

# HISTORIOGRAPHIC IMAGINARY AND HYPOTHESES OF HEREDITY IN THE CONFIGURATION OF ROMANIAN CULTURAL IDENTITY

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## Abstract

*This paper analyses the ways in which Romanian culture struggles to forge, at the level of historical and cultural discourse, an identity, a “personality”, and a specificity. It observes, within the process of forging its identity through a series of avatars, the discursive strategies through which specificity is revealed as an essential form of national uniqueness as well as the compensatory trends of identity fabrication. The paper also attempts to highlight the forms of historical and literary mystification through which, over time, Romanian culture responded to complexes related to its age, identity, belatedness, heredity, legitimacy, etc. Thus, the analysis reveals that, in essence, all the efforts, complexes and myths through which an identity was negotiated at the level of the histories of literature and Romanian historiographical texts betray, in fact, the same spectrum of the Identity-Otherness dialectic. Romanian culture, like other emerging cultures, was forced, first to survive and, later, in order to have a potential for prosperity, to define itself as a distinct entity by relating to the surrounding cultural reality, its growth and evolution taking place either under the sign of antagonism (i.e. a refusal of allogeneic import), or under that of synchronism (as permeabilization with regard to foreign influence), but, necessarily, as a reference to the Other. Moreover, the paper highlights, at the discursive level, the two main poles that have obsessively polarized the questions of descent and heredity within Romanian culture: its Roman and Dacian ancestries. The nuanced intentions underpinning the cultural need for international recognition by means of belonging as well as differentiation are discussed in the process.*

*Keywords:* identity; Otherness; heredity mythmaking; Romanian historiography; imaginary.

## 1. Introduction

Given the competitive nature of the geo-political arena, the emergence of modern nations was subject, almost involuntarily, to a Manichean grid that betrays a perpetual conflict between national identity and *Otherness*. Initially, national adversities were translated into annexationist, invasive, usurping, colonial, and hegemonic dynamics, essentially everything that involved the threat to territorial integrity and the destruction of state unity. These, in turn, lead, by summoning the need for defence, to processes of identity configuration, delimitation and barricading by proclaiming not only the right to *be*, but also the right to *be different*. *Pro patria mori* became an axiom alongside the temptation of national ideologies to demonise foreignness.

In this regard, Simona Nicoară conducts an interesting analysis of the term “nation” in *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România* [Encyclopedia of Imaginaries in Romania]. The author notes that in the Middle Ages, the term was used in a narrow sense to designate the representatives of ethnolinguistic communities from other places:

The word *natio* appeared in academic language, for example, in the Parisian university environment created in the 12th century. The reception of students from other regions of France or other European spaces led to the need to give them a certain identity, to place them in a “nation”. Also grouped into “nations” were medieval merchants who worked in an area other than their country of origin (Nicoară, 2020, p. 144, our translation).<sup>1</sup>

It can thus be observed that the very evolution of the term reveals, within the concept of nation, the fusion of two antagonistic realities: nation as identity and nation as *Otherness*. This paper does not intend to detail the chronology of the formation of nation-states or the history of the concept. However, it will attempt to show that, against the background of Romantic messianism, the modern understanding of the nation-state is being developed, understood from a social, democratic, and legal perspective as well as in the historical-genealogical context of a defining identity based on ethnos, language, culture, and collective memory. The “awakening” of emerging nations and their dislocation from multinational imperial conglomerates feeds the imperative of linguistic, ethnic, customary individuality, reiterated by Vico, Rousseau, Herder, Hölderlin, Fichte, Kant, etc.

## 2. National Histories, Between Identity and Otherness

In terms of historical mentality, the nation responds to its social, political, and demographic circumstances by projecting its own unity outwards, towards the Other, towards the antagonist. The small European nations have been strengthened by refusing to allow themselves to be satellited or looked down upon by the surrounding powers. The term “historical mentality” also comprises those collective forms of representation and self-representation which, derived from the national imaginary, sum up the hopes, expectations, desires, needs, convictions, behaviours, solidarities which feed the need for unity and coherence. These attitudes and desires emerged in the 19th century in the form of national consciousness and spirit. One of the common denominators through which the ideal of unity as a bastion against alien adversity is achieved is the stamp of heredity, of millennial unity, and one of the conditions of millennial unity is continuity:

The formation of each nation has been perceived as a restoration of a unity lost over the centuries. The consciousness of a pre-existing unity is anchored in history, going back to its most distant origins. [...] The family tree of the nation goes back to the Golden Age of beginnings, considered to be the foundation of unity (Nicoară, 2020, p. 151, our translation).<sup>2</sup>

To demonstrate their unity, coherence and the antiquity that corroborates them, the historical mentality and collective consensus of European nations converge towards the elaboration of commonplaces, of myths that exemplify the origins crowned by glorious ancestors, by national heroes and the subsequent triumph of their own nations in the context of historical harshness. National historiographies are the preferred frameworks in which demonstrations of this kind flourish, endowed with both a foundational and a pedagogical, instructive role. Beyond the legitimising historical stakes, the above-mentioned texts set in motion the mnemonic mechanisms of the collective consciousness in which past models are

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<sup>1</sup> Original text: “Cuvântul *natio* a apărut în limbajul universitar, de pildă, în mediul universitar parizian creat în secolul al XII-lea. Primirea unor studenți proveniți din alte regiuni franceze sau din alte spații europene a condus spre nevoia de a le atribui o anumite identitate, de a-i încadra într-o ‘națiune’. Tot pe ‘națiuni’ au fost grupați negustorii medievali care își desfășurau activitatea într-un spațiu diferit de țara de origine”.

<sup>2</sup> Original text: “Formarea fiecărei națiuni a fost percepută ca o restaurare a unei unități pierdute de-a lungul secolelor. Conștiința unei unități preexistente se ancorează în istorie, coborând până la originile ei cele mai îndepărtate. [...] Arborele genealogic al națiunii coboară până la Vârsta de Aur a începuturilor, considerată a fi fondatoare a unității”.

sedimented as examples of future threats to national integrity. This creates a series of places of memory, repositories of myths, stories, founding legends, cultural, linguistic, and ethnographic heritage through which national identity is consecrated and celebrated. The glorious past, marked by unity and continuity, is matched by a destiny, seen through the prism of the spiritual and moral dimension of a nation. Culturally, the nation is like a historical being, following a messianic path that is the result of an indisputable past.

Beyond the socio-political and geographical factors that determine the formation and evolution of a nation, the concomitant need to define it as a distinct cultural entity has been identified. The nation, as a geo-political reality, is not self-sufficient. To truly exist, to define itself and to distinguish itself from similar realities, it must configure an identity for itself, a way of being and a purpose, the modes of identity construction essentially summing up the way in which the nation conceptually represents itself as a historical, social, cultural, and literary entity. Shaping the identity of the modern nation-state often takes place at a textual level (i.e. national histories, histories of national literatures, literary or political writings, etc.) and is necessarily a matter of negotiation, since any form of self-representation implies a reference to *something* or *someone*. This negotiation takes place between identity and Otherness, which means that national identity projections are almost always constructed based on a binary schema, on the polarity between *Self and Other*, with their variety of avatars: good/specific/ethnic versus evil/foreign/barbaric. Given that, in parallel with the factual existence of a nation (as a geo-political entity), its identity is shaped in an ideational sense, we can turn our attention both to the ways in which the latter is managed and to the modulations and distortions that intervene in the process of self-representation, seen here as subjective discourse.

It is known that the nation inescapably exists within history. It is interesting to see how exactly it is configured as a historical reality or as a narrative of formative chronology. We can certainly speak of a historiographical imaginary that is revealed in the texts of literary historians, and we can distinguish at its heart one of the main modes of identity narration. Far from constituting a disinterested account of the events that mark the genesis, evolution and configuration of a nation, the content of histories betrays those hallmarks of conscious or unconscious auctorial subjectivity, the parasitic nuances and various distortions that appear in the process of writing.

The Romanian case is no exception. The crystallisation of a coherent identity is the result of the same process of preferential calibration between ethnogony (understood here in close connection with mythogenesis) and ethnogenesis. Conceived somewhere at the crossroads between myth and reality of events, Romanian histories assertively perpetuate common assumptions about national birth, origin, specificity, and threats. The process of “legend-making” thus operates on the various levels of a national identity, leading to a reordering of the course of history in the collective mind (while retaining a grain of truth) and projecting representative pictures that create a kind of national synopsis. We thus encounter mythical-heroic characters (sometimes hyperboles of flesh-and-blood persons, at other times totally absent from documented history), founding fathers, Daco-Roman ancestors and founding legends as well as those “ogres” of history meant to describe the allogenic factor, foreign invasions, annexationist powers, and various other forms of relating to *Otherness* (through the priming of an instinct of self-definition through difference). Its avatars are transposed into as many sketches of secular friends or enemies, barbarians or good neighbours that prompt us to assert the existence of an imaginary of *Otherness* carefully linked to that of one's own identity.

It became clear that the legitimating assertions concerning not only the right to be, to exist independently but also the right to be different are based on the governing ideas of

unity, continuity, and origins. The desire to fabricate and signal a social, political, cultural, and even geographical identity entails the reiteration of ethnogonic myths.

The need for unity (understood above all as stability) is matched by the need for uniqueness, the latter being the main factor in building a specific spiritual constellation. Far from being constituted *in a vacuum*, nations share common linguistic, historical, religious, and cultural roots beyond their political and geographical boundaries. As for the origins of the Romanians (like those of other European peoples), it can be noted that they are the result of processes of ethnocultural settling and linguistic merging that took place in the wider area of Eastern Romanity. A linguistic and customary matrix of identity is thus created, to which is added, over time, the stamp of other linguistic communities whose influences are stratified throughout the territory in question.

From the cradle of common origins, myths and legends about the founding of the Romanian Principalities emerge similar to the ethnogonic narratives of other neighbouring peoples, sprouts of a common folkloric substratum that narrates ritual hunting expeditions (for example, Dragoș's "dismounting").

### 3. Hypotheses of Heredity: Majestic Dacians and Noble Romans

Similar changes occur in the laboratory of myths about heredity and descent. Sensing the link between antiquity and legitimacy, or rather between antiquity and a certain form of nobility, historiographical discourse (as well as histories of Romanian literature, as will be seen in the following) has oscillated between Latin descent and the "hearth" of ancient Dacia. In the Romanian lands, through the *descriptio* genre and the works of the Greek-Catholic elite, the main coordinates of genesis and continuity are thus established, configuring one of the facets of a self-image mainly represented historically and linguistically. The self-proclamation of the Romanians as direct descendants of Rome and heirs of Western Latinity establishes an important landmark in the constellation of national identity. The theory of Latinity advocated by Micu, Șincai and Maior, as well as the linguistic and cultural efforts of the Școala Ardeleană [Transylvanian School] to proclaim the purity of Roman origins are all ways in which 18th- and 19th-century Romanian society resorted to the past as a mark of national specificity.

Another important axis of identity is the space of ancient Dacia as an original territory, to which the fertile imaginary attributes mythical-heroic dimensions and a generative role. The stability acquired through a spiritual existence defined between these two poles functions, at least at the level of the collective mind, as a shield against secular enemies but also against the hereditary ones that have threatened the country over time.

The 17th and 18th centuries constitute, in Romanian culture, a period dedicated to proving the Romanian's Roman origin and Latin descent as a herald of ethnic individuality, as an illustration of noble character, a mark of antiquity and therefore of identity legitimacy. Late humanism in Romanian culture is, from a certain point of view, enslaved to a compensatory and demonstrative impetus bound to reveal a unity and a historical continuity perceived as heritage.

Based on the analysis that Mircea Martin dedicates to Călinescu's text, *Istoria Literaturii Române de la Origini până în Prezent* [The history of Romanian literature from its origins to the present], a tendency to deepen or rather to lengthen the historical thread to find deeper roots for Romanian culture than those of Latinity can be identified. By attempting to establish the coordinates of the genesis of the Romanian people in a history of literature, Călinescu undertakes a rhetorical revival of abyssal ancestries that have the same role of attesting to a kind of immemorial authenticity and historical authority as the recourse to Latin descent:

Neither historical data nor ethnological examination confirms our youth. We are basically Getae, and the Getae are one of the oldest indigenous peoples of Europe, contemporary with the Greeks, the Celts and the Italic groups that predated the Roman Empire. This Roman Empire found an ancient state here, fought it and took it with difficulty. As always in the long tumultuous history of our country, due to its geographical location, we have endured the blows, absorbing the allogenic element (Martin, 1981, 2018, p. 76, our translation).<sup>3</sup>

Thus, by virtue of a primordial Getic nucleus, the Romanian people fall within a succession of the Roman spirit, which, in Călinescu's view, it has a duty to perpetuate naturally, without "anachronistic mimicry". "Being Romanian" is defined explicitly at the crossroads between an ancient territorialism and "foreign Romanesque models", its relationship with the latter being one of natural correspondence and not mimicry, since the Romanian people's very antiquity would make such mimicry impossible (and anachronistic).

Călinescu emphasizes the fundamental importance of the Latin background from which a form of historical dignity associated with the Romanian culture is derived. However, the language draws its strength from the mixture of heterogeneous values. Although Latinity is unequivocally defined as the dominant element in Romanian culture, there is also the hypothesis of heterogeneous potentialities against the background of Latin clarity, those immixtures of the Thracian-Slavic background which, together with the strongly represented literary Dacian element, constitute unused creative possibilities. Consequently, a second generative space emerges, in which the Romanian culture defines its identity: ancient Dacia, a land of the unknown and the fabulous, a place imagined as being almost outside history, but with deep mythical resonances. The "absolute" Dacia takes shape in literary terms in a setting that is often invented or borrowed, sometimes imagined at the crossroads with other spaces, such as that of the Northern Olympus or the Asian world.

The argument of age is reiterated and detailed by Călinescu from the vantage point of literary, or rather linguistic, achievements. Analysing the case of Creangă, the critic postulates the existence of a secular, anonymous amalgamation from which the author benefits and by virtue of which he can speak the language of millions of peasants: "Creangă is one, but 'one expressing all', he took the national language to new heights of expressiveness, but he would not have succeeded without the anonymous secular amalgamation that preceded him" (Martin, 1981, 2018, p. 107). The strength of this type of argument lies more in the idea of placing authors within a line of descent, themselves bearers of an ancestral value base, than in the identification of a causal relationship between talent and literary success. The emergence of an author such as Creangă would not have been possible, in this line of thought, without the antiquity of the language and without the expressive values that derive from this characteristic:

Writers like Creangă can only appear where the word is old, difficult to submerge, almost equivocal, and where experience has condensed into still formulas, all known to

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<sup>3</sup> Original text: "Nici datele istoriei, nici examenul etnologic nu confirmă tinerețea noastră. Noi sîntem în fond geți, și geții reprezintă unul din cele mai vechi popoare autohtone ale Europei, contemporane cu grecii, cu celții, cu grupurile italice anterioare Imperiului Roman. Acest Imperiu Roman găsea aici un stat vechi, se lupta cu el și-l răpunea cu greu. Ca întotdeauna îndelungul zburciunetei noastre istorii, prin așezarea geografică, noi am suportat izbirile, absorbind elementul alogen".

everyone, so that the literary work is almost only a rekindling of elements that have been melted by use (Martin, 1981, 2018, p. 108, our translation).<sup>4</sup>

Also, in Călinescu's conception, antiquity can be demonstrated by a sort of "physiognomy" of agrarian peoples and by certain character or personality traits: conservative, defensive, and regressive tendencies. The clear indifference of the Romanian peasant to the surrounding peoples is undeniable proof of an unwavering and calm awareness of his own antiquity in relation to the more or less recent appearance of other peoples: 'We are true natives of impressive antiquity'<sup>5</sup> (Călinescu, 1941, p. 886, our translation). The antinomy also seems to take shape at the behavioural level, as Călinescu distinguishes between the defensive, silent, retractile, indifferent autochthonism of ancient peoples and those new, migrant peoples that are 'noisy, gesticulating, with a great aptitude for 'civilisation''<sup>6</sup> (Călinescu, 1941, p. 887, our translation).

Given Spengler's view that the emergence of a civilisation is, in fact, the result of an entire evolutionary process, Călinescu associates civilisation with the last phase in the development of culture, namely its "old age" and challenges its association with indices of youth or recentness. Mircea Martin (1981, 2018) considers that the author avoids characterising Romanian culture as oriental precisely in order not to dissociate it, from a spiritual point of view, from Europe or the West, to which it is linked by echoes and original virtualities. Another essential influence of the West on Romanian culture is the evolution of literature which, in Călinescu's view, coincides with the discovery of the West. One mention is, however, important: although the discovery of literature facilitated by contact with the West may be considered a recent phenomenon in Romanian culture, this does not suggest the recentness of Romanian culture any more than the absence of literature in any way mirrors the absence of culture.

Analysing the way in which Romanian culture defines itself in relation to a Dacian ancestral background and noble Latin descent, it can be observed that ancient Dacia is recovered, through books, in the context of Romanticism and in the atmosphere of nation-building marked by the revolutionary impetus of creating an identity by challenging the hegemony of empires. Until then, however, the birth of the Romanian people was supported by an exclusively Latin thesis, perpetuated and transformed into a programme by scholars such as Dimitrie Cantemir or Nicolae Costin and members of the Transylvanian School. The Dacians are claimed as ancestors in the Romantic context of the 19th century, as a form of rejection of the dominant tradition of Latinism, in militant, utopian writings that convey nostalgia for a mythical, original past, characterised by unity and moral purity. The importance of the archaic ethnic substratum attributed to the Dacian space lies in postulating a significant difference between the Romanian culture and other neo-Latin peoples. Basing the discourse of identity on the idea of national specificity is a movement typical of the nation-states in the period of European Romanticism and is based on appealing to the collective memory of the folkloric substratum understood as a repository of the past.

Imagining the Dacians leads to the illustration of stereotypes of the "barbarian", the bearer of pure original axiology, the representative of a civilisation that was not touched by allogenic elements. The construction of the framework for integrating Dacia and its inhabitants into national history, both historiographically and in literature, is based on

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<sup>4</sup> Original text: "Scriitori ca Creangă nu pot apărea decît acolo unde cuvîntul e bătrîn, greu de subînţelesuri, aproape echivoc și unde experiența s-a condensat în formule nemișcătoare, tuturor cunoscute, așa încît opera literară să fie aproape numai o reaprindere a unor elemente tocite de uz".

<sup>5</sup> Original text: "Suntem niște adevărați autohtoni de o impresionantă vechime".

<sup>6</sup> Original text: "Popoarele noi migrante sunt dimpotrivă sgomotoase, gesticulante și au o vădită predilecție pentru 'civilizație'".

highlighting stereotypes that respond to the need for association with origins marked by morality, purity, and heroism:

The general tendency is to fix an image, which will persist for a long time, loaded with all the stereotypes present in ancient works, taken as such, as long as they served to build national consciousness and ideology. The need for prestigious origins characterised by heroism (and possibly tragedy - the figure of King Decebalus), which individualise the Romanians, develops the picture of the “moral barbarian”, warrior and believer in immortality. The Dacians thus join, with their own profile and semantic baggage, the Romans in the gallery of the founding ancestors of the nation, of the national epic in the making (Florea, 2020, p. 35, our translation)<sup>7</sup>.

As protagonists of the founding national myth, the Dacians are reconstructed in the collective imagination in the form of schematic, stereotypical arrangements, which are, however, detached from factual reality. The scientific recovery of Dacian civilisation contrasts the mythical image of an ahistorical space, designed in such a way as to correspond to the different representational needs of Romanian culture. The image of ancient Dacia works as a substructure of Romanian culture insofar as it helps to highlight, through the thesis of the inheritance of a glorious culture and epoch, characteristics, and values (heroism, morality, faith, hardiness, industriousness) contrasting with the unconventional realities of Romanian culture.

The second essential element that defines Romanian culture as a culture of legacy is the culture and civilisation of classical antiquity, which evokes an idealized image of ancient Rome. Rome is a common place for the Neo-Latin peoples and is a catalyst for ethnic identity, guaranteeing, through its supposed superiority and civilising action, the noble character of the cultures that descend from it:

At the level of the collective mind, this sustained interest in the heritage of classical antiquity has gradually led to the imposition of an idealized image of republican and imperial Rome as the source of most of the structures, practices, and concepts that define modern European culture and civilisation. Consequently, the gradual expansion of the Roman Empire over vast areas of temperate Europe, northern Africa and the Near East, and the consequences of this expansion for the conquered populations as well as those in the surrounding territories, have long been interpreted in terms of the supposed civilizing mission of an inevitably superior culture (Egri & Rustoiu, 2020, p. 51).

Ancient Rome thus becomes an interpretative model that takes on ideological values in several empires in the medieval or even modern periods. Considering themselves the rightful heirs or continuators of a superior civilisational framework, the Byzantine, Russian, British and German Empires reiterate Roman symbols in their own quests for asserting authority. The idealised image of Rome thus underpins the mythology of the origins of many modern European nations, illustrating, at a social and political level, the association with a prestigious past and the organic continuity of an ancestral space. Against the backdrop of the dismantling of feudal structures of social and identity consolidation, the myths of Latin descent act as factors of social and political cohesion.

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<sup>7</sup> Original text: “Tendința generală este de a fixa o imagine, care va persista mult timp, încărcată cu toate stereotipurile prezente în operele antice, luate ca atare, atâta vreme cât serveau la construcția conștiinței și ideologiei naționale. Nevoia unor origini prestigioase caracterizate de eroism (și, eventual, de tragism - figura regelui Decebal), care să-i individualizeze pe români, dezvoltă fotografia ‘barbarului moral’, războinic și adept al credinței în nemurire. Dacii se alătură astfel, cu profilul și bagajul semnificativ proprii, romanilor în galeria strămoșilor fondatori ai națiunii, ai epopeii naționale în curs de constituire”.

Just as the space of ancient Dacia is defined chronologically as a glorious era from which lessons and models can be drawn, the space of ancient Rome inspires the creation of mythical genealogies ‘that start from real or legendary founding heroes or the existence of a clearly defined ancestral space from a historical, ethnographic and linguistic point of view, which has allowed an uninterrupted evolution of the nation’<sup>8</sup> (Egri & Rustoiu, 2020, p. 54, our translation).

The existence of two ethnogenic versions in Romania can be observed: on the one hand, the Latinist strand of the myth, dominant during the Renaissance and among the Enlightenment scholars of the 18th century, by virtue of which the Romanians are decreed official descendants of the Romans, and on the other hand, the autochthonous strand of the myth, in which the Dacians become the unique and exemplary ancestors of the Romanians, while the Roman occupation is considered to be only a passing episode, albeit with linguistic consequences, but not in terms of an essential change in national identity:

This version of the myth emerged in the Romantic period of the 19th century, and was later revived first in the interwar period, and then in the Communist nationalism of the last decades of the 20th century, and still has effects to this day (Egri & Rustoiu, 2020, p. 56, our translation)<sup>9</sup>

Affinity, in the course of history, with one of the two versions, depends on the social and cultural needs of the period in question. Interest in the pre-Roman stage of national identity is thus fuelled on the one hand by the need for a national specificity which the Latin origin no longer satisfied, given that it was a common element of several European nations, and on the other hand by the need to contrast inherited character traits (the image of brave, noble Dacians) to Roman imperialism:

This attitude can partly be explained by the Romantic authors’ preference for exemplary heroes, original myths and ancient traditions, but also by a reaction against Roman imperialism, perceived as an *avant la lettre* version of the domineering policy of the Habsburg Empire (Egri & Rustoiu, 2020, p. 61, our translation).<sup>10</sup>

The interest in Latin descent as a fundamental episode in the historical evolution of the nation (illustrated by events such as the conquest of Dacia by Trajan or the essential role of the Romans in the genesis of the Romanian people) finds its explanation in the need to assert an authority fuelled by Roman superiority, which in turn attests to an exceptional identity background of the Romanian nation which, although it has faced unfavourable allogenic factors throughout history, is certainly capable of progress. The middle way, which still exists today in some history or even Romanian literature textbooks, is illustrated by the fusion of the two spaces, by the birth of the Romanian people in a Dacian-Roman, collaborative version.

The cultural and even spiritual identity of the Romanians must be determined beyond the certainties of genesis, unity, and continuity and in relation to the two great areas of cultural, linguistic, political, and religious influence: East and West. As powerful

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<sup>8</sup> Original text: “care pornesc de la eroi fondatori reali ori legendari sau existența unui spațiu ancestral clar definit din punct de vedere istoric, etnografic și lingvistic, care a permis o evoluție neîntreruptă a națiunii?”.

<sup>9</sup> Original text: “Această versiune a mitului a apărut în perioada romantică a secolului al XIX-lea, fiind ulterior resuscitată mai întâi în perioada interbelică, iar apoi și în perioada naționalismului comunist al ultimelor decade ale secolului XX, având încă efecte până astăzi”.

<sup>10</sup> Original text: “Această atitudine poate fi explicată parțial prin preferința autorilor romantici pentru eroii exemplari, miturile originare și tradițiile străvechi, dar și printr-o reacție împotriva imperialismului roman, perceput ca o versiune *avant la lettre* a politicii dominante a Imperiului Habsburgic”.



representations of *Otherness* (it remains to be seen whether they can be defined as beneficial or destructive), both areas give rise to oscillating affinities and perplexities in the collective mind. Confronted with the description of the “Western race with Eastern habits” and affected, on the one hand, by the consequences or, rather, the spectre of the long Ottoman occupation and the Phanariot regime in the Principality and, on the other hand, by the danger of the Western mirage and the loss of identity through the adoption of a *modus vivendi* ill-suited to its national specificity, Romanian culture tries to highlight those elements of the two cultures that could benefit it.

An interesting analysis of the founding mythologies in the Romanian space is proposed by Lucian Boia (1997, 2011) in *Istorie și Mit în Conștiința Românească* [History and myth in Romanian consciousness]. The historian identifies three neuralgic points in the historiographic composition of identity: origins, continuity, and unity, by virtue of which a perspective on the “stranger”, on *Otherness* is formulated.

Legitimation through recourse to origins is a stage common to all forms of community, from early to modern nations. The deeply ideologized question of origins is a nodal point in which the consciousness of a community is constructed. Far from representing *a priori*, an axiomatic, objective reality, origins represent a choice in which a specific ideological background and the “agenda” of a community come together. They are not, in Boia's view, correct or incorrect, but they illustrate a specific vision of history from a particular vantage point in the present. The founding myths that irrigate Romanian consciousness represent, in their turn, the personalization of quasi-universal categories, aiming at justifying the present through the past and, therefore, through its origins, and of inculcating coherence into the time axis thus created. Based on the principle of external interventions, exploited through their potential to propel initially amorphous or empty spaces into existence, origins are essentially *ex nihilo*, fundamentally new creations. Once created, the foundation is personified by the introduction into the narrative of an exceptional character, who confers archetypal nobility, transcendentality and sacredness. The origins acquire, even in their later, secularised interpretations, a mystical significance that eternalises them and elevates them above history. Two of the founding myths that polarised and later unified the debate on the origins of the Romanians are the aforementioned Roman and Dacian myths. The Roman founding myth marks the beginning of the modern era, positing the rise of the Romanian Principalities as a continuation of the original founding act, namely the “rise” of Trajan. With the departure of Romanian historiography from the Slavonic stage, the cultural-historical landmarks move towards the epicentre of Rome and Roman origins, a strong argument in favour of the individuality of the Romanian Principalities which, once thus framed, invest themselves with prestige and nobility. The extreme perspectives, such as that of the members of the Transylvanian School, who argued for the exclusive nature of the Latin influence in the formation of the Romanian people, were, however, confronted with the problem of the Dacian element and its existence or contribution. The members of the Transylvanian School tried to explain the disappearance, absence, or non-participation of the Dacians in the formation of the Romanian people either by their extermination, by their expulsion from Dacia or by civilisational incompatibility, i.e. their being unfit for fusion (Petru Maior, for example, develops a whole line of reasoning designed to explain why Roman nobles would not have married or procreated with female Dacian barbarians). Due to their Roman filiation, the Romanians appeared to the West to hold an equal position, acculturation in their case being not a loan but a return to their origins, to the civilisational matrix of the West.

During the Phanariot reigns, historiography in the Romanian Principalities opens up to the potential of a Daco-Roman fusion. The transition of the view of the Dacians from

being an undesirable element to representing the epitome of the spirit of freedom and sacrifice is manifested especially within the Romantic revolutionary generation, for whom Dacian virtues were admirable and worth following. Sacrifice for the fatherland, the courage to choose death over slavery, and the example of Decebalus are all elements through which the Dacian background is heroised. The Romantics contribute to the illustration of the Dacian theme, not necessarily as a founding element but rather as a mythical and prehistoric ancestral background whose bravery has a powerful echo.

The synthesis between the Roman and the Dacian elements occurs with the historical events that consolidate the Romanian space as an independent entity: the foundation of Romania, its independence, and the proclamation of the Kingdom. Therefore, the argument of Roman descent as a seal of nobility and purity is no longer a critical position to be supported. Romanian historiography began to recognise the Dacian background as a founding element and to reconcile the Western sources, by virtue of which the Romanian people were related, along Latin lines, to the “sister nations” and the indigenous sources, namely the Dacians. In his work entitled *Istoria Românilor din cele mai Vechi Timpuri până la Moartea Regelui Carol I* [The history of Romanians from the earliest times until the death of King Carol I], Constantin Giurescu raises certain questions:

Some of the popular beliefs, the incantations, the old folk remedies, must have an ancient origin. Is our “wake”, in the archaic form in which it still appears, in some remote corners of the country, like Vrancea, a form that shows joy rather than sorrow, with masks, with games, with jokes, a legacy of that time? (Giurescu, 1943, p. 61).<sup>11</sup>

The combination of the Dacian and Roman contribution to the formation of the Romanian people thus begins to be illustrated in the areas of etymology and archaeology, but also at the poetic level.

The question of continuity is, to the same extent as that of origin, a “burning question” of Romanian historical consciousness. While discussions on ethnogenesis seem to ask the question “Who do we come from?”, those on continuity focus on the circumscription of the geographical area of Romanian existence, thus on the question “Where do we come from?”. The hypotheses diverge and, in Boia's view, run the risk of inappropriate exaggerations, such as that of the extension of the Romanian people over a significant part of Central and South-Eastern Europe or its positioning south of the Danube, ‘completely outside the country where they live today’<sup>12</sup> (Boia, 1997, 2011, p. 189, our translation). Political continuity is of similar interest, historiographically, as ethnic continuity. Noting the perpetuation in time and space of a Romanian element that is not self-sufficient and that has been subject to various foreign rulers, is not an optimal solution. Added to this is the complex of “backwardness” felt by Romanians, the millennial lack of a Romanian state and, therefore, of a political tradition that can be compared to that of its neighbouring nations.

In addition to the tendencies of exaggeration or disagreement with reality that he reveals in the construction of the avatars of the Romanian space, Boia notes the overestimation of historical means to the detriment of linguistic ones and the recourse to archaeology in elucidating the problem of continuity. This can only be inaccurate since the formation of the Romanian people is ineluctably linked to the emergence of language, and if

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<sup>11</sup> Original text : “O parte din credințele populare, din descântece, din leacurile băbești, trebuie să aibă o străveche origina dăca. Să fie „priveghiul” nostru, în forma arhaică în care apare el încă, în unele colțuri retrase ale țării, ca în Vrancea, forma care arată mai degrabă bucurie decât întristare, cu măști, cu jocuri, cu glume, o moștenire a acelei vremi ?”

<sup>12</sup> Original text: “cu totul în afara țării unde trăiesc astăzi”.

the discovery of vestiges attests to the continuity of life, it does not necessarily support Roman continuity, but rather that of the population in general.

An essential archetype in identity building is unity. One of the strongest manifestations of the ideal of unity in the geo-political arena is consolidated at the level of nation-states emerging in the 19th century. The nation thus becomes the central concern of the entire historical process, and national sentiment becomes an essential value. In the Romanian area, there is a polarisation of the historical perspective between the desire to discover the argument of unity in the past and the accusation of the past's lack of national solidarity. Regardless of the perspective, the Romanian national idea prevails, valorised either as a glorious past or, anecdotally, as a history of shortcomings. In the second half of the 19th century, the need arose to scientifically substantiate or argue the unity of peoples and, more recently, of nations having their own destiny and moral and spiritual traits. Thus, the analysis of the psychology of peoples appeared as a fertile ground for a nation like Romania, which has achieved unity late and with difficulty. The need to define unity within national borders and, at the same time, to illustrate those elements by which the Romanian people distinguish themselves from other peoples is combined with the desire to elucidate the inferior position of the Romanians in relation to the West and the solutions that would guarantee a future in keeping with the brilliance of their origins.

In his lucid analyses in *Din Psihologia Poporului Român* [From the psychology of the Romanian people], the sociologist Dumitru Drăghicescu (PhD candidate at the Sorbonne, under the coordination of the well-known sociologist Émile Durkheim), illustrates some of the ways of self-representation and of relating to *Otherness*. Viewing Romanian culture and society as the result of a mixture of peoples (Dacians, Greeks, Romans, Scythians, Gauls, Cumaeans, Goths, Huns, Slavs, Hungarians, Turks, Russians, French, etc.), the author tries to identify the mark that each influence leaves on national spirituality. In periods of independence from foreign powers, the “Romanian soul” is marked by ‘a hard-working, steadfast will, at the same time violent and prudent, and by a simple but vigorous and systematic intelligence, a lively imagination, nourished by a very deep religious feeling’<sup>13</sup> (Drăghicescu, 1907, p. 203, our translation). However, while historical-political traumas such as the Ottoman domination caused ‘the loss of positive attributes, the destruction of the will and the unbending character of the Romanian people, the destruction of the Romanian reigns and the frequent change of rulers’<sup>14</sup> (Drăghicescu, 1907, p. 218, our translation). The sociologist's method is in keeping with the spirit of the moment. The Romanian soul is the culmination of the ethnicities that participate in or influence the Romanian synthesis. Therefore, to define the Romanian spirit, it is enough to put together the Romanic, Dacian and Slavic characteristics and to adhere to the hypothesis of psychological determinism:

A people of shepherds and less so of ploughmen, the Romanians were cruel and violent. Having a will of iron, being stubborn, impulsive, often self-controlled, often unrestrained and changeable, they had to be bold beyond measure, courageous, undaunted by death, and inspired by the spirit of freedom and courage, which most often also divided them, seldom allowing them to unite. Disciplined and organised or undisciplined and anarchic, depending on the circumstances, both tendencies were ingrained in their souls from the cradle, for they had inherited both from their particular ethnic origins. The intelligence of the Romanians, in this age, should have been very rich, in any case it was lively, bold, and easy-going, it evinced a sense of generality and organization and a bent for

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<sup>13</sup> Original text: “voință harnică, statornică, în același timp violentă, dar prudentă și printr-o inteligență simplă, dar viguroasă și sistematică, o imaginație vie, hrănită de un sentiment religios foarte adânc”.

<sup>14</sup> Original text: “pierderea însușirilor pozitive, nimicirea voinței și neatârării poporului român, punerea domniilor române la mezat și prea repede schimbare a Domnilor”.

observation from which comes humour and mocking satire (Drăghicescu, 1907, p. 179, our translation).<sup>15</sup>

Just as there are formative, constructive influences, there are, in Drăghicescu's view, also influences that have altered the character of the Romanian people, such as Turkish or Greek influences. While the East is demonised and considered deeply harmful because it instilled attitudes such as laziness, carelessness, resignation or fatalism, the combination of the qualities inherited from the Dacians, Romans, Slavs and the West brings out the best in Romanians. The sociologist's argument clearly leans towards Western and French spirituality, which creates a fertile ground for interwar autochthonous contestations. The historical marginality of the Romanians, whether viewed sarcastically or taken at face value, becomes the premise of a timeless Romanian spirit: 'What is there to criticize if this is who we are? What is there to criticize if we don't want to metamorphose into Westerners anyway, but only want to remain Romanian?'<sup>16</sup> (Boia, 1997, 2011, p. 900, our translation). Romanian spirituality is clearly outlined in the vision of writers such as Blaga, Vulcănescu, and Călinescu, while other interpretations have regionally delineated the psychological and spiritual characteristics of Romanians. We briefly mention here the works of Ibrăileanu (*Spiritul Critic în Cultura Română* [The critical spirit in Romanian culture]) and Lovinescu (*Istoria Civilizației Române Moderne* [The history of modern Romanian civilisation]), who distinguish between two types of spirituality: Moldavian and Greater Wallachian. While Ibrăileanu dissociates based on socio-historical determinism, Lovinescu starts from psychological and racial considerations and distinguishes between the creative propensity of Moldovans by virtue of their contemplativeness and the pragmatism of the people of the mountains. For Boia, the danger of ethnopsychology lies precisely in the freedom it offers in drawing any kind of conclusion, which can prove both the inconsistency and the homogeneity of the Romanian nation.

Constantin Rădulescu-Motru's work entitled *Pshihologia Poporului Român* [The psychology of the Romanian people] is also indebted to ethnopsychology. The writer sees in the Romanian mentality a group consciousness, or rather a herd mentality. Influenced by the crowd, by what others say, the Romanian appears to Motru to have a gregarious soul, lacking in self-sacrifice, in a state dependent on tradition and circumstances. An essential distinction must be made between gregariousness and solidarity, since the latter concept, which is completely absent in the case of the Romanian people, presupposes self-knowledge and the harmony acquired by virtue of this knowledge, while the former illustrates the mechanical passivity of young peoples, susceptible to being influenced, to giving way to imitation, to a lack of resilience in the face of the Other:

We imitate like sheep the deeds around us and only show energy when we are in a group. In war we fight willingly, for there we stand shoulder to shoulder, but in professional work we are careless, for here each is left to his own duty. We have not the courage of our opinions, when it comes to defending them individually, but we are the most

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<sup>15</sup> Original text: "Popor de păstori și ceva mai puțin de plugari, Românii erau cruzi și violenți. Având o voință de fier, încăpățănată, impulsivă, adesea stăpână pe sine, adesea neînfrănată, schimbătoare, ei au trebuit să fie îndrăzneți peste măsură, curajoși, nepăsători de moarte și însuflețiți de spiritul de libertate și de neatămăre, care cel mai adesea și dezbina, arareori le îngăduia să se unească. Disciplinați și organizați sau lipsiți de disciplină, anarhici, după împrejurări, amândouă aceste porniri erau sădite din leagăn în sufletul lor, căci pe amândouă le moșteniseră de la neamuri etnice deosebite. Inteligența românilor, în această epocă, ar fi trebuit să fie foarte bogată, în tot cazul ea era vioaie, îndrăzneată, scăpărătoare, avea simțul generalității și al organizării și aplecarea spre observație din care rezultă umorul, satira batjocoritoare".

<sup>16</sup> Original text: "Ce mai este de criticat dacă așa suntem noi? Ce mai este de criticat dacă oricum nu dorim să ne metamorfozăm în occidentali, ci vrem doar să rămânem români?"

susceptible people, when it comes to speaking in a group, and as a group (Rădulescu-Motru, 1937, 1999, p. 44, our translation).<sup>17</sup>

Motru criticises the volatility with which Romanian society goes through nationalist crises without self-examination and giving in to the temptation to blame other cultures for its shortcomings. However, what the author calls “gregariousness” turns out, in retrospect, to be a shield against the potential dissolution caused by the differentiation of personalities. Only in this way, Motru believes, have Romanians managed to maintain the unity of their language, their nation and their culture. The force of imitation becomes a catalyst in the face of adverse circumstances, and the form of existence as a group and not as individuals has enabled the Romanian people to face threats successfully. However, in the face of the future, gregariousness will no longer be enough because as things begin to change, the Romanian people will need a new soul, crystallised in an original culture, presided over by strong individualities.

In the search for the Romanian soul, the Other cannot be ignored. It is part of an archetypal structure of the community imaginary, regardless of the people under scrutiny. Romanian history reacts to the presence of *Otherness* either from the isolated angle of a rural community or from the perspective of a space influenced by foreign masters and models. Whatever the case, the distinction between Romanians and “the others” is strongly felt, either in a favourable sense or as an attack on national values. Although the pressure of foreigners on the Romanian territory is demonstrable and historically attested, it is hyperbolised at the level of the imagination, generating the complex of the besieged fortress that idiosyncratically marks Romanian mentality. The country's history is, in palimpsest, the history of centuries-old struggles for ethnic, spiritual, and state survival. While the Romanian people remain identical to themselves, the role of the enemy has a changing cast, ranging from the Ottomans to the Hungarians, to the Greeks or to the entire Eastern space. The myth resulting from the struggle for independence fulfils, not only at the level of historical discourse but also at the literary level, the triple function of highlighting the heroism and courage of the Romanians, of justifying the historical gap through the need to counter countless aggressions, and of illustrating the essential role that the Romanians played in defending the West from the Ottoman invasions, by virtue of which the West's duty towards the Romanians is also claimed.

The truth is, however, that Romanians are part of a European cultural area that has simply been left behind. It is, however, understandable that in the face of an immutable reality, the answers should be sought elsewhere.

For Drăghicescu, the degeneration of the Romanian people is produced along Oriental, especially Ottoman, lines. The explanation varies, from ethno-psychological and social considerations to observations of a vestimentary nature. Not only Turkish corruption and sloth but also the specific type of clothing that suggests to the sociologist a lazy, superficial lifestyle of torpor and uninterrupted rest are to be condemned:

Even if our forefathers had wanted to break away from their life of insensitivity, of sleepy torpor and laziness, even if they had wanted to wake up and work, to start doing something, these garments would have prevented and discouraged them. With wide,

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<sup>17</sup> Original text: “Imităm ca oile faptele din jurul nostru și nu arătăm o energie decât când suntem în grup. La război ne luptăm voinicește, fiindcă acolo suntem umăr la umăr, dar la munca profesională suntem neglijenți, fiindcă aici fiecare este lăsat pe seama datoriei sale proprii. Nu avem curajul părerilor noastre, când este să ni le apărăm fiecare în parte, dar suntem poporul cel mai susceptibil, când este să ne rostim în grup, și ca grup”.

long, split sleeves that hinder and paralyze the hands, it is not possible to be active and energetic (Drăghicescu, 1907, p. 340, our translation).<sup>18</sup>

With westernization, two competing myths appear in Romania. The French myth, embraced by the Romanian elites who look to their Latin “sister” in the West, is recognisable both in the aforementioned work by Drăghicescu, for whom the closeness to the French soul implies a clarification, smoothing and brightening of the Romanian soul, and in Pompiliu Eliade’s remarkable study, *De L'influence Française sur L'esprit Public en Roumanie* [On the French influence on public spirit in Romania], in which the author considers modern Romanian civilisation to be a result of French contribution. Eliade considers that, before the contact with and subsequent influence of the French, the Romanian countries existed neither for history nor for civilisation. Therefore, contact with France cannot be a rebirth, but a birth in the true sense of the word. For more than a century, the French myth played a role in shaping Romanian culture, contributing to the formation of the intellectual elite. The German counter-myth, the second great Western landmark in Romanian culture, emerged in the second half of the 19th century, with the end of a period of political effervescence and the need for a new balance. While some intellectuals appreciated the French order, harmony, and balance, criticising the chaos and confusion of the German intelligence, others found solutions in German culture in line with the aspirations of the Romanian people. As the choice of an influential minority, the German myth constitutes a cultural and political preference for men of culture like Titu Maiorescu, P.P. Carp or Mihai Eminescu.

### Conclusion

Nations, as identity projections, were initially constructed as narratives of genesis, evolution, maturity and finally decline, by means of organic images and by assuming a profoundly typological and (often Manichaeic) characterological grid. These narratives allowed for the subsequent distribution of villains and heroes roles: “Indeed, the story could be cast in different generic forms, and assume the shape of a divine comedy, a Bildungsroman, a drama of destiny, or even a national Golgotha” (Neubauer, 2004, p. 9).

The process of recovery or fabrication is matched, as the case may be, by a complementary process of adjusting national histories with an illustrative role in order to preserve the coherence of an ideal profile and to eliminate elements that could destroy the integrity of the epos. At this point, it is interesting to recall Ernest Renan's statement about the creation of a nation:

Oblivion, and even historical error I would say, are an essential factor in the creation of a nation, and so the progress of historical studies is often a danger to nationality. Historical investigation, in fact, sheds light on the acts of violence that have occurred at the origin of all political formations, even those whose consequences have been most beneficial (Renan, 1882, 1997, p. 27, our translation).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Original text: “Chiar dacă ar fi vrut strămoșii noștri s-o rupă cu traiul lor de nesimțire, de toropeală adormită și de trândăvie, chiar de ar fi vrut ei să se trezească și să lucreze, să înceapă ceva, îmbrăcăminte, aceasta i-ar fi împiedicat și i-ar fi descurajat. Cu niște mâneci largi, lungi și despicate, cari împiedică și paralizează mâinile, este peste putință de a fi activ și energetic”.

<sup>19</sup> Original text: “L'oubli, et je dirai même l'erreur historique, sont un facteur essentiel de la création d'une nation, et c'est ainsi que le progrès des études historiques est souvent pour la nationalité un danger. L'investigation historique, en effet, remet en lumière les faits de violence qui se sont passés à l'origine de toutes les formations politiques, même de celles dont les conséquences ont été les plus bienfaisantes”.

The recovery process works insofar as it is doubled by a creative effort which, by transforming the nation into a collective character, assigns to it an appropriate representation in the field of imagined communities and a coherent, causal history that conforms to the panegyric image.

The appeal to cultural forefathers such as the Roman Empire or the Dacian Kingdom as a significant argument for originality, translated here as national specificity, is also part of the same discussion of forms of representativeness. The discussion of a nation's hereditary substrate is carried out as an emphasis of autochthony, which, however, is based on the paradox of the common cultural heritage of the East-Central European area, nurtured, to a large extent, by the same topos, due to the permeability of linguistic barriers and topographical proximity, so that the argument of originality becomes everyone's and at the same time nobody's, due to the difficulty of identifying the historical-cultural origin of one's cultural specificity.

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