

*REVISITING EXPLORATORY PATTERNS AND CULTURAL STEREOTYPES –  
ENGLISH TRAVELLERS AND ROMANIAN ITINERARIES*

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*Abstract: This paper starts from Ralph Crawshaw's idea that "travel has a way of stretching the mind" doubled by the exploratory perspective of (re)dimensioning new horizons and (re)visiting frameworks of the mind that would not only make the world 'crack' the nutshell but also reveal its "myriad new sights, smells and sounds". Our attempt is to identify some travelling patterns of the English wayfarers who reached the Romanian realms (18<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> century). We intend to approach what we may refer to as the paradigm of borderlines, interpreted from a threefold perspective – geographical, historical and cultural – positioning thus an expression of the East on the imperial mapping system of the West.*

*Keywords: travel, metaphor, perception, borderlines, stereotype.*

Would looking at journeying through the realms of the world as metaphoric roaming be too elusive and evanescent an assumption? Considering the intricate webbing of critical thinking and reality, on the one hand, and that of perception, imagination, conceptualisation, on the other, the rationale we intend to build may be read in the key of a perpetual, self-defining quest. Building such an approach starts from the point that embraces the nature of the metaphor as 'vehicle' that reflects the 'substantiality' of the 'other' with which it interacts as two (inter)connected subjects (I. A. Richards, Karl Bühler). Furthermore, it is well known the fact that metaphors span bridges between the particular, the already known and the well-defined, the real, the tangible, the explicit, and the mysterious, the distant and the surreal, the inaccessible and the implicit (Avădanei 1994), filling a space that used to be a terra incognita with the colours and emotions of discovery, the always surprising effervescence that lies beyond the unknown. Marcus Hester sees metaphor not as much as an effective means of building a relationship, but as one that highlights it, putting it into a far broader perspective, while Paul Ricoeur describes it as a 'mediating factor', and Ronald Barthes ascribes it the role of 'celebration' and 'magic'. There are moments when travelling and exploring the frontiers of

the ‘other’ (re)design the architecture of a catachresis that establishes relations, operates (dis)placements, composing and unceasingly (re)defining the *mappa mundi*.

Travel lies at the very border between metaphor, understood as selection and substitution through which images relate in terms of similarity and contrast, and metonymy as source of endless combinations and juxtapositions; if the former operates at the very heart of the code, the latter combines contextual meanings within the message itself. Exploring may be thus ‘suspended’ in between the metaphoric principle of equivalence and the metonymic expression of concatenation through relations of contiguity (Avădanei: 55). If we are to follow Roman Jakobson’s dichotomous construct of literature, we approach the borderline perspective that cuts deep into the ‘flesh’ of the utterance, entrusting fiction to the magic of the metaphor, while projecting non–fiction against a metonymic background. Travel may also be approached from the Freudian distinction between the metaphor seen as sign of ‘identification’ and ‘symbolism’ and the metonymy interpreted as ‘condensation’ and ‘displacement’. It is no wonder, then, that travel literature recommends itself as an intimate expression of transgression, border-crossing, counterpoint deviations, all imbued by a deep metaphorical mark and vision. A *theatrum mundi* reflecting genre, travel writing calls on the worn out board of the stage people, canonical traditions, genuine slices of life, all eventually scrutinised by the subjective retina of the explorer.

Over the centuries, there has been a shift in the reasoning behind the act of travel, which dawned mostly as an act of fame and wealth-seeking, proof of devotion to sovereign and country and less as an exercise of sheer curiosity. There has been a long journey to cover between the pragmatism of the first explorers who undertook political, diplomatic, religious missions and the far more relaxed dimension of voyaging for the very pleasure of doing so. There are scholars who consider that the Golden Age of Travel of the 1830s marked a turning point in the history of voyaging, for that was the moment when man started designing machines that would not only help him compress distances, but it would also provide him with the necessary comfort long journeys require. This was also the moment when travellers started chronicling their voyages, recording their thoughts, impressions, reflections, sketching not so much a political or mere economic geography as a rich personal geography of vibrant emotions and reflective considerations.

As American sociologist Ralph Crawshaw used to say, in 1921, “Travel has a way of stretching the mind. The stretch comes not from travel’s immediate rewards, the inevitable

myriad new sights, smells and sounds, but with experiencing first-hand how others do differently what we believed to be the right and only way” (Chang 2006: 531). It is at this point when hyperbolization comes to distort, rather than merely record the grand spectacle of the world, either by simply turning the entire act of narrating into sheer fiction, or by heavily permeating it with biased reflections tributary to unique, utterly generalised systems of reference. Stepping back in time, in 1688 Aphra Behn publishes *Oroonoko*, the book that most likely turned her into the world’s first armchair traveller, the pioneer of the travel memoir genre. Thus, she started the tradition of European travellers that recognize themselves in Benjamin Disraeli’s confession, “Like all great travellers, I have seen more than I remember and remember more than I have seen.” Defined as a border-crossing genre par excellence, travel literature not only comes to (re)define the physical territories of the world, it also (re)dimensions the inner mechanisms of interpreting the world and its fabulous wealth of (hi)stories.

Glimpses of life and minute descriptions of the *modus vivendi* of the Romanians appear in chronicles, annals, official reports and diplomatic correspondence authored by various British travellers that offer an invaluable perspective not only upon human settlements, local customs, institutions, royal court rituals and its canonical traditions, local attire, merchants, army, but also upon the type of climate, terrain, and, interestingly enough upon, the wealth of natural resources. Most of the journeys throughout the realms of Moldavia, Wallachia or Transylvania would be almost mathematically focused on precise, economically-oriented goals, defining some “pragmatic approach resulting from the need to complete political duties or stick to the trading interest for commodities that were highly demanded on the markets of Eastern Europe” (Luca 2004: 49).

Mineralogy was at the heart of many such voyages, accounting for the presence in this part of Europe of such travellers as John Petty or Edward Daniel Clarke, mineralogist and doctor of the University of Cambridge. The former of the two, member of the English aristocracy, developed a rather keen interest towards the coal areas of the Habsburg dynasty (Transylvania, Bohemia, Slovakia). The real object and concern behind this enterprise is yet unknown, but not few are the voices that describe it as a rather intelligence-architected mission in favour of the British Cabinet, employed, as he might have been, by his cousin, Sir William Petty, Prime Minister of His Majesty King George III. Spy or no spy, it is a fact that it was precisely in those upland, coal areas where knight Petty spent most of his time, making

surveys, drawing coal mining sites, trying to obtain different ore samples. A pioneer of industrial espionage or merely a curious mind, John Petty must have kept a diary of his journeys throughout Central and Central-Eastern Europe that would, if found, tell us more about the way in which he saw and interpreted the Romanian realities, otherwise reflected in his ample correspondence with the Baron Samuel von Brukental.

Edward Daniel Clarke was equally interested in mineralogy, pursuit that accounts for his presence in Wallachia and Transylvania, precisely in the area of Săcărâmb, at the feet of the Metaliferi Mountains, known as one of Europe's largest gold deposits. What he leaves behind is not just a series of notes on detailed descriptions of local mineral resources, but also a rich and vivid picture of the Romanian life at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Impressed by the Latin-origin of the people and the striking resemblance between the Italian and the Romanian language, Clarke offers valuable information on the traditions and customs of the natives, evermore valuable as he manages to sketch a kaleidoscopic portrait of the Romanian people, immortalised both at times of great celebrations (weddings, balls) and also at times of endless pain (funerals, wakes). "Nothing appeared to us more remarkable than the language. It is not enough to say of it, that it is nearly allied to the Latin: it is in many respects purely so; the difference between our way of speaking Latin, and theirs, consisting only in the pronunciation. All the principal names of things that a traveller requires, particularly of provisions, are Latin words" (Clarke 1816: 258).

John Newbery, who offers one of the first descriptions of Moldavia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, is almost exclusively interested in aspects of economic nature, paying much attention to such details as the price of main goods, the level of taxation, etc (Holban, vol. II: 485) and little, if any, to all the other aspects that would tell the real story of the people.

A biased referential perspective, exclusively and almost brutally filtered through the canonical values and modus operandi of the western civilisation brings together the narratives of many such travellers on Romanian lands, a fact that would not only characterise the perception of the people who lived centuries ago, but it would also shape the minds and 'cripple' the spirit of some contemporary visitors. The former Romanian Principalities wove their history under the nippy winds of history and at the crossroads of empires; not taking the time to listen to their (hi)stories would lead to failing to grasp and understand the very essence of things. Of all the peregrines that visited these Eastern lands, British travellers have been among the harshest judges (Holban 1970) artificially and erroneously displacing

epistemologies, transferring identity representations upon foreign existential matrixes. Described as the other referential system against which Western Europe would (re)define its own cultural, anthropological profile, the realm of the East metamorphosed the limit of beyondness – orientalism as opposed to europeaness, barbarism to civilisation, mysticism to logic, tradition to modernity, corruption to lawfulness, sensuality to ethics, eclecticism to rigorousness. At the crossroads of geographies, cultures and mentalities, stereotypes come to life and shape constructs that end up distorting through negative attributions, rather than building. The Western observer finds himself caught in the intricate webbing of orientally imbued, autochthonous, and foreign codes whose understanding requires time, resonance with this locus mundi and its energies. He becomes the cartographer of conceptual maps that do not focus as much on the geographical frontiers, as on the mental borderlines, thus delineating a territory of irreconcilable differences, an almost antagonistic counterpart of the classical West, canonical in its rigour and epistemologically related to such inspiring concepts as intellectual superiority, political hegemony and a crucible for new, progress-generating ideas.

Nevertheless, even the severe, critical eye of the western observer has to acknowledge the traditional hospitality of the Romanian boyars – though the following fragment was taken from a French chronicle, *Nouvelles observations sur la Valachie*: “Les boyards ou seigneurs de la Valachie sont très-hospitaliers envers les étrangers; il sont grands et généreux: c’est une justice à leur rendre avant tout” (Laurençon 1822: 29). A land of extremes, the Romanian Principalities often catch the eye of the finest of the observers with the luxury and even opulence of the boyar’s attire and living. Men and women impress alike and even if they are mostly oriental in what clothing, customs, attitude and mentality are concerned, some of them prove ready to follow the Western European standards and fashion.

Sir Robert Kerr Porter, a British diplomat and traveller records the following: “The boyars of this city (Boucharrest) live in a degree of luxury and splendour hardly to be exceeded in any capital of Europe. Their balls and parties, with the jewelled dresses of the ladies, are beyond imagination” (Porter 1822: 799).

General Sir Robert Wilson shares the same point of view, as he himself is mesmerised at the sight of such wealth and most of all, squander of it. “The costume of the women is here very gay; and I think that I have noticed one or two fashions which will be admired in England. That the women are very pretty I need not add: their attention to ornamental dress is a proof that they are accustomed to admiration. I have never read of Wallachia’s beauties, but they are

no mean rivals of Venus's better known and more vaunted establishments. If I may judge from my dinner today, Wallachia must also be an Epicurean abode. I have seldom sat down to a greater variety, or to viands better dressed" (Wilson 1812: 138).

The glamorous display occasioned by public and investiture ceremonies is also an event worth mentioning in the personal annotations of foreign voyagers. "I saw the other day [...]" notes Lady Elizabeth Craven, author, playwright and intrepid traveller, "[...] the public departure of a new named Prince of Wallachia. The procession was very fine, his own court and guards, with many escorts from the Porte, preceded and followed him two by two, a great number of horses, Janissaries, and cooks – the horses coverings were of cloth of gold or rich embroideries; two white horses tails on sticks, and a kind of cap like a helmet, the emblem of his dignity, were carried before him. [...] This cortege lasted a long time, and was really as fine a procession as ever I saw" (Craven 1789: 239).

Focussed mostly on the public, political and popular culture, and less on the cultural aspects, British travellers felt like roaming the land of oriental tales, instilled with heavy scents, ravishing luxury and breath-taking mystery; it was as if the rigour of a scientist met the elusive, ever-changing and challenging perspective of an indefinable other, that may be read and experienced either in terms of horizon, self, imagination, fiction, way of life. A scientist may never become a magus unless his name is an alchemist. Tributary to a demanding system of values and hierarchies, the British observer remained true to his education and world and underwent a feeling of separation from civilization while stepping into the world of the East. The Question of 'oriental despotism' finds itself at the very heart of the game of cards that draw political geographies and distilled mentalities on a map antithetically governed by the rationality of the West and the laissez-faire of the East.

William Wilkinson, general consul of England wrote in 1820: "None of the events that had influenced the political existence, and undermined the public spirit of the Wallachian and Moldavian nations, proved more ruinous to them than the system of policy introduced by the Greeks of the Fanar, when they were placed at the head of the principalities. Humiliated, degraded, and oppressed as the Greeks were, since they had ceased to be a nation, civilisation degenerated among them, in proportion to the weight and barbarism of the yoke that had been imposed on them, and they had insensibly contracted those habits of corruption, and servile obedience, which must be inseparable from a state of slavery similar to theirs. Dissimulation and falsehood became the most prominent features of their character; and, in short, the force

of the causes which acted upon them incessantly, familiarised them, by degrees, to every thing that could be degrading and humiliating to man” (Wilkinson 1820: 95-96).

No wonder than that “The absurdities of superstition, which for so great part of the fundamental principles of the present Greek faith, have gained equal strength in Wallachia and in Moldavia: even the most precise doctrines of the Christian religion are there corrupted by the misconceptions or selfish views of low-bred and ignorant priests, a set of men, indeed, who have here made themselves a manifest to the sanctity of the Christian name. A celebrated writer (Voltaire) has said that ‘Climate has some influence over men; government a hundred times more, and religion still more’” (ibid.: 151).

Romanians’ religiosity, intimately infused by the Latin pharmacum with its incantation, magic spell, itself a most delicate metamorphosis between asceticism and dogmatism, seems to sharpen the differences between the enlightened Western Christianity and the passionate Orthodoxy. Looking at things from the perspective of the sign of equality, treading new roads with old compasses, and drawing conceptual maps of the mind instead of (re)defining truthful profiles of land and peoples, foreign observers must have failed to become spectators of the whole panoramic perspective, complacent as they were with the scratched shards that reflect a distorted, infinitely undersized dimension of things. Although the authenticity, the honesty of the testimony, the accuracy of information have to be constantly taken cum grano salis, the value of such chronicles goes beyond their intrinsic importance. Regardless of their identity – diplomats, missionaries, adventurers, scholars, merchants or occasional witnesses, all foreign travellers brought their undoubtedly unique contribution to the description of the Romanian Principalities and of their rise and fall.

A journey through the realms and centuries that wrote the (hi)story of the Eastern part of the Old World is a delicate dance circumscribed to the same paradigm – while the East struggled to legitimize its reform through an ample reference to the values of the Western Enlightenment, the West would still remain the inflexible prisoner of the geographic and spiritual dichotomy that (still) polarizes the European spirit.

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