

The Picturesque Romania: An Exercise of Reterritorialization and Symbolic Translocation

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Abstract Romania, a young state at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century had to find for itself a convenient position on the European map. It was not a European power center, but a periphery that fought for being recognized. This periphery developed a strategy of seducing the center, based on emphasizing the picturesque, via which an area full of differences was poetically represented as pleasant, interesting and relaxing. The picturesque diminished the differences that the eye of the foreign traveler discovered in both the human and natural landscapes: the differences became agreeable, without needing to deny or conceal them. Integration into another world could thus be made without giving up any particularities, which, nevertheless, had to become part of the communication, in order to create a discourse that would make them known and accepted. The present article is dedicated to the transformation of a cultural concept (the picturesque) in a cultural, economic and political advertising strategy of the country and its provinces, in an age in which communication specialists or branding manuals were totally unknown.

Key words picturesque; exotic; border identity; Romanian culture; nation and country branding

The progressive enlargement of the European Union has up to now entailed a steady effort made by the member states in view of reterritorialization and symbolic translocation. The participation in the construction of the E. U. always meant a rescaling of the geopolitical space, depending on the rights and duties that have kept reshaping its borders. The articles referring to the free circulation within the E. U. have proved to modify the concrete daily exercise of cultural exchanges over the borders, on the one hand, and, on the other, the collective perception of each single state's borders and of the Union's borders. The interest for what remains on the outside of such a construction at a certain point is vital, and the phenomena of partition, disruption and/or cooperation always say something essential about the internal architecture of this construction.

This paper explores the ways in which Romanian culture builds up a border identity before but also after Romania's accession to the European Union. This border identity stands for something other than a peripheral identity which only has to ensure security. The public discourse in Romania tries to find arguments for a comfortable

and speculative positioning in its own condition; thus, the border identity is always attributed mediation assignments and offers—without making any difference—resistance towards the separation, autarchy and homogenization phenomena. For a culture building its border identity, taking responsibility for the way it plans the relationships with its neighbors is vital. How does the periphery imagine the outside world, what are the benefits for its own economy, but also for the whole economy of the world it is part of? To ask such a question means to surpass the traditional articulation of the terms of center and periphery so as to shift the attention upon the relation between the periphery and the outside world, which the periphery necessarily is interested in and which, at some point, may become “central”. Such exercises, by which one can imagine the vicinity relations symbolically shift the borders between cultures, facilitate the exchanges and provide suggestions for subsequent reterritorializations.

But where does Romania stand in relation to Europe? For more than one century, Romania stands at the Eastern confinium of the European territory, at its Eastern and South-Eastern border. The analysis of the symbolic structures that have oriented the Romanian territories towards Europe once again enhances the relative character of placing any territory on a map, as the result of *choice*. Neither the cardinal points, nor the affiliation of the territories to a direction or another are certain within an inhabited geography. Edward W. Said¹ sustained that, in order to escape the terrors of a map, we must seriously consider Giambattista Vico’s most important observation, namely that people build their own history, that what they can know is what they have done before, and to apply it to the field of geography. Both the geographic and the cultural entities—not to mention the historical ones—such as places, regions, geographic areas such as the Orient and the Occident, are man’s creation. Following this strain of thought, the Romanian territories are, as regarded by the foreign travelers of the Western administration, either Oriental, or Occidental, either both Oriental and Occidental or neither Occidental nor quite Oriental. The territory called the Carpathian-Danube-Pontic space dilutes the oppositions, refuses a dichotomist way of thinking and risks dialectic on its own. The Romanian definition of the space inhabited by Romanians wants to escape the logic of the opposition Orient-Occident. It uses other two substitutive terms in order to represent the idea of belonging and, respectively, being different: the terminological pair *picturesque-exotic*. But how should we understand these terms within the Romanian identity discourse? Both terms recognize the difference between the Romanian (South-East-European) and the European (Central and Western European) identity. Nevertheless, *picturesque* seems the most convenient term, while *exotic* does not simply fit. There is, evidently, a positive component of the term “exotic”. It can contain a little admiration, praises for the unknown, as Tzvetan Todorov would say. Understanding Romania as an “exotic” country might be a dangerous approach: it often gave birth to a “polar exotic” that has ostracized and isolated this world. In this latter case, the diversity, the difference are not seen as positive energies, as elements stimulating contacts of confrontations, but inducing fear, the need to retreat, to flee. One could also say that this exotic can be understood as the most brutal, uncontrolled and disorienting form of the picturesque, as an *inverted* picturesque. Erich Auerbach readily proclaimed in 1946 the death of exotism

not only in Europe after Mérimée, for whom the Spanish or the Corsicans still appeared exotic, but rather throughout the entire world, given Pearl Buck's writings.²

The first Romanian version of interpretation of the geographic situation of the Romanians belongs to the writer Alexandru Vlahuță (1858 – 1919). Vlahuță is the author of the countrybrand for the first half of the 20th century (for a critical consideration of the term see Coșovei 409)³ with his travel memoirs called *România pitorească* [*Picturesque Romania*] (1901) (Coșovei 409). Except for the title, the term “picturesque” does not show up anywhere else during the text. It is still void of meaning, just about to be put to work in order for it to generate meanings and, most importantly, consensus. It is an imported term (a neologism) that still needs to be “translated” into Romanian. It is not an accident that Vlahuță asked a well-travelled foreigner to admire his motherland:

“— God, your country is beautiful. . . Your land is just like a nurturing mother: it gives you, almost for free — which is not necessarily a good thing — it gives you the tastiest fruits, the most sought-after grains in Europe and wines that we, in Paris, consider to be the stuff dreams are made of. (⋯) Say, don't you think your country — which I reckon you must love so much — inspire you to dream the dreams of one thousand and one nights? Anyhow, you must agree that you are a fortunate people” (Vlahuță 141).

Picturesque is a word like a piece of luggage, filled with meanings but, at the same time, empty, available to take the most diverse forms and which we shall meet more and more often in different writings. It seems that, without needing to provide any elaborate explanations, those who use this word agree upon its meanings, by using it as a token of abstract value, still valid, yet without an adequate coverage. By retracing the history of this term, we still cannot get rid of its ambiguities, even more so since the different aesthetics denounce it for contrary reason. The picturesque is not pictorial, as the art historians say, who attach it far too easily to the more popular aesthetics of photography, postcards, illustrated geographic magazines or travel guides. The arts of the 20th century, the photography and the documentary accuse the term of having an author's aesthetics, of being subjective, of lacking objectivation, the illusionist moment, which alters the quality of the perception: the picturesque paints (i. e. “counterfeits”) reality, it does not document it. The picturesque is a passage concept, very adaptable and which escapes the “canonical” canons. It needs to be looked for in other places than within the traditional aesthetics: it mixes mediums (painting and poetry, photography, film, architecture and urbanism, etc.), movements (baroque-romanticism), cultures (elitist-populist). It cannot be detached from the new habitudes of life: travel, tourism and the tendency of art to become the design of existence (Barthes 121).⁴ It is the motor of the new advertising industry. The art to make anything seem extremely agreeable, yet not depicting the value of usage, sells everything, including the new states appearing on the European map during the 19th century. Nonetheless, we are interested in understanding what were the reasons and the results of adopting the term “picturesque” by the strategists of promoting

the Romanian territories inside, but mainly outside the country.

“Picturesque” is a strategic term, depicting the convenient position of Romania within Europe’s political landscape. The picturesque is the definition of the line where the difference starts that can be overtaken; the world’s horizon becomes broader, *noster mundus* expands by including an acceptable, likeable difference. Vlahuță’s “Picturesque Romania” corrects the exotic perspective people have with respect to this country, which pushes it far away and makes it not understandable to the Europeans.⁵ Vlahuță does not dismiss right away that exotic of the space—if you come to think of it, the world depicted by him by means of an intermediary is one of a paradisiacal opulence—yet he gradually adds a layer of exotic, hence foreshadowing a better future of prosperity and civilization, in which human and natural resources are well exploited. The picturesque discovers the beauty of the utilitarian. The translation of the exotic projection from the axis of space to the one of time is essential to the picturesque project. This operation corrects the differences between the East and the West, which can easily be observed by the travelers who are more empathic to the East. Obviously, there are some differences, yet they are not insurmountable, on the contrary, they are about to disappear. The picturesque represents the *brand* of a country with *potential*, of a developing country that has hopes and a future. Both the foreigners and the local people are flattered to assist to the birth of a new world. Another important feature of the picturesque can already be guessed: through this process of retracing the map, by means of which distances become shorter and shorter, the past has been neutralized. The picturesque does not remember anything. This new geography fights with history for getting into first place. The past does not guarantee the future; this is Vlahuță’s great discovery. We cannot take pride permanently in our glorious past, if a respectable present structure is absent. The past is treacherous and only complicates things. It will later also become picturesque and settle in a comfortable choreography, void of any conflict. The past of the changes, of the reconciliations, of the wise attitudes towards history and the neighbors shall be privileged.

The “picturesque Romania” does not only have enthusiastic promoters, but also opponents. It is no coincidence that the historian Nicolae Iorga numbers among the latter. What is not convenient for Iorga is the reduction of history, the decorative smoothing of the past. The historian’s reaction was caused by the “commercialization” of Spain as a result of the implementation of the concept of *picturesque* that evidently helped Spain to fit successfully into Europe. Iorga asked the reader not to confuse Spain with the opera scenery of *Carmen*, “as nobody should confuse the real Romania with the mythic, idealized Romania based on the legend of the Curtea de Arge Monastery, whose image is decorated with needless luxury and accessories like a theatrical scenery. Romania is picturesque indeed, but no nation would agree only to be considered this” (Iorga 95).⁶ Furthermore, we find ourselves in a state of elation in which we no longer need to have a promotional strategy for the whole territory. This concept of *picturesque* shall apply from now on to the predominating outlying areas, the peripheral provinces, which are insufficiently known but supposed to be regarded as likeable. When the literary critic Vladimir Streinu claimed the necessity of devel-

oping a new understanding of the concept of “picturesque Romania”, he thought of the way this concept had spread to the outlying provinces. After 1918, when the Old Romanian Kingdom overtook the new provinces of Bessarabia, Transylvania and Bukovina, the *picturesque* elements of Romania were sought “along the border” (Simionescu 1939, vol. 2), i. e. in the new provinces and in their bordering areas. This happened as a result of the progressive “normalization” of the national territory, whose image did not need a sustained, special promotional strategy—least of all for the natives. Therefore, the *picturesque* element was able to develop around the border areas for the following two reasons: first, because the outlying areas were mostly unknown (we refer to the border areas of the Old Romanian Kingdom) and, second, because the distances had become shorter, while the pleasures of diversity still had to be sought further away (yet not too far away, otherwise they would get uncomfortable). The locals did not feel anymore that the center was as picturesque as the (most amiable) foreigners considered it, yet with a healthy dose of *wishful* thinking, it remained European and modern, while maintaining a homogenous relation with the Western centers of decision, action and work. Anything that did not find its place in this ordered, efficient and perseverant world, which Romania took more and more part in, withdrew to the periphery of time and daily space.

On the other hand, Romania tried to push the border in another direction, in order to move it just a little bit further, yet not settle on the other side of the border, and to export this perspective, which showed all their differences, to the South, on the other side of the Danube and into the East, on the other sides of the rivers Pruth and Dniester. The picturesque in the Romanian culture is to be understood as an answer to the repeated social and historical exclusions, as well as their positivation (Muthu 66, 93). The interest for the picturesque South, for instance, made the others, as well as the Romanians themselves, think that they were “people of the North”, as Mihail Sadoveanu called them in his notes about the journey to Bazargic (Dobrich), who brought their hats cars to a narrow-minded, monotonous local society (2). Finally, they are the “Europeans” who use the South of the Danube as an access point to the Balkans and to Asia, as the novelist Mihail Sebastian says while imagining the collision of these two worlds, which are neighboring and separated at the same time.

In this dreamy world that rocks itself to sleep by singing old Turkish songs that are still sung today without having lost any of their sadness, in this run-down yet self-content Orient, the intrusion of *Europeans* must have seemed extremely loud.
(Sebastian 648)

Certain characteristics of the picturesque concept are needed for this very important mission of reevaluation of the periphery. The picturesque canonizes non-classical characteristics, such as the baroque from which it descends, which have been reconfirmed by Romanticism. One of the most important characteristics is diversity of disorder. A picturesque landscape is not straight-forward, it lies in a graceful disarray. Moreover, the human landscape is not pure either, but mixes ages, status and differ-

ent ethnic groups in order to form a polite *tableaux vivant*. The picturesque beauty is hybrid, paradoxical, suggestive, weird, difficult and rare. It takes the shape of a mosaic, a kaleidoscope, a panorama or a fan. It is detached and, in limits, critical, tolerant and relaxed. When the memorialist Constantin Stere spoke of a “very picturesque incident” taking place in the Romanian Parliament, he referred to an unusual event, an unexpected occurrence, which resulted from the violation of the common law during a moment of protocol suspension, of rules interruption. The picturesque plays with the fall of the idea, it allows temptation to creep in, yet only during this period of suspension. The peripheries embraced it, because it allowed them to be different, by “humanly” criticizing the center. In Stere’s opinion, Vienna is the one that is picturesque, since its Eastern suburbs fall on “the Asian border” (86). Stere likes the organic mixture of civilizations, which is considered to be “spontaneous” and “natural”, but also the landscapes, intentionally recreational in order for the inhabitants of Vienna to take their vacation in or around the city. This is why Vienna is bright, comfortable and full of surprises (94 – 95), whereas Berlin seems military and grumpy. The crowds of wild ducks on the Spree river do not make it more attractive. Ultimately, Paris is not picturesque but pictorial:

Every street portrays a different scenery, has its own shape, while every cross-road has an artistic concept and every palace and almost every old house show their special individuality, – while still coexisting in harmony like in the paintings of famous painters. (Stere 138)

Romania’s capital city cannot compete with Paris, although it likes being called “Little Paris”. Bucharest’s best-kept secret and unfulfilled dream is to live comfortably like in Vienna—“You should go to Bucharest/Where living’s good, to have a rest”, says a Romanian children’s folk song. Therefore, according to the Romanian perspective, Central Europe up to Vienna is picturesque (and hereby, very familiar).

The picturesque is a *mixed fiction*, a hybrid of different perceptions and projections that discover and build a whole new world. The differences between the worlds is still visible, yet it has become accessible, communicative, without turning fragile or fatally isolated. The picturesque is another way to describe an unknown, intelligible and almost pleasant difference, as well as to describe a *small difference*, as opposed to the exotic. The picturesque Romania is against the exoticization and ostracization of South-Eastern Europe, and therefore its isolation. It chooses an open kind of geographic understanding. Although the term “picturesque” is considered to be old-fashioned and dated and cannot be used nowadays as an advertising slogan, it still works in every strategy aiming at promoting Romania in its neighborhood, as well as in the entire world.

Notes

1. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York; Pantheon Books, 1978).
2. See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Bern;

Francke. 1946).

3. Unfortunately, the second half of the 20th century abandons this successful export image of Romania. It did not fit the country's promotion ambitions that aspired to other dimensions, less modest, an expression of a ridiculous and damaging megalomania in a small, developing country, which was about to fight off great deficits: "Our road stretches from the unknown picturesque to the monumentality, to greatness and brilliance" (Coșovei 1978, 409). By giving up the picturesque, the self-image of the Romanians starts to become entirely different from the perspective shared by the others. The picturesque Romania had managed to create a balance between the two, to bring them to a common denominator.

4. The picturesque is, according to Roland Barthes, one of "the myths of everyday life"; modern tourist guides only know this landscape with a picturesque light thrown on it (Barthes 1957, 121). The picturesque landscape appears to allow for an ethics of effort and solitude in modern man's economy, through which proximity to places and people becomes both adventurous and agreeable. If picturesque geography requires a certain amount of effort made for one to conquer it, the picturesque landscape of the human usually compensates for that through agreeableness. To the monstrosities of the mountains, of the torrent and the dunes thus corresponds to a graceful novelistic décor made up of the inhabitants of the venue.

5. This is not the place to comment upon the contemporary attempts to create a country brand (as if none had existed until now). Nevertheless, we must note that three of the current formulas, "the eternal and fascinating Romania", "Romania, always surprising" and "fabulospirit" not only totally ignore the country advertising formula of the first half of the 20th century, which is still active on an imaginary level, but also ignore the incredibly important principle that also inspired Vlahuță: making the difference between a Romania that lies in the East and is influenced by the Balkans, and the one that lacks elements of modernity as compared to the sociable Central and Western Europe. The first formula steals something from the brand of the "eternal" city of Rome, and has the special quality to remind us of the slogan "Romania (or: the Balkans, the East, the Orient), the eternal problem". Moreover, the fascination can also be aroused by ugly things, which are only attractive due to their fatidic, perverted features. Surprises can also be unpleasant (this is why, the Estonian brand clarifies: "Estonia. Positively surprising"). Something that always surprised is not always exciting, but also tiring. The third formula also has its inconveniences, one of them being that the grammatical hybrid, by being detached from the promoted object, aimlessly floats in search of an adequate product (who has the "fabulospirit"? The urban equipment provided by Jack Wolfskin and inspired by extreme sports, or Romania?). This formula transgressed by means of excesses towards the tradition unveiled by Vlahuță; it may very well be translated by "shockingly picturesque"—the fabulous excessively expands the surprise element and pushes the promoted territory towards the limits of the exotic. The latest country brand, Romania as the Carpathian Garden: this is something well preserved and with relaxing qualities. We hereby return to the picturesque!

6. *Picturesqueness* is an idea against which Iorga fought also in direct relation to Romania. Actually Iorga sustains the concept of picturesque in his magazine "Sămănătorul" [The Sower]. The picturesque Romania is a rural Romania, a social fringe. More radically than Iorga, Constantin Stere repudiates the *picturesque* as being an arrangement with our past, promoting conservative values and the nostalgia for customs and traditions which survived with its help. In the East, Stere is a modernist without compromises. Whereas Stere admires the oriental *picturesqueness* in Vienna, he does not support the picturesque of Iassy. He is in favor of the city's modernization: "The old-fashioned, Turkish houses with their picturesque arches were teared down in order to renovate the city (...) A splendid row of lime-trees grew at the periphery, hiding a row of new villas." (Stere 1935, vol. 7, 359).

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