthening of the Romanian nation and the merging of the heterogeneous elements with the Romanian soul (1)".

Alecsandri's poetic work is also the first to articulate what one might call a Romanian imaginary of the sea, modelled on the French Romantics, in particular on Lamartine's poetic work. As a Romantic poet, he is possessed by what the literary historian George Călinescu called "the demon of tourism" (2003: 259). Alecsandri, a lover of the sun, of the wide expanse of the sea or the ocean, travelled a lot, especially in winter: to Italy, Spain, France, yet also to Constantinople and even to northern Africa. He kept records of these journeys and wrote a diary about his journey to Africa, which he sent to his brother with a dedication for his niece. On leaving France, he put down his musings about the sea he was crossing:

> "I have journeyed on the sea many times, and whenever I left the shore I felt a deep longing for my family and my country rising in my heart. In the first moments of departure, I am overwhelmed by a profound sadness which brings discouragement with it in my soul and a painful feeling which makes me believe I will never see the shore and the people I love ever again, yet soon the cool breeze on the sea, the soft rocking of the ship and the expanse of the horizon gives rise to a change in my thoughts and brings me complete satisfaction. Then I seem to turn into a new being, my spiritual powers increase and I feel I finally find myself in the true element of my nature.
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> The infinite of the sea and the sky, between which I find myself, lend wings to my imagination and prompt it to roam their spaces. Then, like a cheerful bird, it flies into the clear sky, over the boundaries of the horizon, plunges into the depth of the sea, looks for remote and unknown lands and tries to penetrate the mystery hidden at the heart of the waves!
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> Only few satisfactions can compare with the priceless contentment I experience at the beginning of my sea journeys, when I feel I am thrown out of the usual way of the world!" (Alecsandri, 1975a: 164-165)

The sea occasioning this meditation is the Mediterranean, about which Alecsandri also writes that "nothing is as beautiful, attractive, nothing inspires thinking with a greater delight than looking at the wide expanse of

the blue Mediterranean” (qtd. in Călinescu, 2003: 260). He dedicates a long poem, in three parts, to his beloved sea, which he compares to an “infinite sapphire”, a “royal robe / Falling to the earth”, an “emerald nest” (Alecsandri, 1967b: 73) and “ethereal mirror / Of the clear sky” (75). His writing is not so complimentary when it touches the Black Sea, though. On embarking on the ship meant to take him to Venice (where he was going to be reunited with his lover, Elena Negri), he spends two hours with some friends “in pleasant conversation, swearing to rescue one another in case we get wrecked on the Black Sea” (Alecsandri, 1975b: 63). It is the same image of the stormy unfriendly sea which has endured through centuries ever since Strabo, when the Greek colonists had baptized the Black Sea Pontus Axeinos (the inhospitable sea). Yet in spite of his ardent declaration about the joys of travelling by sea, Alecsandri often entertained fears when crossing it: he dedicated a poem to the captain of a ship who had managed to get them safely through a storm. Journeying by ship to Constantinople and sailing along the Bosphorus in a kayak, he dreams of Oriental love in the manner of Dimitrie Bolintineanu:

„The beautiful Biulbiuli
Who sweetly sings at night
On the shore at Kandili” (Alecsandri,1984b: 88).

However, after his lover Elena Negri dies in his arms on the ship travelling back from Italy to Moldavia, somewhere near the Golden Horn, the sea turns stormy and dark, mirroring the inner turmoil of the poet:

”Yet suddenly the rough wind, blowing with despair
Turns the face of the sea into frightening mountains
And when the lightning strikes now and then, one
Can see the poor boat crushed on the vast expanse”
(Alecsandri, 1984a: 113).

Although a lot has been written about the sea as metaphor in the poetry of Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889), the Romanian national poet, it must be noted that its use is a generic one, a Romantic prop which points to different, and often contradictory realities: life, love and death. The most recurrent image of the sea is that of the waves: its surface and shore, as Ion Dumitrescu notices, may remind one of a forest lake, a natural object with which Eminescu had been familiar ever since childhood (Dumitrescu, 1972: 25-26). In his essay about the Mioritic space, which he identified as the unconscious spatial horizon of the Romanian culture – one might even say the Romanian national landscape - and its stylistic matrix, Lucian Blaga explained that in Eminescu's poetry the undulating structure of the Mioritic

space (a rhythmic space of ups and downs) is rendered not so much through valley and hill, but through the image of the undulating sea, the waves[71] and their rhythmic movement. He also contended that, in contrast to other Romantic poets, Eminescu does not use the sea as a metaphor of the infinite, but rather as a symbol of the eternal rocking movement of the waves: “For Eminescu, the sea is neither an occasion to get lost into the infinite, nor a symbol of some stormy dynamic, but a symbol of undulation, of rocking, a symbol of a certain melancholy feeling of destiny, with an inner rhythm like a succession of ups and downs (Blaga, 1969: 246).

Blaga's suggestion may be true for the generic use of the sea metaphor in Eminescu's poems, yet it is certainly not true about Eminescu's first impression of the Black Sea. In 1882, as part of a treatment programme for varicose ulcer, Eminescu went to Constanța (on the site of the old Greek colony of Tomis) for a heliomarine cure which lasted 10 days. He found accommodation at Hotel d'Angleterre, in a room which overlooked the sea. In a letter to his lover, Veronica Micle, he wrote that his first impression of the sea was that of “an infinite in perpetual motion” (Eminescu, 2018: 504). He also admitted that, having been there for only two days, he had not “seen it in all its facets, as it is ever-changing in its colour and movements, this being the reason why some authors compare it with Woman” (504). Since he had been a student of philosophy (among others, such as geography, logic, natural sciences, physiology and even legal medicine!) in Berlin and attended C.V. Althaus's lectures on Hegel's philosophy (Pavel, 2020: 242), there is little doubt that Eminescu was referring to the Hegelian view of the sea as a feminine, unstable and treacherous element[72].

Writing further about Constanța[73], Eminescu remarked, in a typical Romantic vein, that: “A terrace on the high shore offers a beautiful view over the whole expanse of the sea, and when the moon is over the water, it throws a shining pallor, which floats over on one side of the water. The rest stays in

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71 Here is part of Blaga's argument: “In Eminescu's subconscious we can notice the presence of all the stylistic determinants which we have discovered in the layer of our folk spirit, only in a different dosage and constellation due to the individual factor. That horizon of the undulating space is not symbolized in Eminescu's poetry so much by the image of the 'plateau', as by the image of the 'sea' and 'water'. The undulation, the waves, the rocking – these are among the most frequent elements in Eminescu's poetry” (1944: 246).

72 Here is Hegel's notion of the sea in *The philosophy of history*: “For the daring who encounter the sea must at the same time embrace wariness — cunning — since they have to do with the treacherous, the most unreliable and deceitful element. This boundless plain is absolutely yielding — withstanding no pressure, not even a breath of wind. It looks boundlessly innocent, submissive, friendly, and insinuating; and it is exactly this submissiveness which changes the sea into the most dangerous and violent element” (2001: 108)

73 In his letters to Veronica Micle, Eminescu often uses the Turkish name of the city, Chiustenge (Kustenge).

darkness, and at night the sea deserves its name of black" (Eminescu,2018: 504). Thus darkness and night are connected to the blackness of the Black Sea, serving to enhance its mystery.

Another interesting observation of the poet is that "looking at the sea is quite calming, especially for a stormy soul" (504). Maybe this is why, in his testament-poem "Mai am un singur dor" [One wish alone have I], where Eminescu expresses his wish to be buried by the sea, the "rough chant" which "roars with passion" (Eminescu, 1970: 268) is, next to pastoral elements (the forest, green branches, the moon sailing through the fir-trees, the cow-bells), an integral part of the poet's way of imagining a peaceful death. Apparently, this poem held special significance for Eminescu, for he wrote four versions of it: the other three are called "De-oi adormi" [If I were to fall asleep], "Nu voi mormânt bogat" [I do not want a rich grave], "Iar când voi fi pământ" [And when I am earth], in December 1883. The wish for a peaceful death, followed by the return to the familiar landscape of his childhood, runs like a red thread through Eminescu's poetry: he had also expressed it in a poem written in 1866, "Din străinătate" [From abroad]. After reminiscing about the beauty of his native land, in the last stanza he admits that even death, were it to happen within that landscape, would bring "a sweet quiet" and "in blissful dreams would take me to the clouds" (6). The difference between the 1866 poem and the 1883 versions of "Mai am un singur dor" is of course that in 1866 the Black Sea did not belong to Romania and thus, it did not feature in Eminescu's poem, where the poet's most ardent desire is for the "darkness of the forest, poetic labyrinth" (5). As a supporter of the Conservative party, Eminescu was also an active journalist, often arguing in favour of what is now called "ethnic nationalism". Therefore, my contention is that, although the metaphor of the sea is not directly linked to any kind of nationalism (as it was in Alecsandri's *Ovidiu*), the presence of the sea in Eminescu's poetry is connected to his idea of the nation. More particularly with his Russophobia: I find it quite interesting that in the same year when he published "Mai am un singur dor" and its three versions, he also composed the famous "Doină" [A doina], a poem in the folk metre, with xenophobic accents, where he placed the borders of Romania "From the Dniester to the Tisa", and "From Hotin and to the Sea" (Eminescu, 1989 [1884]: 175), directly attacking the Russians whom he perceived as a threat to the integrity of Romanian territory. During the communist period, although Eminescu was favourably viewed by the regime, "Doină" was invariably crossed out from his poetry volumes, as it would have offended the Soviet regime. It finally appeared in print, and this is again illustrative for Ceaușescu's revisionist nationalist policy, in 1989, in a reprint of Eminescu's princeps edition of his *Poesii* [Poems] (1884).

Like Ovid, the sea turns into a familiar topic for poetry, although most authors deal with it in a conventional vein. Duiliu Zamfirescu, for instance,

entitles his collection of poems from 1899-1918 *Pe Marea Neagră* [On the Black Sea], yet only the first poem, "Pe malul mării" [On the sea shore] takes the sea as an obvious topic: a meditation of the infinite of the element, bringing with it new hopes for love and "eternal faith / in the future" (Zamfirescu, 1919: 5). The choice of the title is rather symbolic: the year is 1919, soon after the Great Union, when Transylvania became part of the Kingdom of Romania. One poem is dedicated to the newly annointed queen, and another to the Roman legionaries whose heroic virtues Romanians have inherited: thus the title of the volume works as a reminder of historical continuity – from the small to the great union – with the sea prefacing the symbolic addition of yet another territory to the body of the nation.

From Bolintineanu to Eminescu, in less than half a century, the imaginary of the sea makes a U-turn, from the Oriental, exotic Other to an essential space for the definition of national self-identity. This 'sea change' is slowly taking place after the integration of Dobrudja into the national territory of Romania. It was first articulated by Alecsandri, who 'invented' Ovid as the tutelary divinity of a Romanian national – and Latin culture. The Black Sea turns thus into a space of imagined historical continuity between the ancient Roman Empire and the new Rome in the East. Through the Black Sea and Ovid, assimilated to a preferred Latinity, Romania symbolically extracts itself from the space of its Balkan roots and starts looking towards the West.

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