Postcards from Europe. Representations of (Western) Europe

in Romanian Travel Writings, 1960-2010

Oana Fotache Dubălaru

University of Bucharest

I. Introduction. Romanian journeys to the West - historical contextualization and recent perspectives.

Starting with the modern age Europe has been a constant reference for Romanian intellectuals. The synchronization of Romanian civilization and culture with Western European patterns has been in the center of numerous ideological disputes against the background of Romanian society's modern development. Apparently the representations of the West varied considerably across time and were in a complex relationship with Western depictions of Romania and Romanians.

Two historical periods stand out in this process of constructing a (national) identity in relation to the Other: the one around mid-19th century (before and after the 1848 Revolution, that marked the start of Romania's modernization interpreted as Westernization); and the interwar period when the national state consolidated its democratic values and institutions, and developed a stronger sense of cultural legitimacy (Spiridon, 2009). During both these periods the intellectuals and especially the *literati* played a key role in establishing a sense of Europeanness among Romanians. As to the particular forms that this European consciousness embraced, one can notice the dominance of the French model, to which a German cultural influence was later added (by the end of the 19th century) and to a lesser extent an Italian one, this motivated by common linguistic origins that helped envisioning a kind of singularity 'among a Slavic world' (as a frequently used phrase goes). Of course these cultural models were enhanced at different times by political alliances as well as by societal models, customs, religious beliefs, and other factors.

A persistent theme has to be noted with Romanian cultural ideologists for about a century (1830-1930) – from the Romantic writers up to modern ideologists such as the cultural critic Titu Maiorescu (1840-1917) and the literary critic and sociologist Eugen Lovinescu (1881-1943): that of the necessary synchronization with Western Europe on a societal and also a cultural level. At first this synchronization was understood as an import of Western models – all the way from translations to the creation of institutions and patterns of state governance. Then this process underwent a very critical phase (which coincided with the influence of the German model) when the import as such was perceived as degrading since the borrowed cultural forms did not manage to generate a 'content' and thus could not function properly. The cultural society "Junimea" [The Youth], led by Titu Maiorescu, objected to what its members saw as very superficial adaptations of the Western institutions and manners that could only lead to inferiority and loss of genuine values in favor of second-hand perceptions of Europeanness. This was an organicist (and conservative) view that played an important part in the development of Romanian society. Its source was of course Hegelian dialectic, as Maiorescu had studied philosophy in Berlin and Giessen.

After the Great War and the unification of Transylvania with the other two Romanian historical provinces (1918) the slogan in circulation was different: not *translation* as such was the solution, but *creative adaptation* that eventually leads to original forms ('make it new'). This idea was promoted by the most important Romanian modernist literary critic, Eugen Lovinescu. By that time Romanian society was already modern enough to be accepted in the family of the Western states partly because of the royal family of German origin; Bucharest was then named 'little Paris', Romanian intellectuals had strong connections with their Western colleagues, the process of modernization seemed to be very advanced.

After the Second World War all these connections and the cultural and historical legitimacy they brought along were suddenly dropped and replaced by a 'colonization' of the country by the Soviet Union. For about 15 long years or more (1947 through 1960-64), contacts with the West were scarce and strictly controlled by the communist regime. The Romanian cultural elite was destroyed (through imprisonment, formation of labor camps, social marginalization,

some people's own compromises, etc.). Western Europe was no longer a travel destination; all the roads led to the East, to Russia, or even China.

II. A few methodological caveats.

No wonder then that Europe had to be rediscovered. This process started by the middle of the '60s, with the wave of (partial) liberalization brought by Ceausescu's rule in its beginning. Everybody's hopes turned toward the West; Western Europe[1] was perceived as a validating instance since it was the depositary of political, ethical, and cultural values. Being part of it could not be a legitimate claim for Romania (despite geographical and historical evidence) unless that claim was supported by self- and others' representations of this status.

The following pages will propose a sketch of Romania's recent cultural history from the perspective of this process of rediscovery that triggered significant changes in the structure of collective identities and representations. I chose travel writings (mainly travel diaries) as case studies for several reasons: they render more directly the personal, subjective experiences of this 'Other' that was Western Europe for Romanians – so they are at least in principle more authentic than other discourses, fictional or not (although subject to censorship as much as them). Also, because the travel diary as a genre[2] is a privileged witness of the process of self-definition and identity construction. As the theorists Cornis Pope and Neubauer write, "in East-Central Europe, poets and philologists were major contributors to this invention [of the nation and at the same time of its Other(s)] by constructing *texts* as well as *institutions*." (Cornis Pope and Neubauer, 2002, 13). Thirdly, because travel writings have a double nature, that of a *literary work* and of an *anthropological document.* So I will be reading them as documents of Romanian intellectual mentality representative for the time when they were written.

The five travel diaries further discussed were chosen both due to the similarities and differences among them. Differences function on various levels: the time of the travels to the

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[1] Often thought of as simply 'Europe' throughout history.
[2] For a pertinent discussion of its generic status, see David Chirico, 'The Travel Narrative as a (Literary) Genre', in Bracewell and Drace-Francis, eds., 2008, vol. 2.

West (during the '60s, '70s, '80s, and finally the '90s); the purpose of the travel and accordingly the duration of stay (study, research, academic contacts, participation in conferences, teaching Romanian language and literature abroad); the age of the traveler (early 30s to mid-40s and 50s); not least differences in education and personality. Among these five writers, we encounter a historian (Dan Berindei, born 1923), two literary critics (Eugen Simion, b. 1933, and Ioana Both, b. 1964), a literary theorist (Adrian Marino, 1921-2005), and a religious anthropologist (Teodor Baconsky, b. 1963).

A few words about their similarities: one can trace here a first distinction between diarists that travelled before and after 1989, when no control of the ruling communist party was exercised anymore and travelling abroad was conditioned mostly by financial rather than political reasons. Most of these texts display a strong (and also traditional) fascination with French culture and with Paris as a cultural center (even *the* cultural center of Europe at some time). Most travelers define their writings similarly, refusing the type of *tourist diary* and going instead for what Adrian Marino[3] theorized as *intellectual diary* (Marino, 1976). Their diaries testify to the experiences of Eastern intellectuals confronted with a different mentality and trying to find their place in a cultural and academic world quite different from their own. So we should expect to find here an understanding of self-writing as *Bildung*, as a means of spiritual formation. Last but not least, an important criterion for this selection was the air of 'family resemblance' brought by their similar way of relating to the Romanian cultural tradition of the journey to the West.

Of course 'the West' and 'Europe' will not be regarded here as stable and unitary entities. As Gerard Delanty writes in a widely influential book, "the idea of Europe itself as an invention has never been scrutinized"; "every age reinvented the idea of Europe in the mirror of its own identity" (Delanty, 1995, 1). Especially in these texts, published between 1960-2010, Western Europe was experienced as a place of desire more than an object of knowledge; so even when the authors pass stereotypical judgments and opinions on this and that issue these are not to be read as attempts to render an idea of what Europe as a strong notion meant for them, but rather as very fragmented and partial visions of distinct aspects of the European

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[3] Marino was probably the most prominent figure abroad among them due to the many translations of his theoretical works into English, French, Italian, and a few other languages of circulation.

culture or civilization. I definitely share Diana Mishkova's view on this matter, that using the notion of Europe nowadays implies an awareness "both of the plurality of contents and forms, which the 'idea of Europe' spawned over time, and of the analytical objections to treating '(Western) Europe' as an entity and a coherent unit of analysis" (Mishkova, 2008, 240).

Yet despite this diversity of perceptions regarding 'Europe' (and I am equating here Europe with Western Europe, to speak from the Romanian travelers' perspective), there is one common denominator: Europe stands for the idea of modernity, and of "cultural superiority and power" (Mishkova, 2008, 253).

These ideas were promoted by Western Europeans themselves since the Enlightenment (as Larry Wolff accurately points out in his *Inventing Eastern Europe,* 1994); they were reflected and gained circulation in the self representations of Eastern Europeans since about the same time. That is how the East-West opposition took shape. Yet, as Wendy Bracewell points out in the introduction to a comprehensive anthology of East European travel writing, "these travelers' accounts complicate the image of a Europe divided neatly into East and West: neither half of the continent has ever been so monolithic and coherent as this formula implies." ("East European Travel Writing: A Guide to Orientation", in Bracewell, ed., 2009, xiv)

III. Europe as an imaginary space: *topoi* of a cultural encounter.

This age-old opposition was still in place at the time our travels were made. According to Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, "this mental polarization was subsequently challenged by integrative-federalist projects, political unions, or cross-cultural hybrids (...) that cut across the imaginary dividing line between Eastern and Western Europe. And yet, no matter how porous or chimerical, cultural oppositions have a tendency to perpetuate themselves" (2002, 23). As Michel Foucault brilliantly stated in his *L'Archéologie du Savoir* (1969), discourses are strictly conditioned by history; there are patterns of reading reality and also culture that cannot be easily replaced.

I would like to use as a starting point the idea expressed by Ph. Longworth in his *The Making of Eastern Europe. From Prehistory to Postcommunism* (1997): the historian implies – seemingly departing from the established line of thought on this issue – that Eastern Europe (and the Western one as well) is not an entirely arbitrary construct either[4]. He refers to the existence of a long tradition of collective representations that is responsible for the present ways of relating to the Other (which is a sort of pessimistic interpretation of Edward Said's views, if you like). This also holds true for my case studies. In the introductory remarks I pointed out to the mid-19th century emergence of the idea of national identity modeled after the Western European prototypes. In the travelogues of the time this emergence took the form of a sincere and almost total admiration for all things European. As important as this attitude was in the process of Romanian society's modernization, it also brought along a persistent inferiority complex (usually called *Dinicu Golescu's complex*[5]). The intellectual generations that followed responded to this perception either actively, by engaging in a process of original cultural creation; or by inventing another set of myths in return which they tried to legitimate by restoring an alternative tradition – that of folklore, rural customs, and the like, in a word, pre-modern cultural patterns.

In the interwar period, this inferiority complex is expressed by a foreign observer and then assumed by the Romanian intelligentsia: the would-be French president Raymond Poincaré who visited Romania as a lawyer defending an Austrian company. His much commented upon phrase goes: "Que voulez-vous, nous sommes ici aux portes de l'Orient, ou tout est pris à la légère..." After the isolation that Romania had gone through under the communist rule in the '50s, the reactivation of this complex by our travelers in the '60s and after that cannot surprise us. The feeling of a permanent need to legitimate one's culture in the eyes of the West is expressed in many ways by these travel diaries.

The opposition between East and West was translated by the Romanian travelers further discussed either as one between *home* vs. *here*, or as that of *before* vs. *now*. This is highly significant in several ways. First, *home* becomes sometimes an embarrassing reference point,

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[4] See especially "Introduction", in Longworth, 1997.
[5] Dinicu Golescu (1777-1830) was a Wallachian boyar whose book *Însemnare a călătoriii mele* / Account of My Travels (Buda, 1826) established a pattern for Romanian travel representations of Europe.

an awkward heritage that one is not entirely responsible for but still has to suffer its effects; while *here* is often distanced from the traveler's conscience and perception because it is viewed as a *beyond*, as an entity that overcomes one's capacity of representation, an object of both desperate desire and resentment (the belief that Europe and the US abandoned Romania to the communists was very popular at that time). Moreover, Romania was seen as a country stuck in its own past and struggling without much success to be recognized as part of Europe again.[6]

To illustrate the images of Western Europe I will discuss first the representations of the **European city**. One thing to be noted here is that Eastern cities are valued according to their proximity in cultural terms to a kind of Western ideal metropolis – most often Paris. Thus Dan Berindei (*Drumuri în lume: 1965-1980: în vremuri de speranţă şi incertitudini / Rambling through the World in Times of Hope and Uncertainty: 1965-1980*, 2005) is enchanted by Belgrade and Budapest because they look more like the cities on the other side of the Iron Curtain. As for Paris itself, the myth is still in place for most of them. When arriving there for the first time, Adrian Marino writes: "I feel that I came back to a familiar landscape". That is because he had planned his trip thoroughly since "a culture cannot be mastered but from the inside, not wandering on the streets" (*Carnete europene / European Notebooks*, 1976, 40)[7]. We should expect then a *livresque*, mythologized Paris, not a real place. Unfortunately this "familiar landscape" is not very welcoming to the visitor. The monuments or the paintings are warmer than the people, and the writer doesn't miss the chance to pass judgments on Gaelic individualism, on the death of French manners, on the decadence of contemporary French culture, and the like.

Eugen Simion (*Timpul trăirii, timpul mărturisirii... Jurnal parizian / A Time to Experience, a Time to Confess. Parisian Journal*, 1977) is more tolerant and definitely has more time to construct his personal myth. He had spent 4 years in Paris as a visiting lecturer for Romanian at Sorbonne University. Already serving as a guide for Romanian colleagues coming over to

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[6] The themes approached by Romanian travel diaries are actually recurrent in East European travel writings, as Wendy Bracewell points out: "the discovery of European difference; tourism and the traveler; the big city; exoticism and the self" (Bracewell, ed., 2009, xvii). Yet the limited space of this analysis does not allow us to go into a detailed comparison, however interesting that might prove.

[7] All quotations from Romanian travel diaries are given here in my translation.

Paris, he notices that "Romanians feel very good in Paris. They have already known the city from their readings. When they finally arrive, they have no other curiosity than to simply recognize it." (Simion, 1977, 159). Yet the same experience was overwhelming upon his arrival: the feeling of a foreign, indifferent, hostile city. While embracing this sense of familiarity with a cultural *topos*, Simion struggles at the same time to be recognized, to be more than "a mere spectator" (130) of Parisian intellectual life, as he wrote after his first visit to Roland Barthes's famous seminar at the Ecole pratique des hautes études. In the end, his reading of the city evolves from a superficial and bookish encounter to a better understanding of his own self: "The city had received me with the hostility of its indifference and I now leave it feeling calm and serene. It revealed something in me and made me see with greater lucidity the place where I come from." (421)

There is a change of attitude with Teodor Baconsky, who had studied for his PhD at Sorbonne. His trip coincided with a significant change of paradigm: the Paris of the '90s is already a global city, crowded by immigrants and tourists from all over the world. Here are the significant entries in his diary: "Had someone told me – 3 years ago – (...) that I would so naturally spend a whole day *sous le parvis de Notre-Dame* I would have said that's a fairy tale." (*Insula cetăţii: Jurnal parizian, 1991-1994/ Island of the City. Parisian Journal*, 2005, 13). But later on the myth loses its force: Paris is "Americanized, macdonaldized, sick of its old glory..." (25). Paris is no longer a myth for him also because it has become accessible to many: "nowadays any Romanian can stroll at will on *Boul' Mich*" (30).

As Monica Spiridon noted in her article on 'Paris, *terre d'asile*: Exile, Nostalgia and Recollection' (2004), Paris has perhaps never been a 'real' city for Romanian intellectuals but an imaginary construct, always refashioning itself.

For an intellectual and even more so for a writer, going to or living in Paris should imply a lot more than taking pictures or queuing in front of Mona Lisa. He/ she will try to be part of the city's cultural life, to make contacts with like-minded people, to get whatever symbolic profit available. The Romanian travelers are no exception. Marino seems to be the most determined of them; he lives each journey "as if it were the last one" (1976, 21), which certainly affects the style of his cultural and existential contact with the city. Always running

out of time, he establishes the perfect technique of reading as much as possible at the French National Library. Under these circumstances human contacts are limited and superficial. In most of his trips to Paris, Marino's priority is to check sources and complete the bibliographic research for his books; on another level, he tries to find collaborators and improve the circulation of the academic journal he was editing in Romania, *Cahiers Roumains d'Etudes Littéraires*. Since his funding was limited, if not scarce, he preferred to maintain a more or less closed circle of friends and acquaintances, and take the most out of his library visits.

In these writers' images of **Western culture** there is a prevalent reaction: a clear preference for canonical, classical reference points and correspondingly, a lack of sympathy for avant-garde forms of expression. For instance, Marino visits museums of classical art and classical writers' memorial houses. On an Easter holiday he goes to see the houses of Delacroix, Balzac, and Hugo, "which I also visited in the last years" (Marino, 1976, 124). He definitely prefers literary history to contemporary art and literary forms. When visiting an exhibition of Italian futurist art he ignores the formal innovation and jumps straight to an inadequate interpretation of content and meaning: "The central idea here is the suggestion," he writes (1976, 115). Marino strongly reacts against popular French culture, but embarks on a guided boat tour on the Seine as the common tourists he despises; moreover he finds the tour to be "very instructive" (117).

Both Marino and Simion react very critically to the public appearances and statements of Philippe Sollers or Roland Barthes, major figures of French literary life at the time. The former looks to them frivolous and displaying a contradictory behavior which they eagerly and ironically comment upon. Simion writes that Sollers is "typical for Western *intelligentzia* [sic!], radical, politicised, determined to get involved in the social life" (1977, 28). At that time, the prevailing mode of Romanian intellectuals what one of evasion, of retreat from civic life, feebly motivated by the political circumstances of communist dictatorship in the country. Even with Baconsky, a member of another generation, we encounter the same rejection of a non-familiar intellectual discourse: "I read in Sollers's face expression the

complex of isolation of this humanist intellectual class" (2005, 34). So the same reading habits regarding otherness are perpetuated from a generation to another.

French (and Dutch, and Swiss) contemporary culture are seen by them as entertaining a direct relationship with consumer culture – and criticized for this matter. Life in the West appears as being devoid of values, empty, meaningless. Superficiality and the obsession of novelty prevent Western intellectuals from focusing on their real mission, or at least they think so. After he assisted to a public debate hosted by the *Tel Quel* group in a Parisian bookshop, Simion notes: "Nobody spoke a word about literature or new critical methods. Slightly disappointed, I asked my neighbor: what is the topic of this debate? He answered promptly: *la masturbation de l'esprit!*" (Simion, 1977, 25)

In this context, the Easterners are invested with a privileged 'mission', to keep alive the humanist tradition (an attitude that measures exactly the persistence of the inferiority complex I was talking about). Their style is characterized by a richness of erudite comments and allusions which are meant to prove their right to belong to this (long gone) classical culture of the West. Marino's discourse turns melancholic when he diagnoses, in the footsteps of Spengler, the decline of the West, and then militant when he advocates the chance of the smaller (i.e., Eastern) cultures to make themselves known on the European stage as 'true' inheritants of classical values.

As to the other term of the opposition, their reaction to **Romanian culture** is no less problematic. The difference between East and West is acutely perceived by all of them. "When compared to our neighbors, we find ourselves in a situation of clear inferiority in terms of promoting our image abroad, especially in its positive aspects," notes Berindei in a bitter tone (2005, 142-3).

The complex of belonging to a cultural periphery is to be found with Ioana Bot also, although she meets all the criteria for and she actually manages to fully integrate herself in the new Swiss environment (Zürich University): "Today I have read Jean Cohen, *La structure du langage poétique.* I realize I shouldn't say that, as people might ask me how did I come to this age without reading Cohen, or about the Romanian's complex not to be left outside

European culture. But Europe doesn't care about all that, my young European colleagues live happily and don't worry about reading Cohen; obviously the question comes out: who is inside and who was left aside? Paradoxically, it seems that we are always those who miss the train." (*Jurnal elvețian. În căutarea latinei pierdute/ Swiss Diary. In Search of Lost Latin*, 2004)

Baconsky's perspective toward Romanian intellectual circles is a distant one as he comes to realize their huge delay in comparison with the Western state-of-the-art in different branches of science (especially those that had been marginalized by the communist regime for decades, such as anthropology or psychoanalysis; after 1989, these 'new' disciplines in the Romanian academia lacked professionals, course materials, circuits of validation, a.s.o.). When tailoring plans for his comeback, he finds himself in a similar situation to the 1848 generation of Romanian intellectuals: "I wonder which the priorities should be: to translate Western texts or to produce compilations?" (Baconsky, 2005, 121)

Regarding the issue of Romanian culture's situation in Europe, a common sense of mission and duty is to be found with them (also reiterating the 19th century reaction of the young aristocrats who returned home after studying abroad): minor cultures have to struggle to make themselves known and recognized by the Others who are invested with the power to legitimatize values. An immense frustration arises when this recognition is sometimes delayed or partial. Simion is obsessed with the obstacle represented by Romanian language which has less circulation than many other European languages and thus prevents Romanian culture from becoming 'universal' (as if universality would be an essential quality of an object, not a pragmatically negotiated one).

Ioana Bot expresses in a memorable phrase this blocked communication (actually, it was not always blocked on a personal level, but on the collective one): "While I find myself in a foreign country, I am also foreign to them; the way seems to be blocked in both directions". (Bot, 2004, 34). One cannot help thinking about Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*... Bot reiterates here, on a different level, Montesquieu's perspective embodied in his Persian character Usbek. She willingly cultivates her own strangeness as seen by her Swiss colleagues in order to be better placed for a lucid image of the Other. Hers is a distant

reading although the premises for a perfect integration to the Swiss/Western intellectual milieu are all met (plurilinguism, intellectual curiosity, a vivid intelligence, etc.).

IV. An opposition to deconstruct. Provisional conclusions.

What is to be done then? To free oneself from this obsession as Baconsky attempts? ("The West was good for me, but that was all. At least I cured myself of superior illusions", 2005, 135). To postulate an imaginary superiority since the marginal is better read in and appreciates more the Western cultural tradition than nowadays Western intellectuals – as Marino states? (1976, 121)

Starting their travels to this so challengingly accessible Europe with the feeling that they have really deserve being there, some of them come back with another prejudice in their luggage: that the West is somehow doomed (Spengler again!) and that it is their mission to try to save as much as possible from its heritage since they are more Europeans that Western Europeans themselves, culturally speaking. This prejudice is less present with the younger generation, but the patterns of relating to the Other established by the Romanian intellectual tradition are still in function. Eventually the opposition does not get to be deconstructed, but perpetuated. It will be for the newer generations to attempt that.

The type of otherness that Western Europe stands for in the eyes of Romanian (and probably also Eastern European) writers is a particular one, because it does not name the dialectical match of its own identity, but is part of a projected identity with powerful affective connotations. Western Europe emerges from these travel writings as a privileged and idealized cultural space of almost mythical character, an object for various feelings like admiration, wish, complex, frustration, nostalgia.

These fragmented, sketchy, over-interpreted images of Europe represent in fact the opposite of a postcard in what they indirectly say about Romanians: there's too much writing for so little space and time to write. Packed with myths and bookish allusions, pervaded by melancholy and complexes, the travel writings I have discussed here are to a lesser extent representations of Western Europe than fragile Romanian identity constructs.

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