OTHERING THE WALLACHIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY: BRITISH VICTORIAN TRAVELLERS VOYAGING DOWN THE DANUBE

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Abstract: During their voyages on steamboats down the Danube, Michael Joseph Quin (1835), Edmund Spencer (1837), Charles Boileau Elliott (1838) and John Paget (1839)[1] reveal the British national identity as it is constructed abroad, in the process revealing the national identity of the inhabitants of the territories visited by them. Such a reading of these travel narratives is in line with Benedict Arnold's theory of imagined communities and Homi Bhabha's discussion of the narrative of nations. The dichotomy of the two different national identities is set up by reverse-mirror imaging (Gerd Baumann) since where one is technological, civilized and superior; the other is primitive and indolent. Thus, by setting the British identity as a positive pole, these travellers establish the projected image of the Eastern Wallachians as an instance of the Orientalized identity, essentially othering it.

Keywords: Othering, Wallachian identity, British identity, reverse-mirror imaging, Orientalism.

The Steamboat and British Travel Narratives

The historical context of the various journeys undertaken by British subjects along the Danube river at the very beginning of the Victorian Age, in the 1830s decade of the 19th century, is one of innovation, based essentially on a British invention of the 18th century – the steam engine. This heralded a new age – the industrial one – and permitted safer and faster travel in voyaging on rivers towards territories previously inaccessible. The British quickly took advantage of the opportunity; as a result, in the above mentioned decade there were several British travellers to reach the territory of present day Romania. For some this was the end of their journey, while others were only passing through. Once the steamboat was introduced on the Danube River, the difficulties of obtaining free passage throughout the territories of all the countries crossed or bordered by the Danube was seen as a small obstacle indeed. In addition, for those travellers setting forth in the 1830s, this new avenue of voyaging represented novelty and adventure.

Initially however the voyage was fragmented. The steam boats could not reach the Black Sea; portions of the voyage required travelling over land due to the dangers of the turbulent waters of the Danube between Moldova and Schela Cladovei. Thus, a portion of the voyage could be undertaken overland or by small barges whose progress would not have been impeded by the shallow waters. From Schela Cladovei the traveller could continue his journey on another steamboat that was meant to travel on the lower Danube. At times, as a result of the drought, there were longer segments of the Danube that could not be navigated due to the shallow waters.[2] Some of the travellers who braved the dangers were Michael Joseph Quin (1834), Edmund Spencer (1836), Charles Boileau Elliott (1837) and John Paget (1838).[3]

[1] The years here indicated refer to the time of publication of their travel narratives.

[2] I would like to acknowledge here the assistance received from lecturer dr. James Brown (University of Bucharest) who has patiently answered my questions regarding the steamboat service on the Danube and suggested some names of British travellers who had journeyed through the territory of present day Romania in the 19th century.

[3] The years here indicated refer to the time of their journeys.

Michael Joseph set up a model for other travellers, not only in terms of the formal aspects, but also in the way he perceived and depicted the Wallachians in his story. The first three travellers were only passing through Wallachia on their way elsewhere, however, the fourth – John married a Hungarian baroness and lived in Transylvania for the remainder of his life. When Michael Joseph Quin undertook his journey, he had to disembark immediately after Vidin. Quin was a pioneer of this route, since it had only just been launched.

Aside from their British nationality, these travel writers share the condescension with which they treat the local inhabitants, their absolute belief in their own superiority, and the conviction that the steam power would become a moral and civilizing engine that would propel the backward territories of Eastern Europe and even of the Ottoman Empire. They each had reasons other than the novelty of the experience to travel – Captain Spencer to gather information, Elliott, who was a vicar, to consider the state of Christianity in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, Quin to write articles, as he was a journalist, while Paget was living in Transylvania and was an agriculturist. Despite these differences, the way they perceive the Wallachians encountered throughout their journeys is quite similar. Thus, it is not simply their British national identity that makes them one, but also their worldview and the impulse to try to improve the lot of the less fortunate.

The British Identity

Britain's "self-appointed position of guardian of international morality" shines through the pages of these travel narratives, however, the travellers also criticize the lack of action on occasions when the Britain should have acted. (Taylor 396) Charles Taylor discusses the idea of moral progress as established in the 19th century. This is indeed the impression given by the travellers who judge the locals for their different mores, habits, customs or costumes in a rather unflattering manner. The entitlement and righteousness of the travellers lead to the projection of a sense of superiority towards the locals: "The very picture of history as moral progress, (...) which underlies our own sense of superiority, is very much a Victorian idea." (Taylor 394) The British identity is created through the appreciation of technology, innovation, and progress and a pronounced dislike for primitiveness and backwardness. Thus, Britain is seen as a civilized country, with developed technology and innovative industry, a progress that is reflected in its society, economics, politics and customs. On the other hand, the predominantly agricultural territory of Wallachia is seen as backward not only in terms of industry and technological developments, but also in terms of its social and political classes, while the morality prevalent in this territory is disreputable at best. Furthermore, the central virtue of industry, highly appreciated by the British, is seen as lacking in the Wallachians, which are treated contemptuously as a result. The slave trade had been suppressed in 1807 and slavery had been abolished in 1833 in England (Taylor 396) yet on visiting Wallachia, these travellers discover that slavery was still a fact of life here. Female modesty, which was the norm in Britain, is not viewed the same way here. The importance of the family as the building block of British society is disregarded in Wallachia where, we are informed, divorce occurs quite often.

Othering / Orientalizing the Wallachian Identity

As the travellers leave the West behind them, it feels as if they are travelling back in time. The moment they set foot on the steamboat travelling away from the civilized world, the comforts of Western life gradually disappear. One by one they become infrequent or inexistent as if the leap made by civilization in the Western world had not occurred. With each new step towards the East the traveller is reminded of a less civilized and developed past, of earlier times and of earlier mores. For the most part, these travellers are glad that these earlier times and mores have been overcome in the West with only few nostalgic remembrances of things such as hospitality. As the travellers transit various geographical spaces, they seem to be moving back in time. The awareness of how far civilization had come in the West is set in the forefront of their minds even before travelling to the East:

> We feel that our civilization has made a qualitative leap, and all previous ages seem to us somewhat shocking, even barbarous, in their apparently unruffled acceptance of inflicted or easily avoidable suffering and death, even of cruelty, torture, to the point of revelling in their display. (Taylor 396)

What comes as a shock to these travellers is the continued existence of those earlier models within a space they perceive as other. Thus, these narratives from the 19th century are a way for the travelling British to represent their culture by means of a mirror provided by the inhabitants of the countries transited by them. The cultural representation is commendatory for the British Empire and derogatory for the East, and implicitly for the Wallachians. The geographical and temporal removal from the West to the East is tacitly implied to parallel a reversion to an earlier model, possibly a sign of a fall from grace.

Edward Said's Orientalism is of utmost importance in understanding the way in which Western cultures interpret Eastern cultures. This dichotomy of us versus them that the West adopts in its representations of the East is rather crude. While seemingly denigrating the East, the West is also involved in a dialectics of desire – desire for what the East has and the West is missing, possibly because it was lost. Thus, in an earlier embodiment the West was the East – conversely, there were certain traits that were lost in becoming the West as it is now. This is what Gerd Baumann calls reverse mirror-imaging.

Occident Positive	**Orient Negative**
Rational	Irrational
Enlightened	Superstitious
Technological	Backward
Occident Negative	**Orient Positive**
Calculating	Spontaneous
Sober	Luxuriant
Materialist	Mystical

The figure from Baumann's chapter in *Grammars of Identity/Alterity* represents the reverse mirror-imaging through which the dominant/superior culture not only recognizes its negatives in the Other, but also those positive traits it no longer possesses: "the sense of Western superiority entails also a sense of loss: 'we' are 'no longer' so spontaneous, luxuriant

or mystical." (20) Baumann suggests that within Orientalism one may also find self-critique and signs of desiring what the Other has.

Romantic Elements

The romantic period in Europe – with its first proponents in England and Germany and its starting date of 1798 – is characterized by several aspects that become immediately visible in these travel narratives from the 1830s. The escape into the past, history, tradition and foreign, exotic places, identifying national characteristics in terms of mythology, folklore, and language, contemplating nature with its local specificity, seeing man as a microcosm mirroring the outside world as macrocosm. Visiting distant lands is a typically romantic pursuit of leisure, as are an appreciation of nature, of gothic elements, of ruins and of exotic places. The British travellers' journeys through Wallachia fit several of these categories since they visit the ruins of Trajan's bridge, of castles, and cities.

Joseph Michael Quin uses romanticized images with gothic overtones in the way he sets up nature as an inherent extension of the national character:

> The whole of this narrow passage amongst the rocks was curious, and highly romantic. (…) A cluster of rocks, somewhat further on, assumed all the appearance of the ruins of a cathedral, with its towers and ivied walls, and Gothic windows and gates. The effect of this pile was remarkably picturesque, as it rose on an eminence above a mass of green foliage, which seemed to conceal the lower parts of the cathedral. (Quin 91-92)

In this particular fragment, nature itself has taken the guise of a pile of stones that seemed to be a cathedral at one time. The point of entrance into Wallachia, while voyaging down the Danube, is represented by the Iron Gates:

> celebrated "Iron Door" of the Danube. It is a series of rapids so called from the extreme difficulty of passing them, and also probably from the almost impenetrable nature and ferruginous colour of the rocks (...). These rocks (...) looked terrific; the gaping jaws, as it were, of some infernal monster. When the Danube is at its ordinary height, replenished by its usual tributaries, the roar of its waters in hurrying through the "Iron Door," is borne on the winds for many miles around, like the sound of continued peals of thunder. (Quin 144)

Describing the first confrontation with Wallachia, Quin chooses to describe the Iron Door of the Danube with words such as "extreme difficulty", "impenetrable nature", "gaping jaws, as it were, of some infernal monster", "roar of its waters", "the sound of continued peals of thunder" which clearly place the style in the Romantic period. He uses the landscape to characterize the people of this land. The Wallachians and their land are placed in world beyond that to which the traveller is accustomed. The land seems to protect its people since the entrance to it seems impenetrable. The gothicised nature of gaping jaws and peals of thunder seems ready to expel the foreigners. Thus, the British traveller's depiction of Wallachia as the land of alterity is justified in his view.

Edmund Spencer begins his interactions with Wallachia by describing the cataracts or whirlpools that constitute "an object of great terror to the navigators". (Spencer 62) The impetuousness and violence of the stream that dash ships "to pieces by the foaming surge" is seen as a possible connection to the character of the Wallachians. (Spencer 63) The Iron Gates

or Demirkapi as it was called by the Turks due to its prior impassability is described as length due to its savage beauty and the perils it represents – a

> channel, rushes between stupendous rocks down the descent with the rapidity of lightning, and with a crash so tremendous as to overpower every other sound; while the foaming surge, as it broke with violence over the deck, and lashed the sides of our vessel, gave to the river the appearance of the sea when agitated by a storm. (Spencer 70)

The romantic character is evident here, but what is more important to Spencer, is the fact that the steamboat he was on was the first to accomplish the perilous feat of travelling past the cataracts without employing the alternative overland route. (Spencer 70)

Another romantic element refers to the ruins of the bridge built by Apollodorus Damascenes at the command of Emperor Trajan – "the remains of the arches are visible at low water, and the towers on each side of the river still maintain their position, in defiance of the storms of ages." (Spencer 73) In this case too one may consider that these ruins enduring through the ages are a sign of the character of the Wallachians. Elliott also praises the romantic character of the Danube, seems impressed with the wilderness of the views. He tells us that "the scenery on both sides is romantic to a great degree" and "the river opens a majestic view." (Elliott 134) After a few positive remarks regarding the landscape, the attention of the traveller turns to further criticism. Finally, John Paget starts by praising the Danube and its picturesque, yet wild vista: "I know of no river scenery in Europe to be compared with it (...) the Danube is wild and awfully grand." (Paget 116) In true romantic style he also visits the ruins of Trajan's bridge and those of Sarmisegethusa at Gradistie, "the former capital of the Dacians, the residence of Decebalus", and the place where Trajan built Ulpia Trajana. (Paget 181)

Mythological Elements and Superstitions

The British travellers discuss the baths at Mehadia, which existed since the times of the Romans, who called them "*Thermae Herculis ad aquas*". These baths are surrounded by landscapes that are "beautiful, abounding with romantic valleys and lofty hills" (Spencer 66) and there are legends which link Hercules to this area: "Hercules bathed in a dark cavern, access to which is by a small aperture not large enough to allow a man to enter erect." (Elliott 137) Paget also mentions the legends attached to places such as a cave near Babakay: "the identical cave of the Dragon slain by St. George, and where, they say, the foul carcass still decays, and, like Virgil's ox, gives birth to a host of winged things." (Paget 116) Similarly to the earlier travellers, Paget places the Wallachian principality beyond the realm of the ordinary. He also chronicles the superstitions of the Wallachians and their connection to the Romans: one superstition in particular reminds Paget of the Roman libations – refers to spilling a little of the water taken from well, to appease the spirits "who might otherwise make her pure draught an evil-bearing potion." (Paget 223)

History of the Wallachians as Descendants of the Dacians and the Romans

Paget appreciates the heart and soul of the people inhabiting this land, a people who is unwilling to leave behind the bones of its ancestors: "the Wallack feels deeply; he loves the land his fathers tilled, the house his fathers lived in, the soil where their bones have found a

resting-place. (...), utilitarian as I am, I should be sorry to see this stuff of the heart bartered for such gains as theirs." (Paget 221) Moreover, in Paget's view, the Wallachians' redeeming qualities are his love of his parents and the care and respect for the elderly: "They would consider it a disgrace to allow anyone else to support their aged and poor, while they could do it themselves." (Paget 220) John Paget looks towards the history of the principalities in order to winnow the truth from the falsehoods ascertained as the national character of the Wallachians by those those prejudiced against any eastern people. Charles Boileau Elliott characterizes the Wallachians in terms of their agricultural occupations but also informs the reader that in older times they used to be shepherds – hence the name: "in Illyrian Vlach signifies a herdsman, whence is derived the name Wallachia." (Elliott 155)

Clothing and Physical Traits

Charles Boileau Elliott criticised the raggedness of the peasants' clothing – "a sort of blanketing, patched and repatched, and then torn and patched again, so that probably little remained of the original garb." (Elliott 134) Elliott informs his reader that the clothes of those who wear more than rags have an eastern character: "The women wear a white veil fastened with silver pins, passing round the throat and falling loosely down the back." (Elliott 147) He also considers the European costume of the gentry to be a vast improvement over the clothes worn by the peasants he encounters: "The gentry in Wallachia have adopted altogether the European costume." (Elliott 147-148)

John Paget offers a detailed description of the Wallachians in his work. The men are seen as being of average height, or even below the average, and of "rather slightly built and thin." (Paget 213) This marks a distinct difference from the various peoples that surround the principalities. The Wallachian's features are "often fine, the nose arched, the eyes dark, the hair long, black, and wavy, but the expression too often one of fear and cunning to be agreeable." (Paget 213) Moreover, Paget notices the resemblance of the Wallack peasants to the Dacians of Trajan's column:

> The dress, the features, and the whole appearance of the Wallacks, were so Dacian, that a man fresh from Rome could scarcely fail to recognise it. They have the same arched nose, deeply sunken eye and long hair, the same sheepskin cap, the same shirt bound round the waist, and descending to the knee, and the same long loose trowsers which the Roman chain is so often seen encircling at the ankles. (Paget 125)

This chain may be interpreted as a metaphor for the centuries of thraldom the Wallachians endured after the departure of the Roman colonists. The garments worn by the Wallacks are similar to those of the Dacians from the past. Thus, Paget believes that the origin of the Wallack people lies within the colonization of Dacia by the Romans and the mixing of the two peoples, consequently they "proudly cherish the name of Rumunyi." (Paget 188)

Housing

Quin informs the readers about the backward state of the housing situation, but he also explains the reason for it: "Their cottages are still constructed in the most simple and temporary style, because they do not feel assured of the continuance of that domestic peace, which happily they now enjoy." (Quin 169) His views are continued by Spencer's describing

his arrival in Kladova and Giurgewo and the poverty of the inhabitants and their wretched state: "the very personification of misery." (Spencer 72) The description of Giurgewo includes "dirty narrow streets, and houses built of mud", indolent inhabitants, and stray dogs roaming the streets. (Spencer 77) The surrounding area is only scarcely populated and it looks like a desert, with only a few scattered huts, while the inhabitants appear to have reverted to a more primitive state due to the long oppression of the Ottoman Empire: "so oppressive has been the long rule of the Ottoman government, and so protracted the devastating wars, that the people have gradually relapsed into semi-barbarism, and the country has become so depopulated." (Spencer 81) Elliott criticizes the accommodations for the night in Scala Cladova. The houses here are little better than huts

> a village of thirty or forty huts, formed of hurdles, the interstices of which are, in some filled with clay, in others left to give free vent to the air. (...) These miserable dwellings consist of a single room without windows, lighted and aired by the door: each stands by itself on a common, unprotected by any sort of enclosure. (Elliott 143-144)

The Western traveller feels appalled at the living conditions of the people in Wallachia from the first instances of housing that he encounters in the first town – the head station of Scala Cladova. First of all, the primitiveness of these huts looks daunting to him and the prospect of spending even one night in such conditions perturbs him. He observes that the misery encountered in these villages is typical of the living conditions in the entirety of the principality of Wallachia: "the squalid filth, the poverty and degradation in which the people of this village vegetate can scarcely be exceeded; and, alas! it is but a specimen of Wallachian misery in general." (Elliott 147) Elliott is the first of the travellers to use the word oriental to refer to the living conditions in Wallachia, even though the previous two travellers had described parts of those same conditions and had included Wallachia in the territories of the Ottoman Empire: "the size of the mud buildings, the platform before them, the dress of the natives, and the number of dogs running wild through the street, constitute a *tout ensemble* truly oriental." (Elliott 152)

Immorality

Slavery was an issue that would have scandalized the British traveller since Great Britain had just made it illegal. In Wallachia the slaves were all gipsies. Gipsies lived throughout Europe and the question of their origin had not yet been resolved, yet it was supposed that they hailed from Egypt. The prejudice against gipsies was prevalent elsewhere as well and it was rampant in the principalities. Here, they were

> valued as little as, or less than, beasts of burden. (...) The physiognomy, musical taste, thievish and conjuring tricks, falsehood, dirt, and idleness, which characterize them throughout the world, here equally distinguish them. (...) A healthy man costs three pounds, a woman two; and both sexes are bought and sold by the nobles without any regard to the bonds of domestic union. (Elliott 159-161)

In terms of morality, Elliott becomes quite critical of the Wallachians: "immorality of the worst description pervades all classes in the principalities." (Elliott 161)

This sentence he passes due to the lack of observance of marriage vows and the fact that the locals divorce their spouses without much thought. Elliott is firmly convinced of the salience of the family as the building block of society. (Elliott 162) Thus, by allowing divorce, the society of the principalities is perverted especially since it does not attempt to pass judgment, to shame or to shun those involved in such scandalous conduct. Elliott is firm in his judgment of this disreputable behaviour, considering that the values of his own nation and culture are visibly superior: "it may safely be affirmed that Christendom does not contain a country more demoralized and more degraded than Wallachia and Moldavia." (Elliott 162)

The Wallachians' Negative Traits

Before reaching Wallachian territories Michael Joseph Quin encounters its inhabitants in the guise of the boatmen who convey him down the river and on one of his overnight stops. One of the boatmen, described as a "short thick-bodied Wallachian, wearing on his head a woolly sheepskin cap, might have been sketched as the very personification of indolence." (Quin 86) The subtitles for Quin's chapter refer to the Wallachians as the picture of laziness and to the way they live their lives as the charm of procrastination: "I never beheld such a picture of laziness as that which these men presented. (…) when they were not eating or drinking, were either sleeping, smoking, singing, or lounging, anything save working, which they continued as much as they possibly could, to avoid. (Quin 87-89) During Quin's stay at Gladova, the protracted delay of the carriages and merchandise that were supposed to reach them from Orşova, unnerved him and his companion, Count Szechenyi. Consequently, the count rode back hoping to encounter the missing caravan, only to find the men he had hired all asleep; thus, Quin concludes: "The laziness of these Wallachians is indomitable." (Quin 168) This idleness is the one trait that all the travellers agree on.

The Wallachians' Redeeming Qualities

The one redeeming quality of Wallachian people seems to be their hospitality, but even that is criticized by Quin. At Gladova, they are invited into the home of a young Wallachian officer – this home is rather condescendingly described by Quin as "his house, or rather his hut." (165) Elliott believes that the hospitality of the locals will be lost once the means of conveyance to this region improve and the numbers of foreigners visiting them swell:

> The hospitality, almost universal in countries comparatively uncivilized, costs very little. (...) As soon, however, as a system of steam navigation is organized on the Danube, and an influx of strangers into Wallachia takes place, civilization will be promoted, and primitive hospitality will necessarily decrease. (Elliott 154-155)

Thus, one of the positive traits of the Wallachians according to Elliott is dismissed as a mere product of the low degree of civilization of the country. If at the time he was travelling hospitality still existed – and was a desirable trait in the eyes of the Westerner – it was meant to vanish soon, since the steamboat was only likely to provide the necessary progress now that the Danube had been opened to travel.

The Need for Progress

Quin expounds the opinion that once the Danube would become navigable by steamboat down to the Black Sea, those countries which lie on either side of the river will enjoy countless benefits. Thus the civilizing project seems to be a mission worthy of undertaking for those like Count Szechenyi who are enlightened and who can see the potential of this route for commerce and progress. On the other hand, Quin's comments also reveal the prejudices Western Europe holds about the East which is hardly seen as part of Europe – a lack of industrial development, the backwardness of the territory, the need of emancipation in terms of laws and institutions and the perceived lack of morality:

> The advantages destined to arise out of this great enterprise to Hungary, to Servia, Wallachia, and Bulgaria, and, indeed, to all Turkey, are incalculable. Those countries, which have hitherto seemed scarcely to belong to Europe, will be rapidly brought within the pale of civilization; their natural riches, which are inexhaustible, will be multiplied ; their productions will be vastly improved ; their institutions and laws will be assimilated to those of the most advanced nations ; and new combinations, not only of physical but also of moral strength, will be created, which may give birth to important changes in the distribution of political power on the continent. (Quin 153)

In terms of development, he mentions institutions and laws as the beneficiaries of the assimilation of advanced nations. He is also firmly convinced that these nations would also benefit from moral improvement. Thus, Quin takes the position of the superior and civilized Westerner and passes judgment on the nations of the East. The advancement of these lands is clearly meant to be accomplished under the guidance and influence of Western European states. Thus, these backward and primitive territories are treated as a child in need of tutelage would be treated. These comments are also indicative of the desire of the West for the inexhaustible riches of these lands.

Conclusion

The Wallachian identity is constructed through its closeness to the nature and landscapes of the country the Wallachians inhabit, as well as through the criticism offered by the travellers in terms of the primitivism of the living conditions. The British identity, on the other hand, is conceptualized via the technological advancements and the inventions of the age – chief among them being the steam engine that enables the British nationals to travel down the Danube – and through their desire to attempt civilizing missions wherever they go. While there is a clear dichotomy between the two identities, the British travellers also seem to realize that this ease of movement and conveyance will eventually result in an obliteration of the distinctive national features of Europe and a merging of these identities. Nevertheless, the British national identity is clearly poised as the superior pole of the binary opposition and through reverse-mirroring, the Wallachian identity becomes an alterity through its primitive and Orientalized embodiment. Gerd Baumann argues that reverse-mirror imaging is the method by which an identity may be Orientalized. His theory is based on Said's description of the dichotomy between us and them, in this case the Wallachian identity is relegated to the marginalized 'them' and encompassed in the Orientalized identity. By othering the

Wallachian identity, however, the British identity emerges as well – what one is, the other is not – since those traits that one identity displays, the other identity clearly lacks.

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