

THE KING'S RETURN: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE REPRESENTATION OF KING MIHAI'S EASTER VISIT TO ROMANIA IN 1992 BY THE ROMANIAN PRESS

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Abstract: King Mihai's Easter visit to Romania in April 1992, the first successful visit of the monarch since the fall of the communist dictatorship, was largely debated in the Romanian press, which generally reflected two antagonistic viewpoints that colonized the public sphere at the time. For some, the king was a sort of healer or saviour of a country who suffered the oppression of a totalitarian regime. For others, the king was a threat and a source of instability to the status-quo of the newly-established neo-communist power. The analytical framework is mainly, but not exclusively circumscribed to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which provides tools for text analysis able to decipher meanings which are not always easily identifiable at first sight. As a method of investigation, CDA helps reveal how ideology can turn into an efficient means of manipulation by being converted into common sense, as claimed by Norman Fairclough. Intertextuality and recontextualization are other processes by means of which ideology can insinuate itself at text level. In my analysis of the king's profile as constructed by Romanian newspapers, I use Jan Blommaert's concepts of "ascribed identity" and "achieved identity" in order to illustrate how the process of identification develops.

Keywords: CDA, intertextuality, recontextualization, ascribed identity, achieved identity.

After the fall of the communist regime in Romania, in December 1989 and before April 1992, King Mihai made at least two attempts to return to his homeland, which the newly established political power tried and succeeded, by various ways and means, to block. In the spring of 1990, King Mihai was, without much ado, turned back the moment he was embarking on the plane for Bucharest in the Geneva airport, Switzerland, the country where he spent most of his exile. On Christmas day 1991, a few hours after the king landed in Bucharest and headed towards Curtea de Argeş, the Romanian royal necropolis, to recollect at the tombs of his ancestors, the royal convoy was brutally stopped in the middle of the highway, quickly surrounded by armed police forces, accused of having trespassed the Romanian borders illegally, forced to return back to the airport under military escort and expelled from the country.

The royal Easter visit of 1992 proved to be a total success for the king, which exceeded all expectations. A sea of people invaded the streets of Bucharest and welcomed the monarch, their joy pouring down in waves. What exactly made the new political regime change their mind and allow the king's return? Could President Ion Iliescu have undergone a sort of epiphany which revealed to him and made him understand who Mihai I of Romania was? The reason behind this change of attitude was political. The newly-elected president, self-styled a democrat, proved unable to convince the Western chanceries that his political reforms were meant to strengthen democracy in Romania. The extreme acts of aggression of the miners against the capital and its population, known as the Minerriads, between January 1990 and September 1990, reaching its most violent expression in the Minerriad of 13-15 June 1990, overwhelmed the West with shock and severely undermined the president's credibility both at home and abroad. He quickly needed a new occasion by means of which he could try

and turn the tables in his favour. The opportunity occurred when His Holiness Archbishop Pimen of Suceava and Rădăuți, a high-ranking Romanian prelate, on his own initiative, invited King Mihai to celebrate the Orthodox Easter at Putna Monastery, in Northern Moldavia, where Voivod Stephen the Great is believed to have been buried. The king, although eager to return home, remained vigilant, announcing that he was considering the invitation and waited for the reaction of the Romanian authorities who, with unprecedented swiftness, and on their initiative, not upon royal request, as some official elliptical communiqués implied, announced the granting of the visas.

In a new communiqué, the king announced that he had accepted the invitation and that he was planning a private three-day visit to Romania at Easter. The King and the queen, accompanied by their second daughter, Princess Elena, and her son, Prince Nicolae, would land in Suceava, the former capital of Moldova, on 25 April and head straight to Putna Monastery for the Easter religious service. On 26 April, the sovereign and his suite would arrive in Bucharest and take part in the religious service of Easter Sunday at Saint George's Church, where the king intended to recollect by the tomb of Voivod Constantin Brâncoveanu, followed by a meeting with the representatives of the Romanian cultural life at the Continental Hotel, where the royal party was accommodated. Then, on the third day of the visit, the royal family was expected at Curtea de Argeș, for another religious service and a requiem for their ancestors. In the afternoon, the king and his family would return to Otopeni airport and fly back to Switzerland¹. The royal communiqué was clear in stressing the private and spiritual character of the visit.

Mass media, especially the written press, played a crucial role in reporting the events, and being the intermediary between the social actors involved and the rest of the country following the events, “mass media not only present[ed] the event, but also fabricat[ed] it in order to become a media event”². The manner in which the Romanian press presents the visit reflects the stirring passions that divided public opinion at the time. Given the temporal frame of the visit, the Easter celebrations, and the spiritual weight of the royal journey, the newspapers supporting the opposition construct the visit as surrounded in a sacred halo. At the other end of the political spectrum, those backing the political power minimize the symbolism of the visit, belittle the king and ridicule the reaction of the public. The journalistic discourse, “equally defined by referentiality and the power of connotation”³ balances between the discourse of sacralization and the discourse of desacralization.

In order to establish the identity that the journalistic discourse attaches to the king, I make use of Jan Blommaert's concepts of “achieved identity” and “ascribed identity”⁴. Blommaert's taxonomy seems fitting for my investigation because on the one hand, it emphasizes the role that the group or the community (in this case the Romanian press) plays

¹ Cotidianul, 25 aprilie 1992, “Programul vizitei Majestății Sale Regelui Mihai I”, p. 1. [Cotidianul, 25 April 1992, “The Program of His Majesty, King Mihai I's Visit”].

² My translation (mass media nu numai că prezintă evenimentul, dar îl și fabrică pentru a deveni un eveniment mediatic), Mihai Coman, “Construirea mitologică a vizitei regelui Mihai în România în discursul presei române”, pp. 146-154 in Mihai Coman, *Mass Media, mit și ritual. O perspectivă antropologică*, Iași: Polirom, 2003, pp. 146-147.

³ My translation (definit în egală măsură de referențialitate și de puterea de conotare), Coman, “Construirea mitologică a vizitei regelui Mihai în România în discursul presei române”, p. 147.

⁴ Jan Blommaert, *Discourse: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 205-206.

in attributing an identity to an individual (in ascribing an identity). On the other hand, Blommaert's categorization underlines the importance of being recognized as inhabiting an identity by the group (achieving identity). Blommaert claims that "people don't have an identity, but that identities are constructed in practices that produce, enact or perform identity – identity is identification, an outcome of socially conditioned semiotic work"⁵. Therefore, having an identity is not entirely a matter of personal choice. Having an identity established presupposes having it "recognized by others"⁶.

Before investigating how the journalistic discourse individualizes the king, it would be useful to identify what the king's inhabited or achieved identity is in the sense of "a self-constructed and self-performed identity"⁷. On 4 April 1948 in London, King Mihai made public his position towards the abdication in the first press conference since leaving the country. The monarch stated that the abdication was forced upon him by an unrepresentative government, hence he was not bound in any way by that act and pledged to continue to serve his people⁸. This remained the king's stand ever since, and after the fall of the communist regime when, in his statements and messages to the country, he continued to consider the abdication null and void and reaffirmed his oath. This is the king's achieved or inhabited identity, that of the legitimate sovereign, doubled by another identity, that of God's anointed. These aspects will help understand the position of various Orthodox prelates towards the king as well as the attitude of numerous members of the public, which are reflected in the discourse of sacralization of the king and of his visit.

The discourse of sacralization

The fact that the king's visit had a private character and was meant as a pilgrimage and that it coincided with the Easter celebrations contributed to the illustration of the royal journey as surrounded by a sacred aura. The sacralization of the king is thus encapsulated in the formula the king-pilgrim, journeying "especially a long distance, to some sacred place as an act of devotion"⁹. In the context, the sacred place is not only the monastery or the church where the king is expected to take part in the religious service, but the whole country from which the monarch had been banned for almost half a century and to which the monarch devoted himself even when exiled.

In Mihai Coman's view, the king-pilgrim, returning home in a private visit as a Christian, in order to pray and recollect at the tombs of his ancestors, helps project the image of a monarch disrobed of the regalia, of the insignia of power. It points to "the naked king" taking part in "the purification and penitence rites of the Christian Middle Ages"¹⁰. However,

⁵ Blommaert, *Discourse: A Critical Introduction*, p. 205.

⁶ Blommaert, *Discourse: A Critical Introduction*, p. 205.

⁷ Blommaert, *Discourse: A Critical Introduction*, p. 253.

⁸ Mircea Chirițoiu (ed.), *Lovitura de stat de la 30 decembrie 1947: preliminarii militare, consecințe politice. Documente*, București: Fundația Academia Civică, 1997, pp. 285-286 (Document nr. 89).

⁹ Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, published by Gramercy Books, a division of dilithium Press, Ltd., distributed by Random House Value Publishing, Inc., New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland: Random House, 1994, p. 1092.

¹⁰ My translation (riturile de purificare și penitență ale Evului Mediu Creștin), Coman, "Construirea mitologică a vizitei regelui Mihai în România în discursul presei române", in Coman, *Mass Media, mit și ritual. O perspectivă antropologică*, pp. 147-148.

Coman's point of view can be considered only-half true if one takes into consideration another dimension of the king's pilgrimage: his participation in the performance of the ritual of canonization of two Romanian voivods: Stephen the Great and Constantin Brâncoveanu, which the Romanian Orthodox Church was planning for 1992. According to the Orthodox ritual, influenced by ancient byzantine traditions, a canonization ritual cannot be performed unless a crowned head kneels at the tombs of those to be beatified. As king-pilgrim, Mihai I's identity is binary: he is both a Christian pilgrim, divested of the signs of his earthly powers, but he is also God's anointed, recognized as the holder of a spiritual gift which, according to the New Testament (Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romans, Chapter 11), cannot be taken back¹¹.

Another expression of the sacralization of the king's image is provided by comparing him with a monk (reference to Father Iustin Marchiș, parish priest at Stavropoleos Monastery in Bucharest, who welcomed the king upon his arrival in Bucharest on Easter Sunday). The king's natural distinction is perceived as a "paradoxal Majesty", "a miraculous blend of glory and humility"¹². The humbleness of the monk, "the only one compatible with the humility of the Sovereign"¹³ mediated the long awaited reunion between the king and his people.

In his capacity as God's anointed, King Mihai is seen not only as a receiver of sacrality, but also as a source of sacrality. His presence in the prelude of sacralization of the two Romanian voivods reinforces the dimension of the king as having the power to transfer sacrality. From this perspective, Mihai Coman interprets the king's spiritual voyage as a hierophany¹⁴.

Mircea Eliade defines hierophany as "the act of manifestation of the sacred", "the manifestation of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural "profane" world"¹⁵. One of the signs of the manifestation of hierophany is the attitude of the people who welcomed the king in Bucharest, approximately a million according to the CNN. In a society divided by politics and in a capital vandalized by miners and often the scene of violent clashes between the opposition and the power supporters, the public behavior of the million people who filled the streets to see a king was characterized, in general, by civility, common sense, overwhelming joy, sheer enthusiasm and an ineffable spirit of concord.

Against this background, hierophany seems to manifest itself in the presence of the thaumaturge king, healing the wounds of his people and working for the swift recovery of his country: "Mihai I's look can heal. Lost in the huge crowd, I felt, better than anywhere else, the healing fluid emanated from the king's presence. Hate, tension, revenge have disappeared as if by magic [...]"¹⁶

¹¹ The Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romans (Chapter 11): The New Testament (Romans, 11, 29): For God's Gifts and his call are irrevocable.

¹² My translation (Majestatea paradoxală; amestec miraculos de slavă și smerenie), Sorin Dumitrescu, "Monarhul și Monahul", *România Liberă*, 1 mai 1992. Vezi și Răzvan Bucuroiu (editor), *Majestate nu pleca*, București: Editura Anastasia, 1992, p. 82.

¹³ My translation (singura compatibilă cu smerenia Suveranului), Dumitrescu, "Monarhul și Monahul".

¹⁴ Coman, "Construirea mitologică a vizitei regelui Mihai în România în discursul presei române", in Coman, *Mass Media, mit și ritual. O perspectivă antropologică*, p. 149.

¹⁵ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion* (translated from French by Willard R. Trask), 1959, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987, p. 11.

¹⁶ My translation (Privirea lui Mihai I poate vindeca. Pierdut în uriașa mulțime, am simțit mai bine ca oriunde fluidul vindecător emanat de prezența regelui. Ura, tensiunea, răzbunarea au dispărut ca prin farmec [...]), Sorin

Closely related to the image of the thaumaturge king is that of the king as saviour: “People received King Mihai as a Saviour, as a redeemer from the evils of our political existence”¹⁷. King Mihai is illustrated here as the deliverer of his people from a corrupt mentality imposed by decades of communism during which ideological manipulation left deep wounds, alienated the Romanians from their more recent past and fabricated generations and generations oblivious of their true identity. The king is also perceived as the liberator of the country from its political discontentment, with a corrosive impact on civil society and on the much-necessary steps towards national reconciliation: “The King as head of the country would be the only guarantee for stability and political equidistance. King Mihai is the only personality, with huge historical and moral prestige, able to preside over the difficult process of national reconciliation”¹⁸.

Another indication of the king’s sacrality is his illustration as an intermediary between God and people: “The King is the head, turned towards the sky, of an entire nation, our being gathered together in a high place. When a nation is left without their sovereign, their head turned towards the sky is cut. They are beheaded. The Romanian people were thus beheaded on 30 Decembre 1947”¹⁹. The king is illustrated here as the one who keeps his people in contact with the Almighty, and facilitates the overflow of God’s grace on the nation. For others, King Mihai is seen as having an almost magical power similar to that of Jesus: “An extraordinary event has just taken place. King Mihai has turned back on our land and His [...] striking the darkness of an injustice that was so prolonged that it has turned into history”²⁰. Thus, the character of hierophany of the king’s acts is suggested.

Applying Blommaert’s taxonomy to the discourse of sacralisation of the monarch, it can be concluded that the king-pilgrim, the king thaumaturge, the king saviour, the king as a source of sacrality represent various facets of the monarch’s ascribed identity. Blommaert underlines that these identity categories “can only be bestowed on people *after* identity-performing acts have occurred”²¹. Since, in the journalistic discourse, the king is seen as a bringing social peace and harmony in a country torn apart not only by political factions but also by social categories (the miners), and judging by the reaction of the masses, who felt as if they had been shown a better version of themselves, it can be maintained that the sacred attributes which were attached to the king’s persona are part of his ascriptive identity.

Mărculescu, “Regele vindecător”, *România Liberă*, 29 aprilie 1992. Vezi și Răzvan Bucuroiu (editor), *Majestate nu pleca*, p.35.

¹⁷ My translation (Oamenii l-au primit pe regele Mihai ca pe un Salvator, ca pe un mântuitor de relele existenței noastre politice), Dan Pavel, „Mai mult decât referendum”, “22”, 1-7 mai 1992. Vezi și Răzvan Bucuroiu (editor), *Majestate nu pleca*, pp.163-164.

¹⁸ My translation (Prezența Regelui în fruntea țării ar fi singura garanție de stabilitate și echidistanță politică. Regele Mihai e singura personalitate, cu imens prestigiu istoric și moral, capabilă să patroneze dificilul proces de renonciere națională [...]), Sorin Mărculescu, “Ultima șansă a României”, “22”, 8-14 mai, 1992. Vezi și Răzvan Bucuroiu (editor), *Majestate nu pleca*, p. 180.

¹⁹ My translation (Regele este capul întord către cer al unui popor întreg, ființa noastră adunată laolaltă într-un punct înalt. Când unui popor i se ia suveranul, lui i se taie capul întors către cer. El este decapitat. Poporul român a fost decapitat astfel la 30 decembrie 1947), Gabriel Liiceanu, “De ce Regi?”, “22”, 8-14 mai 1992. Vezi și Răzvan Bucuroiu (editor), *Majestate nu pleca*, p. 171.

²⁰ My translation (Un mirabil eveniment a avut loc. Regele Mihai s-a reîntors pe pământul nostru și al Său [...] fulgerând întunericul unei nedreptăți atât de adânci încât a devenit istorie), Gheorghe Grigurcu, “Regele și Învierea”, *Dreptatea*, 30 aprilie 1992. Vezi și Răzvan Bucuroiu (editor), *Majestate nu pleca*, p. 75.

²¹ Blommaert, *Discourse: A Critical Introduction*, p. 206.

The Discourse of Desacralization

The discourse of desacralization aims at “the symbolic degradation of the hero”²². The monarch is depicted as a dark character of the country’s history, who spells only trouble. Characteristic of this type of discourse, disseminated by that part of the Romanian press loyal to the new political power, is the re-contextualization of the communist discourse on the Romanian royal family. In this discourse, there are two pervasive images of the monarch: he is seen as a friend of the Soviets and as an avaricious figure, longing after his former fortune.

Re-contextualization rests on the “transformation of meanings through de-contextualization (taking meanings out of their contexts) and re-contextualization (putting meanings in new contexts)”²³. Information is decontextualized and recontextualized for different aims, often with a manipulative intent, following an arbitrary selection of the elements that are meant to be relocated. Let us analyse, for instance, the example provided by the newspaper *Azi* which, in its edition of 25/28 April 1992, introduces King Mihai to its potential readers as “Stalin’s former admirer”²⁴. To reinforce their point of view, the newspaper editors also use the decontextualization of images, publishing, on the first page, the image of young King Mihai next to that of Stalin, with the subtitle “The Liberators of Our People”²⁵. In the late 1940s, when communist leaders organized various political rallies, it was common to hang the portraits of the king and of the Soviet generalissimus on the walls of the halls, probably for propagandistic aims and in an attempt, perhaps, to convince the less literate population that the monarch supported Stalin’s policies, a practice which the vast majority of the population regarded, if not with distrust, at least with reserve. The fact that King Mihai received the Soviet medal *Pobeda* (Victory) from Stalin, did nothing but to convince numerous generations of Romanians, indoctrinated by Moscow-educated ideologists, that the Romanian sovereign was a disciple of the Soviet dictator.

Another communist theme relocated in the Romanian journalistic discourse of the 1990s is that of the king as a rapacious bourgeois, aiming, if allowed to return home, to restore an *ancient regime* which favored the ruling classes and their former privileges: “The historical Right and its satellites dream of regaining the old privileges of the interwar «nomenklatura». The former king’s dream to retake the throne falls in the same category of reveries [...] Mihai dreams of old castles, vineyards and estates”²⁶. Notice how the newspaper re-words the former interwar elite as «nomenklatura». Since there is a variety of ways of wording a meaning²⁷, it is not far-fetched to believe that in this case, the wording was chosen on purpose, with the aim of drawing a parallel between Romania’s interwar upper-class and the communist elite, so much condemned in post-revolutionary Romanian society.

²² My translation (degradarea simbolică a eroului), Coman, “Construirea mitologică a vizitei regelui Mihai în România în discursul presei române”, p. 152.

²³ Norman Fairclough, “Semiosis, Ideology and Mediation: A Dialectical View”, pp. 19-35, in Inger Lassen, Jeanne Strunck, Torben Vestergaard (eds.), *Mediating Ideology in Text and Image: Ten Critical Studies*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2006, p. 26.

²⁴ *Azi*, 25/29 Aprilie 1992.

²⁵ My translation (Desrobotorii Poporului Nostru), *Azi*, 25/29 Aprilie 1992, p.1.

²⁶ My translation (Dreapta istorică și sateliții săi visează recuperarea privilegiilor vechii «nomenklaturii» interbelice [...] Mihai visează vechile castele, vii, moșii), *Azi*, 9 aprilie 1992.

²⁷ Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*. London: Polity Press, 1992, p. 190.

The discourse of desacralization applies not only to the king's image, but also to the king's visit in Bucharest. On a less virulent tone, the visit is depicted as "a trip" or, in a more trenchant manner, as something which "reminds us of Ceaușescu's visits"²⁸. In interpreting the visit as "a trip", the newspaper aims at stripping the royal visit of its spiritual dimension: that of a pilgrimage (as intended by the royal family) and that of a visit which, coinciding with the Easter holiday, was naturally meant to have a non-secular facet. As far as the resemblance between the royal visit and the former dictator's visit is concerned, what seems to establish an apparent logical connection between them is the vast number of people gathered to see the king. In the Romanians' collective mentality, huge masses of people are almost mechanically and instantly attached to Ceaușescu's famous political rallies and manifestations, where thousands and thousands of people were brought on orders from the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, to show their support for the president, in North Korean fashion. But the resemblance proposed by the newspaper is only a shallow one, since the million people gathered to welcome the king came on their own initiative and not on somebody's orders or following the communist party directive.

The differences between the monarch's ascribed identities in the discourse of sacralization and in the discourse of desacralization are justified in a society who, recently liberated from the communist oppression, but still suffering from the wounds inflicted on its members by a massive ideological manipulation, was trying to rediscover its more recent past and recover its memory. Meanwhile, the fact that the king's inhabited identity (that of the legitimate sovereign, even if only *de jure*, in the circumstances) coincides with the identity ascribed to him by the people ("Then, in Mihai I, we all recognized, young and old, our King"²⁹) points to the fact that the king's claimed legitimacy starts to be recognized by the public, turning into another facet of his ascribed identity. This dimension of King Mihai's identity is part of a national debate that is still unfolding.

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²⁸ My translation (o excursie; ne amintește de vizitele lui Ceaușescu), *Dimineața*, 24 Aprilie 1992.

²⁹ My translation (În Mihai I am recunoscut atunci, toți, tineri și bătrâni, pe Regele nostru.), Raluca Stroe Brumaru, "Adevăratul drum", *România Liberă*, 5 mai 1992. Vezi și Răzvan Bucuroiu (editor), *Majestate nu pleca*, p. 106. ["The True Way", *România Liberă*, 5 May 1992].

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