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The Unknown Neighbour: On Romanian-Bulgarian Travel Encounters

Abstract

As we ever more easily travel far and wide, references about Romania and Bulgaria have become increasingly available. An internet search on either provides millions of results, ranging from country profiles to travel guides and accommodation ads. Since numerous websites and blogs offer access to useful details and unmediated experiences of the two countries, it may seem they are quickly accessible and easily knowable to all. This assumption, however, has been contradicted by my experience as a Romanian travelling to Bulgaria. Not only was the destination quite difficult to reach in spite of its geographical proximity, but it was also linguistically impervious; aside from some touristic commonplaces, it seemed culturally remote to an unprepared traveller. Apparently, the more information we have at our disposal, the less we actually know; the fact that we could get to know our neighbours readily does not mean that we do – quite the contrary. Hence this paper turns to Romanian-Bulgarian encounters as reported in published travel writing; more specifically, it will provide an overview of Romanian travel writing about Bulgaria, exploring several such texts, old and new, in order to examine the place of Bulgaria in the Romanian imaginary. The paper does not deal with the corresponding representations of Romania in Bulgarian travelogues, but wishfully invites a response in that sense, in the hope of starting a self-reflective dialogue between neighbours.

Keywords: Romania & Bulgaria, travel writing, travelogue, West vs. East, Balkan, othering, concurrent discourses, the double

1. Setting Course

In the absence of an established bibliography of Romanian-Bulgarian travel encounters specifically as recounted in Romanian and Bulgarian travelogues, the available collections of/on travel writing, as well as library and bookstore catalogues were surveyed in order to identify relevant published accounts. First, the extant bibliographies of (Eastern) European travelogues were consulted. This prominently featured Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis's *A Bibliography of East European Travel Writing on Europe* (2008), which is part of a three-volume collection entitled "East Looks West" that also includes an anthology and a scholarly introduction. As Drace-Francis notes in the chapter on Romanian travel writing, standard Romanian literary histories fail to include the otherwise numerous Romanian travel accounts.

That should come as no surprise; the travel writing genre is seldom admitted to the mainstream, in spite of its significant role in the construction of ethnic and national self-images; it took dedicated literary archaeologists to uncover those “double-marginalised” Eastern European travelogues, with a view to highlighting their alternate representations of Europe and the engendered discourses on Occidentalism(s). It should be noted, however, that this particular response to the Orientalist inscriptions of the East is West-centric in its source and focus and reiterates the same dichotomy on which it turns back the mirror. Hence what it does not and cannot find is alternative representations, should they exist, which do not necessarily write back to the ideological empire but possibly propose discourses of their own. One place to look for such concurrent discourses could be in travel accounts about neighbouring countries or of one’s own land. Consequently, the present overview of Romanian-Bulgarian encounters also enquires on (the potential of) discourses outside the mutual dichotomic reflections of East and West.

Second, selected volumes of/on travel writing in English were checked for references to Bulgarian and Romanian destinations. One example was another work edited by Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis, *Balkan Departures: Travel Writing from Southeastern Europe* (2009). The volume derives from the same scholarly project to challenge the assumptions of Western hegemony by having the Balkan other speak. However, its explicit assumption that travellers from the region create their identities through encounters with Europe eventually confirms that, when introduced as such, the other is bound to variegate the hierarchic dichotomies of East vs West. While these sources do not offer the relevant examples sought, they highlight the prevalence of an ideological background for Romanian and Bulgarian travel that could be presumed to drive not only the (counter-)representation of the West, but also that of one’s Eastern and Southern neighbours and possibly of one’s self. In other words, Eastern travellers might see themselves and their neighbouring others through Western eyes.

This assumption called for a background enquiry into the Western discourse which East and South European travellers are presumed to confirm or refute. That is, it became necessary to delve into the larger pool of travel writing about Romania and Bulgaria in order to explore representations of the two countries in travel writing – and hopefully identify relevant Romanian-Bulgarian travelogues. The linguistic limitations to that enquiry, that is travelogues published or translated into English or Romanian, rendered it culturally bound and indebted to an imperialist ideology rooted in the *lingua franca*. Notwithstanding that, it proved to be a detour worth taking. Based on library archives, bookstore catalogues, websites and blogs, the survey of travel writing that includes references to Romania and Bulgaria revealed a number of high-circulation English travelogues about Romanian and Bulgarian destinations and comparatively few indexed and studied accounts of Romanian travelogues about Bulgaria and vice versa. At this point, Bulgarian travel writing was

removed from the research scope primarily because of the language barrier, but also due to a concern of not speaking over authors who presumably write from a different place of culture. It remains a question to be explored from a better position of cultural ownership, so that an eventual mutual reflection and dialogue could ensue. This exclusion did not carry through to the category of English travelogues about the two countries, which are frequently part of common itineraries; thus the first question that presented itself was if and how the Western gaze on Romanian and Bulgarian destinations was reflected by Romanian travel representations of Bulgaria. While the present enquiry thus remains bound to the discourse it undertakes to demonopolise, it attempts to shift focus from a binary, hierarchical narrative to a multi- or non-centric representational dynamics.

The resources used to gain an overview of Romanian-Bulgarian encounters in general and of their accounts in travelogues, in particular, included artificial intelligence tools. When asked about Romanian travelogues about Bulgaria, one AI tool offered a sumptuous list of titles; subsequent questions and checks revealed that the first book listed did not, actually, exist. Several interpretations can be made of that confusion, including on the virtuality of Romanian-Bulgarian travel encounters... The road might take us far west before drawing nearer home, but looking closely at our neighbours, those who are (un)like us, could open up a space for multiplying discourses in travel writing.

2. Orientation

According to Jérôme Monnet, “a place can be considered as “symbolic” whenever it means something to a group of individuals, in such a way that it contributes to giving an identity to the group” (Monnet 2011: 652). Material realities like a building, a river or a cardinal point may communicate an intangible value or idea if so construed; as such, they mediate “the relationship between space, power and identity” (Monnet 2011: 652). Such symbols can be circulated for epistemic purposes and instrumentalised for ideological aims, knowingly or unawares, using a variety of discursive means – of which one is travel writing.

One example of a place read as symbol is provided by the Balkans. In Mark Mazower’s referential *The Balkans* (2002), the region is considered to include Bulgaria, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia, Albania, Romania, Greece and the European part of Turkey. This delineation of the Balkans has little to do with the homonymous peninsula and mountain range; it is a conventional merger of southeastern European lands into a signifying whole, which partly overlaps the contours of the Byzantine Empire for a sense of common heritage and overwrites the borders of different modern nations. The Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire, which outlived its Western Roman counterpart throughout Antiquity and the Middle Ages and was taken over by the Ottoman Empire with its capital converted from Constantinople to Istanbul, both continues and

dissociates from the ancient Roman heritage; it is recognisable to the West, but of a different lineage, much like a step sibling. Mazower's examination of the Balkans emphasises the area's ethnic and religious diversity as a source of conflicts, as well as of hybrid beliefs and lessons in co-existence. That multilayered diversity gives way, however, to a common denominator necessary in order to uphold the Balkan construct: the belief in magic, thus framing the Balkans as the irrational other. Already in 1997, *Imagining the Balkans* by Maria Todorova constituted a response from within to received ideas of the region and altogether questions the construct; it also refrains from reconstructing it into a cohesive narrative, as the textual juxtaposition of travelogues, letters and articles is fragmented enough to allude to a Byzantine mosaic, but without rendering it visible.

Romania and Bulgaria, two countries with only tangential trajectories in relation to the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman empires, are frequently brought together under the Balkan tag based on contextual common denominators – as exemplified by Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts* (1993). Kaplan's "journey through history" recounts the author's Romanian travels through the historical regions of Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania and dwells on living human encounters, haunted not by supernatural creatures but by the ghosts of a troublesome, communist past. In Bulgaria, the author is less immersed in the experience of travel and more focused on the country's post-communist issues, which allows him to highlight the societal commonalities between the two territories, both on the brink of societal change. The resulting birds-eye picture of "the Balkans" is of an area with unresolved issues, a formerly communist other.

Kaplan extends his itineraries in *Eastward to Tartary: Travels in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus* (2000); on his journey from Hungary and Romania through Turkey, Syria and Israel to the countries of the Caucasus, the traveller reiterates the imagery of an unstable Balkan region, cast as the definitive fault line between the East and the West. A historian with in-depth knowledge of regional and world politics (Kaplan also wrote the foreword to an edition of *Athene Palace* by R.G. Waldeck, an eye-witness account of the territorial intrigues of political representatives meeting in Bucharest before WWII), Kaplan maintains an analytical distance from the travelled lands and, much like in the above-cited negotiations, frames Romania and Bulgaria as objects of exchange, which can be physically ruptured and politically traded.

Another example of geography read as culture is presented by the Danube, which has been the subject of several eastbound travelogues: examples like *Danubio* by Claudio Magris written in 1986 and published in English as *The Danube* in 1989 or *Danubia: A Personal History of Habsburg Europe* by Simon Winder in 2013 point to a symbolic geography of Europe where the river that horizontally crosses the continent offers a distinct vantage point and lends itself to diverse metaphors of the progress of civilisation. In *Blue River, Black Sea* (2009), Andrew Eames gives

an account of a trip from the source to the mouth of the Danube, including inland visits to Romania. Subtitled “A Journey along the Danube into the Heart of the New Europe”, Eames’s travelogue is a nod and a challenge to Patrick Leigh Fermor’s exemplary journey: to Fermor the Danube is a border; to Eames it is a pathway. As Eames rewrites Fermor’s fragmented mobility into a fluid continuity, his reference to the post-WWII concept of New Europe recasts the European construct in terms of Old (West) versus New (Centre and East), rejuvenating it through an apparent reversal of symbolic hierarchy.

Eventually, travel by land engenders an experience of crossing territories and consequently an objectifying relation of conquest and possession by the traveller; water travel instils a different mood, as the traveller’s fluid movement at a distance rather calls for abstraction and digression on the topic of *panta rhei*. Beyond such variations, the examples mentioned above pertain to a grand narrative that reads places from West to East as self-validating symbols for the progress of civilisation.

3. Travelling West

Consistent with the ideological framework described above, twentieth-century English travelogues tend to lump together Romanian and Bulgarian destinations as part of extended, Balkan or Oriental itineraries. A famous example is Fermor’s backpacking trip across the European continent in the 1930s, reported in a trilogy that dwells on the experience of Germany in *A Time of Gifts* (1977), narrows down on Transylvania in *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986) and reminisces about Bulgaria and Greece in *The Broken Road* (2013). What Fermor’s memory retains of his trip through Hungary and Romania, recounted half a century after its completion, is Transylvania, a region which is not only fraught with the cultural heritage of both countries, but always already marked in the Western imagination as a land of castles, forests and vampires. It is the combination of natural wilderness and remote civilisation (princely castles, mountain villages, monasteries) that impresses Fermor as well, who dwells on the estates of Hungarian aristocrats and loves a local Romanian princess of the Cantacuzino family before being prompted to return home by the outbreak of WWII.

While at the time of Fermor’s journey the region of Transylvania was an integral part of Greater Romania, its depiction in the travelogue builds on and furthers Western representations thereof as a secluded land of legend and adventure, outside historical time and space. Depicted as “a great wild country” (Fermor 2014a) unrelated to the “Babylon” of Bucharest (Fermor 2014b), Fermor’s Transylvania is not of the East/Balkans, but of the Western Romantic imagination dwelling on the other beyond the woods – and the account significantly ends before the Iron Gates, the division between the Carpathian and Balkan Mountains. As *The Broken Road* takes the observant traveller down Bulgaria, through Veliko Tarnovo with its “winged insurrection of houses plumed by belfries and trees” (Fermor 2014a) to Burgas, it is

the unfinished open road that comes to the foreground as a retrospective metaphor of youthful freedom. This posthumously published volume includes Fermor's notes on Istanbul and Mount Athos, which provide a sense of completion and back-frame the entire journey into a spiritual pilgrimage. Nevertheless, the exuberant trip from West to East, backdropped by Romanian and Bulgarian scenery, is foremost to Fermor an initiation into "the charm and mystery of a secret religion, solemnized daily" (Sattin 2013), that of travel writing, which "[...] opened everything up: the world, civilisation and Europe" (Dalrymple 2013).

There are also those English travellers who choose Romania or Bulgaria as a singular destination. Shortly before Fermor, Donald Hall describes his quest for a natural lifestyle in *Romanian Furrow – Colourful Experiences of Village Life* (1933). Hall's travelogue "touches the very soul of rural Romania", according to the subtitle of its edition published by Alan Ogden in 2007 – and thus complements Fermor's more urban experiences in Transylvania. The narrative is realistically anchored in detailed observations of local life but is also indebted to Romantic views of nature and the noble savage. As the traveller moves through the historical regions of Romania (Wallachia, Transylvania, Moldavia, Bessarabia), he lives in villages and works next to the peasants, which accounts for the immediacy and width of his observations of the locals' lifestyle, customs, character and beliefs, painting them as hospitable, spiritual and purposeful. This quasi-ethnographic study, accompanied by photographs, documents an atemporal lifestyle connected to the land and the cycles of nature and is enveloped in a sense of nostalgia for a presumably lost communion between humans and nature. It transpires that Hall is on a quest for a lost world, a quest that also takes him to Mexico and Italy and which confirms itself by incorporating and mythologising pre-industrial landscapes into the Western civilised imaginary; Romania thus emerges as a site of the rural, natural other, an image long retained both in Western eyes and in its own.

In 1938, Sir Sacheverell Sitwell publishes the account of his *Romanian Journey*, with accompanying photographs and an introduction by Patrick Leigh Fermor himself. Having been invited by the aristocratic family Callimachi, Sitwell adventurously sets out in 1937 to a country "among the lesser known lands of Europe" and undertakes to read nothing about it before going there "in order to let it come as a surprise" (Sitwell 1938). However, after his return home the traveller reads "all the available books upon the subject" and comes to the conclusion that "English literature is nearly silent where that country is concerned" (Sitwell 1938). Hence his account attempts to explore and cover this gap in Western knowledge and experience and constitutes a post-hoc intertextual response. Sitwell's four-week trip into the relative unknown takes him through the entire country: from Transylvania to Wallachia, across the Carpathians and to the Danube Delta. Wherever he goes, the travelled land offers picturesque geography and diverse encounters to the good-humoured tourist, who portrays with equal delight gypsies at fairs, aristocrats in castles and the

king of the country, and generously assesses natural and urban landscapes with an art expert's eye. As noted in the beginning of the travelogue, the few details already known to foreigners included, metonymically, Bucharest, Sinaia, oil wells and beautiful peasant costumes; following upon the lines of natural resources and tradition, and in the same West-centric evaluative vein, Sitwell adds further dimensions, of modernity and diversity, presenting a prosperous and tolerant land where contrasts peacefully meet. The emphasis on youthful potentiality and the many depictions of abundance and fertility projects the image of a Garden of Eden found "at the far end of Europe" (Sitwell 1938). By the travelogue's publication date, that Edenic image was portentous of the Fall, as the English travellers and the Romanian travelleses would soon find themselves on different sides in a global conflict and in its aftermath. It is not fortuitous that Sitwell's travelogue is one of the few that have been translated into Romanian; the translation by Maria Berza was published by Humanitas in 2022 as *Calatorie in Romania* with a subtitle that reverses perspective: "Interwar Romania seen by an English traveller" [România interbelică văzută de un călător englez].¹ In Romanian self-representations, the period between the two world wars, much as depicted by Sacheverell Sitwell, amounts to an unmatched golden age.

Only one year later, another guest of the Callimachi family, Derek Patmore, publishes *Invitation to Roumania* (1939). If Sitwell maps the "lesser known" land with an emphasis on natural resources, Patmore (1939) proposes "a social study of a little-known people" and takes culture as his subject. Padmore's account of upper-class life with references to arts, music and literature, including an English translation of the folk poem "Miorita," adds to Sitwell's cross-sectional views while both, equally courteous, travellers undertake to aid the understanding and knowledge of the country – by their respective ideal audience in the West.

If the 1930s mark a heyday of English travel to Romania, after World War II foreign travelogues about Romania are either rare or unavailable. Closed off to Western foreign exchanges, Romania could no longer be conceived by Western travellers as a picturesque destination; "the dichotomy is no longer between East and West" (Sasaia 2015) in Orientalist terms, but as opposed political and societal orders, hence the escapist fantasy is replaced by anti-communist rhetoric. One example from the 1980s is Brian Hall's *Stealing from a Deep Place: Travels in South-eastern Europe* (1988). In his account of a bike trip through Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary between 1982 and 1984, the American traveller's focus is necessarily political. Positioned as a knowledgeable observer of history unfolding, the traveller assesses the effect of totalitarian regimes on the outer and inner lives of the people. His chosen means of transport affords a relative freedom of movement through the lands under study; it also permits chance interactions, as the rider often depends on the kindness of strangers. As Romania is concerned, the traveller contends that the

¹ All titles and quotes from Romanian are my translation, unless stated otherwise. The original source-text is provided between brackets.

inadequate living conditions and food shortages, resulting from the government's insistence on industrial development, left a mark of mistrust and avarice on the otherwise good-natured character of the people. The natural wealth of the territory, which was celebrated by Sitwell, is contrasted by Brian Hall with the scarcity forced upon the people, amounting to the paradoxical image of a poor country "sitting on the richest land in Central Europe" (Hall 1988). To the American traveller, Romania may well be in the centre of the old European continent, because its otherness is not geographical – though ironically brought about by a line drawn on the map to separate eastern and western spheres of influence.

Following the collapse of the Iron Curtain, the 1990s see a revival of travelogues about Romania, of which a significant number are written by female authors and deserve a more attentive reading in a separate study. These include an exploration of alterity reported in *In Another Europe – a Journey to Romania* by Georgina Harding (1990); the account of a bicycle trip through the legendary land of *Transylvania and Beyond* by Dervla Murphy (1992); and a tale of Eastern passion in *Looking for George; Love and Death in Romania* by Helena Drysdale (1992). Also in the 1990s, *Clear Waters Arising* by Nicolas Crane (1997) tells of an adventurous mountain itinerary leading from Spain to Romania.

With the 2000s comes an increasing number of Western travelogues that pick up on the 1930s representations of picturesque Romania and explore its otherness as an alternative place of self-fulfilment. A chief example is Alan Ogden's *Romania Revisited – On the Trail of English Travellers 1602–1941* (2000), which frames the author's itinerant experiences within accounts of previous English travellers. Ogden's *Romania Revisited* is a meta-travelogue, in which the travel narrative and the documented study, bibliography included, are bridged by intertextual commentary. The account is illustrated with photographs and maps and its appendices include a brief history of Romania, a note on the pronunciation of Romanian words, as well as a gender-based section titled "On the Trail: The Gentleman and the Ladies" with a selection of English travel accounts about Romania – all making visible the multilayered discursive network that shapes travel (writing). Ogden's Romanian travelogue, which follows his first travel book on Bulgarian monasteries, is based on an extensive exploration of the country and summarises the experience symbolically in two seasonal sections: summer and winter, each including separate chapters on the cities/regions visited. The traveller marks the sights, usually cities or regions, with synthetic labels such as "In Saxon Transylvania" and "Sibiu, the Anatomy of a Lobster" or "Bucharest: One Street, One Church and One Idea" and "13 Iasi, Once a Capital, Always a Capital". "Revisited" by Ogden in the footsteps of Sitwell's journey, Romania re-emerges as a site of symbolical experience, that can be safely read and definitively interpreted by Western eyes.

Another Romanian travelogue by Alan Ogden, *Moons and Aurochs: a Romanian Journey* appears in 2007. In 2008, an ex-pat's life experiences in Romania are

recounted by Mike Ormsby in *Never Mind the Balkans – Here's Romania*; uniquely, this travelogue was translated into Romanian by Vlad A. Arghir and published simultaneously as *Grand Bazar România sau Călător străin updated*, a title that, once again, reverses perspective and foreignises the Balkan trope of Eastern otherness into an Orientalist metaphor. 2010 sees the publication of *Along the Enchanted Way: A Story of Love and Life in Romania* by William Blacker, a traveller who temporarily settles in the historical regions of Maramures and Transylvania to experience a quasi-medieval world on the brink of change. In 2011, *Princes Amongst Men: Journeys with Gypsy Musicians* by Garth Cartwright recounts a pursuit of Roma music through the Balkans, including Romania. The debatable *To Romania, with Love* by Tessa Dunlop appears in 2012. In 2013 *The Way of the Crosses* by Peter Hurley tells of finding one's path geographically and spiritually, and eventually settling down in a place of traditional culture to cherish and protect. In 2014 appears *The Danube: A Journey Upriver from the Black Sea to the Black Forest* by Nick Thrope. In 2016, *Walking the Woods and the Water: In Patrick Leigh Fermor's Footsteps from the Hook of Holland to the Golden Horn* by Nick Hunt retraces Fermor's archetypal cross-continental journey from West to East, revisiting and confirming previous representations of the remote-yet-accessible, foreign-but-welcoming other.

The overview above illustrates the web and flow of mobility due to political circumstances, cultural trends and individual motives. It also highlights that, beyond these emerging patterns, Romania (like Bulgaria, when explored together) constitutes a site of alterity that proves welcoming and accommodating to the Western traveller, offering moderate adventure and temporary escape. Omnipresent in descriptions of Romanian journeys are the topoi of nature, love and tradition; they make up the allure of this particular destination as incorporated into the Western imaginary and which English-language travel writing consistently confirms as a domestic other.

4. Crossways

While the prevailing English travel narratives about Romania overviewed above belong to the twentieth century, many of the Romanian travelogues about Bulgaria found on record in library and bookstore catalogues date back from the nineteenth century, including some from the mid-nineteenth century. As such, they predate not only the invention of Europe as a meaningful supernational unit complementary opposing the West and the East; they also predate or witness the invention of nations. Also, they do not appear to establish a dialogue with earlier or contemporary foreign travelogues about the pre-Romanian principalities of Moldavia or Wallachia, such as Gilbert de Lannoy's *Voyages et Ambassades* telling of diplomatic missions in the fifteenth century or Paul of Aleppo's *The Travels of Macarius, Patriarch of Antioch* in the seventeenth century not only because those were only published in the mid-nineteenth century, but because the travellers' focus is not westward.

The earliest Romanian travelogue about Bulgaria comes from the classical poet Dimitrie Bolintineanu: *Travels on the Danube and in Bulgaria* [*Călătorii pe Dunăresi in Bulgaria*], published in Bucharest in 1858, recounts Bolintineanu's journey from 1851 when, returning from Paris, the 1848-revolutionary was denied entry to his native home Wallachia and travelled instead through Bulgaria to Constantinople, Palestine, Egypt and Macedonia. In Bolintineanu's travelogue, the sight of Bulgarian shores gives way to vast historical parentheses as the traveller provides detailed information on the witnessed events from Thracian through Medieval to Ottoman times. This diachronic gaze affords added meaning to the Bulgarian landscape, which reveals at once both its present and its past; each place is a metonym of regional history. It also creates a sense of relatedness, as the past described is a past shared by the two neighbouring peoples. On board ship, Bolintineanu's retrospective judgement is categorical and ideologically loaded: "Nowhere in the provinces of Turkey have I met so much squalor as in the Turkish towns on the right shore of the Danube" [Nicăiri, în provinciile Turciei, nu am întâlnit încă atîta mizerie ca în orașele turcești dupe malul drept al Dunărei (Bolintineanu 1858: 54)]. On shore, the traveller sees a sight in physical and symbolic disarray: "The city's position is beautiful and the air healthy; but its physiognomy miserable. Houses irregular and half kneeling to the ground. Pathways narrow, unclean and empty of people." [Poziția cetății este frumoasă și aerul sănătos; dar fizionomia ei foarte mizerabilă. Casele neregulate și jumătate îngenucheate la pămînt. Căile strimte, necurate și deșarte de oameni (Bolintineanu 1858: 54)]. As he seeks economic and social explanations for the destitute state of the place, the traveller is presented with a central metaphor of empire: like a candle whose light is strong all around, but dims with distance and eventually fades, so is the civilising power of empire diminished on its outskirts; the traveller remains unconvinced by the empire-centric model of civilisation, which the travelogue continuously questions and critiques. Incidentally, down the Danube Bolintineanu crosses paths with Vasile Alecsandri, another classical Romanian poet and author of travelogues, ranging from the local *A Walk in the Mountains* [*O primblare prin munti*] to the far-away *African Journey. From Biarritz to the Gibraltar* [*Calatorie in Africa. De la Biaritz la Gibraltar*]. In fact, Bolintineanu as well wrote several travel accounts to destinations near and far including (1856) *Travels to Palestine and Egypt* [*Calatorii in Palestina si Egipt*] and *Travels to the Romanians in Macedonia and Mount Athos or Santa-Agora* (1863) [*Calatorii la romanii din Macedonia si Muntele Athos sau Santa-Agora*], hence the two classical Romanian poets should also be considered, and studied as, full-fledged travel writers. A trend becomes visible: Romanian mid-19th century classical writers and political activists travel extensively and expertly and produce a number of travelogues not unrelated to their nation-building project.

The trend is confirmed by Dimitrie Ralet's *Souvenirs and Travel Impressions from Romania, Bulgaria, Constantinople* [*Suvenire si impresii de calatorie in Ro-*

mania, Bulgaria, Constantinople], published also in 1858, but in Paris, using transitional Cyrillic to Latin alphabet. As the Moldavians Dimitrie Ralet and Costache Negri were sent by the ruling prince on a diplomatic mission to Constantinople, the account of the journey to the colonial centre of power is apparently focused on the destination, which Ralet depicts as a multicultural, almost legendary place where the West and the East meet. The subtext, however, is consistently *pro domo* – and the travelogue’s first edition quotes on the cover an 18th century plea for Moldovan autonomy by the Belgian Charles-Joseph, prince de Ligne: “Suspected by the Russians to prefer the Austrians and by the latter to be connected with the Turks, the Moldavians would like to depart from both. [...] Serve humanity and at the same time the politics of several empires by leaving the country to the Moldavians” (Ralet 1858). Long ignored – much like the entire early Romanian travel writing tradition – Ralet’s account was reprinted in 1979 and has since been considered remarkable for its time not only as a (pre)modern contribution to the genre, but also because of its linguistic and cultural imports. The traveller describes the places and people encountered with an eye for customs and mores and the sights give way to vast historical and ethnographic digressions, much like in Bolintineanu’s travelogue, producing a text with a mosaic structure (Faifer 1979: 722) and a political undertone.

The final destination for these early Romanian travellers is Constantinople as the synecdoche of (Eastern) empire; while the travellers move physically towards the centre of power, their commentary pulls away from its grasp, emphasising the weaknesses of colonial influence and the multilayered civilisations at the heart of the Byzantine, then Ottoman empire. That may be because the travellers’ education is of the West and their nationalist ideals reflect the 1848 revolutionary wave. To these early Romanian travellers through Bulgaria, the south and north shores of the Danube provide equal case studies of a shared history of settlement and conflict in the (dawning) age of empires.

Three decades later, Bulgaria is a distinct destination for the Moldavian bishop Melchisedec Ștefănescu. His *Excursion through Bulgaria* [*O excursiune în Bulgaria*] from 1885 stems from a declared desire to acquaint himself with a country to which his home bears “centuries-old and tight connections” [stranse si secular legaturi, (Melchisedec 510)]. Not without a political agenda, the bishop’s itinerary takes him from Bucharest to Ruschuk, then to Bela and farther on to the old capital of Tarnovo. Accompanied or welcomed by officials throughout the journey, Melchisedec visits prominent members of the local communities and highlights the warm relations and many similarities between the two neighbours. Unlike his earlier Romanian peers, Melchisedec emphasises the positives, e.g. the good organisation of the institutions established by this “brave, hard-working and economical people” [popor brav, muncitor și econom, (Melchisedec 1885: 512)]. The traveller takes time to explore the natural and urban landscapes, writing of “what I myself have seen and found” [me întorc la ceea ce am vednt și constat eu însum (Melchisedec

1885: 516)] and describes them admiringly, for instance noting the nocturnal beauty of Veliko Tarnovo where “houses seem built on top of each other” and are “nestled into the hills like corn kernels” [Casele se par clădite unele peste altele ... casele sînt dese și așezate unele peste altele, ca grăunțele din papusoși (Melchisedec 1885: 512)]. The Romanian traveller has a keen eye for geography, urban planning and architecture, as well as institutions; with a professional focus on the church, he takes note of local customs and discusses demographic trends, such as the exodus of the Turks and Muslim Bulgarians. The resulting description of a neighbour who is different, yet similar, is consistent with the historical moment and the traveller’s persona: Melchisedec, who was active in the union of the Romanian principalities and the establishment of the autonomous national church, communicates a message of friendship from a free kingdom to an autonomous principality whose independence was yet to be proclaimed. A member of scientific societies all over Europe, from Paris to Kiev and from Saint Petersburg and Constantinople, the Russian-educated Romanian bishop communicates a clear sense of, and allegiance to, an established national identity.

By the 1900s the few reports of Romanian-Bulgarian encounters tell mostly of official missions. In 1903, an account of the *Visit of His Majesty the King to Bulgaria: a conference* [Căletoria Maiestăței Sale Regelui în Bulgaria: conferință] is provided by Alexandru Sturdza, a prominent Romanian colonel who subsequently defected to the Germans in WWI. In 1907, a journey *Through Bulgaria to Constantinople* [Prin Bulgaria la Constantinopol] is recounted by the Romanian historian and politician Nicolae Iorga. Interestingly, the encyclopedic Iorga also published in 1928–1929 a collection entitled *History of Romanians by travellers in four volumes, from the 14th century until 1877* [Istoria romanilor prin calatori in patru volume, din secolul XIV si pana la 1877], which explores the accounts of Western and Eastern travellers regarding the social and political situation of the medieval states and modern principalities of Romania. This first and comprehensive study in imagology features an aliasing strategy whereby the historian apparently borrows the traveller’s perspective: Iorga imagines what the first missionary travellers, crusaders or merchants would have seen in places they never reached and, while citing a foreign traveller who “sees well and writes finely and clear” [Avem – am spus – a un calator strain care vede bine si scrie frumos si limpede” (Iorga 54)], the scholar describes itineraries the traveller might have taken; thus the othering discourse of the original visitors is edited and filled in with retrospective self-representations.

The first half of the twentieth century sees Romania and Bulgaria engaged in regional conflicts and world conflagrations, on opposing sides. Following territorial disputes between Bulgaria and its neighbours, during the Second Balkan War the Romanian army crosses the Danube and nears the capital city of Sofia; following the peace signed at Bucharest, Romania receives the south of Dobrudzha (Quadri-lateral). In WWI that territory is taken by the Bulgarian army, as Romania is largely occupied and signs an (unratified) armistice. The neighbour becomes the antagonist.

One triumphant account of war on Bulgaria is provided by the Romanian novelist and political personality Mihail Sadoveanu. Drafted in 1913, the young lieutenant participates in the Romanian campaign during the Balkan war, brought about by the territorial disputes regarding South Dobruja. Sadoveanu covers the campaign in the morning newspaper *Universul*; framed as letters to a friend, Sadoveanu covers the campaign in the morning newspaper *Universul*; framed as letters to a friend, his articles are then collected in the volume *44 Days in Bulgaria* [*44 de zile in Bulgaria*] published in 1916. The writer describes advancing with difficulty through a barren land scorched by the sun and lauds the resilience of the soldiers, who complete their forced march ill-equipped, hungry and thirsty. Apparently, the military do not encroach on the locals as “the population of the neighbouring kingdom was declared sacred” [populatia regatului vecin a fost declarata sacra (Sadoveanu 1916)]. While Sadoveanu justifies war by resorting to the national myth of origin and Roman(ian) exceptionalism: “the absurd army is our only strength against the surrounding enemy languages” [absurda armata este singura noastra tarie intre limbile dusmane care ne inconjoara (Sadoveanu 1916)], the absence of actual warfare is celebrated: “It was an order written somewhere, in the stars, that the blood of this country’s children be spared for a greater cause” [A fost o randuiala scrisa undeva, in stele, ca sangele copiilor acestei tari sa fie crutat pentru o cauza mai mare (Sadoveanu 1916)].

A different account of the war on Bulgaria is repeatedly provided by the Romanian poet George Topirceanu. Drafted in 1916, the non-commissioned officer participated in active warfare at Turtucaia, on the right shore of the Danube, where the Romanian army suffered a great defeat leading to the loss of Dobrudzha and the occupation of Bucharest. Made prisoner, Topirceanu was only released in 1918 and recounts his experience of war and imprisonment in three subsequent volumes: *Memories from the Battles at Turtucaia* [*Amintiri din luptele de la Turtucaia*] (1918), *In Their Claws... Memories from Bulgaria and Light Sketches* [*În gheara lor ... Amintiri din Bulgaria și schițe ușoare*] (1920) și *Pirin Planina, Tragic and Comical Episodes from Captivity* [*Pirin Planina, epizoduri tragice și comice din captivitate*] (1936). A comparison of the *Memories* volume published immediately in 1918 and the *Pirin Planina* volume published in 1936 highlights the self-censorship in the former, as the writer distorts the reality of experience by eluding the more painful memories that are recorded in the latter. Nevertheless, even the first, more objectified, narrative register acts of cruelty committed by the Romanian army against Bulgarian civilians, such as burning down a village, and lets through (in)humane reactions: “[T]he village with its ideas, family home, memories, customs and past, is left behind, burning. Motionless we stand and watch” [satul cu ideile lui, cu casa părintească, cu amintirile, cu datinile și trecutul lui, rămîne în urmă arzînd. Ne-mișcați stăm și privim (Topirceanu 1918)]. In the third volume, however, the account is unfiltered, personal and brutal; moreover, the author takes on send a message of peace by emphasising that war is caused by everyone (not) getting involved.

The fact that these extraordinary accounts of war by an otherwise light-hearted poet were dismissed as untimely or largely ignored is explained by Romanita Constantinescu in an article on how historical events are committed to collective memory depending on how much they adhere to the constructed self-image – which, both at the time and subsequently, excluded a story of momentous defeat. Interestingly, Topirceanu's memoirs were translated into Bulgarian by Corneliu Ionel Ciubotaru as *Memoari na edin voennoplennik* and published in Sofia in 2017, providing a concurrent narrative to the Bulgarian victors' celebration of the epic battle of Turtucaia.

In 1940, geographer Ion Th. Simionescu publishes *Bulgaria*, a spin-off study of a larger work entitled *Picturesque Romania 1939–1942* [*Pitorescul Romaniei 1939–1942*] that includes five volumes: *Between the Danube and the Sea* [*Intre Dunare si Mare*], 1939; *Along the Border* [*In lungul granitei*], 1939; *On the Great Waterways* [*Pe drumul apelor mari*], 1940, *Through our Mountains* [*Prin muntii nostrii*], 1940, *Down the Hills and Across the Plane* [*Printre dealuri si prin campie*], 1941. Simionescu's meticulous account of a leisurely walk, accompanied by detailed drawings of flora, fauna or architecture, is equally scientific and poetic, underlain by a contemplative disposition: "To the deeds of man, only nature remains the same, luminous and smiling" [Față de isprăvile omului numai natura rămâne aceeași, luminoasă și surâzătoare. (Simionescu 1939: 131)]. Simionescu's travelogue literally traces the new borders of the country and takes stock of its natural and man-made possessions, in a nation-consolidation effort. The second person narrative is inviting and guides through an itinerary that covers the entire expanse of Greater Romania, seamlessly incorporating the territories of South Dobruddzha and Bessarabia through indiscriminate descriptions of Balchik and Cetatea Alba, respectively.

The town of Balchik, for instance, is depicted in its "wonderful natural kaleidoscope" [minunantul caleidoscop natural (Simionescu 1939: 128)] as the traveller reads the landscape much like painters have, drawn by colour contrasts: "In the cut of the limestone hills, the sky is of a blue so intense that chicory seems pale, like the face of an anaemic next to the blush of health" [In tăietura dealurilor ca de cretă, cerul e de un albastru atât de intens încât floarea de cicoare pare palidă, ca față unei ființi anemice pe lângă îmbujorarea sănătății (Simionescu 1939: 128)]. The topos of Balchik – a town founded by the Thracians, colonised by the Greeks, fortified by the Byzantines, rebuilt by the Bulgarians and named by the Ottomans, which only belonged to Romania between 1913 and 1940, when it served as a royal summer residence – is part of a trans-historical mythologisation of landscape that serves to naturalise the image of Greater Romania.

The traveller consistently asserts a nation-centric view which, however, allows him to note the relativity of borders: "The current political border does not match the ethnic one; there is almost no place around Romania where the line separating it from the neighbours, sometimes arbitrarily drawn, does not divide the Romanian

population at the periphery of the country” [Granița actuală politică, nu corespunde și cu cea etnică. Aproape nu e colț din jurul României, unde linia despărțirii de vecini, uneori trasă arbitrar, să nu treacă prin românimea dela periferia țării (Simionescu 1939: 69)]. This may be because the traveller’s national construct is rooted in the ethnic myth, which accounts for his alienating description of the ethnic other both within and outside the country’s borders: “There are villages of Bulgarians, busy bees indeed but seldom with a friendly gaze; always brooding hidden thoughts” (Sunt sate de bulgari, albineharnice e dreptul, darrar cu căutăturaprietenoasă. Sunt-mocniți; clocescmereugânduriascunse” (Simionescu 1939: 136)].

In spite of their divergent policies during the global conflagration, after WWII both Bulgaria and Romania found themselves under Soviet influence and part of the same communist bloc. The politics of isolation and control behind the Iron Curtain may have seeped through national borders as well, as the few Romanian-Bulgarian travel encounters from the 1960s and 1970s are cast as mass tourism shaped by travel guides: one *Bulgaria: ghid turistic* [Bulgaria: tour guide] from 1967 or a mythologically-oriented *Prin locurile legendarului Orfeu: Bulgaria turistică* [Through the places of legendary Orpheus: touristic Bulgaria] by Constantin Amarițefrom (1974) illustrate the commodification of the neighbouring other into a tourist destination.

In the twenty-first century, a new wave of Romanian travelogues to Bulgaria is in surge. Surfing on the increasing popularity of non-fiction in general and travel writing in particular, contemporary Romanian authors include Bulgaria in their larger itineraries, with Balchik and the Black Sea as common topoi.

In 2016, in a travelogue intertextually entitled *Around the Black Sea in 90 Days. Seven Countries, Eight Borders and a Coup in Prime Time* [*Ocolul Mării Negre în 90 de zile. Șaptețări, opt granite și o lovitură de stat în prime-time*], journalist Sabina Fati documents her clockwise itinerary through Ukraine, Russia and Crimea, Georgia and Abkhazia, Turkey and Bulgaria. This marginal sea between Europe and Asia, ominously called ‘docume since Medieval times and previously known as “great” or “happy” (“Pontus Euxinus” for the Greek, then Roman colonists) usually serves as a physical and symbolic border. In Fati’s travelogue, however, the Black Sea becomes a territory with its own character, a liquid crossway: “This moody sea, located between worlds, which always seems angry and difficult to control, is a place of endless disputes, hidden dissatisfactions and warlike strategies” [Această mare capricioasă, aflată între lumi, parcă mereu nervoasă și greu de stăpânit, este un loc al nesfârșitelor dispute, al nemulțumirilor ascunse și al strategiilor războinice (Fati 2016: 9)]. The marginal expanse of water is represented as the centre of a distinct region, with geographical, psychological and societal commonalities. This unique shift of focus from land to water re-mythologises the Black Sea, as the author rewrites the symbolic geography of the borderline between Europe and Asia as a liquid contact zone. Fati’s journey through this contact zone is fraught with bureaucratic difficulties and real dangers: “Around the Black Sea one cannot travel near the

shore, as the space is fragmented by conflicts” [În jurul Mării Negre nu poți călători pe lângă litoral, pentru că spațiul e fragmentat de conflicte (Fati 2016: 17)]. The traveller’s heroic itinerary, usually by bus, registers delays and unexpected detours, riding on bumpy roads with no connections from one country to the next; nevertheless, the traveller’s gaze remains equally attentive to details of natural and urban landscape, human behaviour and interactions, as well as to the greater, geo-political picture. The micro- and macro-elements of a given place are correlated in poetic analyses: “The perfume [of azaleas], the sea and political geography make the Abkhazians dependent on their country even more than patriotism, which has brought them to ruin” [Parfumul, marea și geografia politică îi fac pe abhazi dependenți de țara lor mai mult chiar decât patriotismul, care i-a dus în ruină (Fati 2016: 14)] and the travelogue counterpoints individual experience and national politics, the bitter and the sweet (also literally, by including an epilogue on the deserts in the region). Once in Bulgaria, the traveller notes “In Burgas I found Europe back again” [la Burgas am regăsit Europa (Fati 2016: 371)] and delves into the Russian-ridden past and present of the country before citing a local musician’s words about “a special energy of the city that comes from the Black Sea” [Burgas are o energie specială care vine dinspre Marea Neagră (Fati 2016: 373)].

In the 2023 travelogue *Postcards unstamped* [*Ilustre fără ștampilă*], the journalist Alexandru Radescu weaves together impressions from different excursions to Greece, Bulgaria, Spain and Italy into a coherent European itinerary, arranged from East to West. This is a rare account of as a married couple, where the double, mutual gaze of the man and woman also reflects on the landscape. The trips to otherwise typical tourist destinations are memorialized in a fragmented, poeticized prose, with intermezzos of the travellers’ pathways back home; naturally bound together in memory, kinaesthetic impressions, aesthetic judgements and cultural references are framed within an archetypal journey of initiation which is nevertheless very much anchored in the present.

The traveller’s encounters with the “neighbours south of the Danube” is limited geographically to Balchik and the Kaliakra Cape. That may be justified by proximity, but it is also symbolic of the contentious Romanian-Bulgarian relation over the South Dobruja region and the resulting mythologisation of Balchik. As the traveller “breathes in the air of the Quadrilateral”, the town is automatically contextualised as carrying the memory of iconic Queen Marie of Romania in architecture and atmosphere. The landscape is read through a historical and artistic filter: “Quiet Balchik is welcoming and appears forgotten in a tableau of self-consistent painters” [linistitul Balcic este primitiv și uitat parca într-un tablou cu pictori consecvenți (Radescu 2023: 34)]. At the same time, the rough terrain of the Kaliakra cape is seen to contain the presence of the old Thracians, with their fabulous treasures, arousing in the traveller a curiosity that comes close to envy. Thus South Dobrudzha appears as both foreign and domestic, a borderland of the imagination where land and sea

meet: “I am writing these lines in a hurry, on my knees, crouching in the corner of a modern-age pier, with plenty of cement and rust lined with shells, algae and snails” [Scriu aceste randuri in graba, pe genunchi, pe propria genunchi, chircit intr-un colt de arsana din timpuri moderne, cu mult ciment si rugina imblanita cu scoici, alge si melci (Radescu 2023: 36)].

5. Neighbour

It appears from the overview of Romanian travelogues about Bulgaria that travel writers account less of the travelled lands and peoples and more of themselves. In *Haunted Journeys*, Dennis Porter correlates the representation of place and the representation of self in travel writing: “such representations are always concerned with the question of place and of placing, of situating oneself once and for all vis-a-vis an Other or others” (Porter 1991: 20). That means that the descriptions of places and people function as a mirror up to the travellers, reflecting the terms of their encounter with the other. The authority with which travellers situate themselves among others and commit to represent foreign places and people illustrates what Mary Louise Pratt, in the footsteps of Gayatri Spivak, described as the process of othering in which “the people to be othered are homogenized into a collective ‘they’, which is distilled even further into an iconic ‘he’” (Pratt 1992: 139). In this context, the usual description of manners and customs serves as a standardising narrative meant to codify difference, to fix the other in a timeless present where all actions and reactions are expressions of its assigned difference; “thus it textually produces the Other without an explicit anchoring either in the observing self or in a particular encounter in which contact with the Other takes place” (Pratt 1992: 139–40). Pratt’s observation implies an ideological critique of the process of othering; as her *Imperial Eyes* demonstrates, to describe a foreign landscape or city using a panoramic view betrays a tendency toward dominance and imperialism, which is persistent throughout travel writing. However, othering may be seen not only as an oppressive representational pattern at the hands of the imperialist self, but as a general discursive instrument by which even the most considerate of travellers inscribes the physical, linguistic and behavioural distinction of the travelleses into a counterpointing narrative of *différance*. Hence othering can be conceived as a tool of identification at the hands of the travelling self, and in this sense the purpose of travel emerges as an itinerary of self-realisation.

A Romanian article entitled “Bulgaria-Romania. What binds us together, what sets us apart: a yet non-existent cultural axis” [“Bulgaria – România. Ce ne leagă, ce ne desparte: o axă culturală încă inexistentă”] published in 2009, begins with a summary of the commonalities and differences between the two neighbouring countries; according to general opinion, what binds us together is a common destiny, the communist past and sweeping it under the rug of a democratic present, a tiresome transition, corruption; what sets us apart is the Danube, a different perception of

cultural acts, the alphabet, and the orientation (Vlădăreanu 2009). One might add, among others, a common perception as “twin Cinderellas” in European Union policy or the all-inclusive hotels at the Bulgarian seaside, packed with Romanian tourists. In spite of an increasing “inter-peripheral literary circulation” between the two countries (Dinu 2023), the images committed to the collective imaginary are few, stereotypical and seem to illustrate an unwavering mutual disinterest.

Nevertheless, the overview of Romanian travelogues about Bulgaria drafted above shows that the Romanian traveller’s account of the Bulgarian neighbour, variably cast as a wretched, welcoming or ignored alterity, is always already part of a larger discourse of/on the self. On the background of collective nation-building, consolidation and modernisation projects, the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries Romanian journeys to or rather through Bulgaria are political, whether assumed as such or not, and their accounts serve self-affirmation purposes. What they also suggest is a lack of investment in the East vs. West paradigm, apparently partaking of an alternative mind-frame. The Romanian travel writers revisited above do not necessarily adopt or reject the discursive practices and topoi of the foreign travellers on Romania and Bulgaria overviewed before, nor do they refer to them much – with the exception of Nicolae Iorga, who goes as far as to replace the foreign traveller’s gaze with his own. They are not of the West or of the East, but of a place that is a-changing, so that the lands travelled may assume different names and borders from one journey to the next. They are the subjects of History, always already in the making, too variable to fit in the mould of binary thinking. Historically determined by the multi-layered and dynamic reality of a region that goes by many designations, Romanian travelogues about Bulgaria register fortunate or failed encounters between neighbours. In fact, the neighbour constitutes a different category of alterity than the radically opposed other that results from binary splitting. The neighbour can be represented as a friend, an antagonist or an acquaintance, a protagonist or an extra and can be altogether erased; individual neighbours can be qualified, befriended or resented, their presence foregrounded or ignored – but the neighbour is always already there, accompanying the self; the neighbour is not the required other for the self to exist, but a companion; it is a mirror up to the traveller, a double.

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