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National Identity Through Prototypes and Metaphors: The Case of “Romanianness”

Razvan Sibii

Introduction

The last country God created was Romania. Realizing that he still had a lot of riches left over from the other countries, He let Romania have more natural treasures than anybody else. Seeing this, Saint Peter asked in surprise: “My Lord, why are you giving this country more riches than you’ve given to any other?” “Don’t you worry,” said the Lord, “Just wait ’till you see the people I will put in charge of those riches!”

Whether Saint Peter was eventually satisfied with Romania’s condition, we do not know. What this paper does investigate, however, is what God meant by his promise: exactly what kind of people did he end up putting in Romania? Questioning the deity is a complicated (if not risky) enterprise; instead, this study turns its inquisitive gaze on the Romanians themselves. Who do they, themselves, think God put in Romania? Or, more to the point, what does the Romanian narrative of national identity look like and how has it changed over the recent decades? Mapping the coordinates of a phenomenon as complex and, oftentimes, ambiguous, as the Romanian identity discourse is an inherently perilous proposition: no amount of description and interpretation (however skillful and innovative) can achieve a complete account of an entire weltanschauung. As a result, this paper limits itself to offering a fragmentary, partly digested story about the manner in which the perceived, informal Romanian national idea (i.e., “Romanianness”) is put together. I use the word “informal” to differentiate a perceived “Romanianness” from the formal, heavily ideological, elite-originated notion of “Romanianism.”

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1 This joke has long been popular in Romania, as well as in other Eastern European countries (with the necessary name change in the case of each country).

2 “Perceived” is the operative word here: all of the images identified in this paper as constitutive of the Romanian identity discourse can be traced, at least in part, to the ideological “laboratories” of the “Romanian” intellectual and political elites. The distinction between the two frames of Romanian identity (i.e., “Romanianness” and “Romanianism”), however, is predicated on a perception on the part of the “rank-and-file Romanians” (in itself a problematic construction, of course) that there is a “Romanian culture” which can and should be distinguished from a “Romanian nationalistic ideology” which, in every age, merely follows the “party line” and not necessarily the people’s “true” sentiments and beliefs.
The general aim of my investigation can be further clarified, I believe, with the use of a well-recognized anecdote involving a judicial take on the very sensitive issue of obscenity. In 1964, the U.S. Supreme Court was called on to judge whether a certain motion picture could be deemed "obscene." Predictably, the justices had a difficult time grappling with the definition of the term—a matter of obvious importance in this case. In his written opinion, Associate Justice Potter Stewart confessed his inability to provide an "intelligible" definition of the word. However, he still felt reasonably comfortable making his ruling on whether the film had obscene elements in it, because, he said, he still had one way of conceptualizing obscenity: "I know it when I see it." Although Justice Stewart later reportedly reconsidered the validity of his method, the phrase quickly became folklore.

For the purposes of this paper, I believe an analogy could be established between the judge’s operationalization of obscenity and the Romanians’ handling of "national identity." Based on both personal interactions and a growing body of literature, I find that the concept of "Romanian identity" is indeed as hard to define as obscenity. "I am Romanian," say millions of individuals, of all ages, genders, classes, professions, and geographical locations. But what does that mean, concretely? I have asked this question numerous times and have more often than not extracted an answer in the vein of Justice Stewart’s opinion. When pressed on what exactly it is that makes Romania, my interlocutors (and I include here various authors of written texts) often answer: "I can’t give you a clear definition of what a Romanian is, but I know it when I see it." It is this statement that I seek to interrogate in this thesis: If one knows Romania when one sees Romanians, what exactly is one looking at? What are some of the instances that one can observe and use to determine that one is in the presence of Romania?

The complexity of the concept of Romanian identity, while quite daunting at first glance, is far from making this paper's enterprise a mission impossible. My faith, then, in the fact that there are entry points into this difficult concept is based on the following logical chain of reasoning:

1) The "Romanian way" is a cognitive category (qualitatively equivalent to other categories such as "chair," "dog," or "courage").

2) Since the category of the Romanian way is constituted by countless elements (the Romanian language, a certain manner of dress, a certain kind of gesture, geographical coordinates, a certain historical event, and so on), and since no two self-declared Romanians can ever agree on any one of these elements (and yet still call themselves Romanians and most often also recognize each other as such), the method by which Romanians conceive of the Romanian way is highly unlikely to be the mental enumeration of all of this category’s constitutive elements.

3) Assuming that the conceptualization of "national essence" is not a matter of gut feelings or divine revelations, the most logical alternative to that mental enumeration operation is a process of thinking-by-heuristics (i.e., using certain "cheat sheets" that contain enough information for an individual to form an idea about the category of Romanian identity, but not too much information, which would make them into the equivalent of the tiresome and inefficient mental enumeration referenced above).

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4) These heuristics (i.e., which I often call “images” in this paper) stand in for the “real thing,” that is, for all of those distinct elements which make up the category of the Romanian way/idea/identity.

This study, therefore, does not seek to compile a comprehensive catalogue of those characteristics that make one identify oneself as a Romanian. I do not aim to embark on a comprehensive cultural audit of the country. I am not interested in the specific definitions of Romania that my sources have managed to put together. What I am interested in is their selection of data, the direction of their gaze, and the elements on which they settle (always temporarily) in the management of their “national identity.” I believe this project to be much more feasible than attempting to define (and hence construct the concept of) Romania, and artificially freeze it in time and space so that it could be analyzed.

Methodology

Given the open-ended goals of this thesis, it should come as no surprise that my methodology is an eclectic affair, synthesizing several different investigative techniques and approaches. Thus, my treatment of the Romanian identity discourse is based on a three-layered epistemological-methodological scaffolding. At the very bottom of this scaffolding lies an epistemological proposition: one can never “know” what something as abstract as “identity” means to people, if by “knowing” one means the elevation of a researcher’s situated observations (and the conclusions he or she derives from them) to the rank of “Truth”—a Truth, furthermore, which suffers no rival and is not dependent on context. What can be acquired, however, through careful research, is a range of meanings (i.e., of the notion of identity) that can be shown to have played a very important role in the self-consciousness of a nation such as the Romanian nation.

This belief, that rests at the very foundation of my methodology, is laid out below with the help of Clifford Geertz’s (1973a, 1973b, 1973c, 1980) concept of “interpretive ethnography,” an approach to social science that focuses on people’s manipulation of meaning-laden symbols for the purpose of negotiating their every day lives. Writing throughout the 1970s, Geertz put forward an intellectual program designed to revitalize cultural anthropology; his interpretive approach to the discipline was hailed by many as a none-too-early paradigm shift. Geertz proposed that social science turn its investigative focus away from behavior and towards meaning, as well as renounce its sterile search for causal relationships in favor of simply understanding the Other. Geertz’s proposed “research tactic” for accomplishing this goal was “thick description” the accounting of as many clusters of symbols-in-context as possible, the explanation of “the intentions, expectations, circumstances, settings, and purposes that give actions their meanings” (Greenblatt, 1999, p.16). Ethnography will never be “properly” undertaken, Geertz argues, if one limits oneself to the description of simple behavioral acts (e.g., utterances, movements); indeed such description is unforgivably “thin.” What is needed is a “thicker” description, a description of behavior-in-context, of behavior imbued with “public signification.” To put it differently yet, to “thick-describe” a (discursive) phenomenon (such as Romanian identity) means quite simply to come at it from as many different directions as possible, and to account for as many interdependencies as possible.

The second methodological layer deals with what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call “conceptual metaphors,” that is, metaphors which are integral to some of our cognitive processes (such as the description of abstract phenomena). Having previously argued that
Romanian identity is a concept that lends itself very well to the cognitive process that I called thinking-by-heuristics. I offer that certain “images” have achieved preeminence in the Romanian discourse. Because of these images’ quality of “representative-ness” (i.e., they are not the category of Romanian identity per se, but they are qualitatively close enough to it to be used as a convenient representative of it), they can (and, indeed, should) be thought of as metaphors.4 Surely, then, should one be able to identify some of the metaphors that people use in order to effortlessly comprehend and utilize the concept of Romania, one could happily report back to Geertz (1973a): I have come “into touch with the lives of strangers” (p.16).

The texts that constitute my data can be divided into two categories, in terms of the objective for which they were originally produced: 1) scholarly texts dealing with the “Romanian nation,” such as ethnographies and philosophical essays, 2) fictional texts perceived in “Romanian culture” to encapsulate the ever-elusive “Romanian ethos.”

**Romanianess**

This paper defines Romanianess as a diffuse feeling of belonging, of togetherness. Romanianess is a cultural frame: through this frame, “that which is Romanian” cannot be traced to a call for action or to a diatribe against foreigners. Indeed, Romanianess does not have a fixed origin, and does not have one originator. Romanianess is perceived as living in the crowd’s bustle and vociferations, not in the self-righteous pens of the political and academic elite. Literary works may very well encapsulate Romanianess like no other, but they are seen as merely confirming that which is already there: the feeling that “all Romanians” possess certain features which form a unique Romanian cocktail.

Romanianness is to be found in stereotypes and, more precisely, in self-stereotypes. While devoid of a history per se, such self-stereotypes do have an identifiable trajectory: they are predicated on certain mental images, on certain prototypes (i.e., characters that metonymically stand in for wider categories). The Romanian self-stereotype, therefore, cannot be traced back to an origin, but it can be studied in terms of its constitutive images. This is what I aim to do in the following sections: to examine the Romanian self-stereotype in terms of Byzantine, Orthodox, and Balkan components, which will be contextualized in terms of their experiential and literary basis.

**Self-Stereotypes**

Romanianness is not primarily operationalized through visual metaphors, but rather through a conceptual entity defined solely by an agglomeration of ideal (abstract) characteristics: the stereotype. Stereotypes are “shared sets of beliefs about, or shared representatives—

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4 In this paper, I use the term “metaphor” as a general designation for all those figures of speech/rhetorical tropes that help one escape denotative (straightforward, literal) speech, and function through the substitution of one concept for another (e.g., using the words “my star” to refer to one’s child). Thus, as will become obvious in the subsequent sections, I include under the metaphor heading metaphors-proper (in the specific, Aristotelian, rhetorical-trop sense), metonymies (the process of “using one entity to refer to another that is related to it” [Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.35]), and prototypes (a category’s “most structured portions” and the “clearest cases of category membership defined operationally by people’s judgments of goodness of membership in the category” [Rosch, 1978, p.36]).
tations of groups or social categories" (Simon, Glässner-Bayerl, & Stratenwerth, 1991, p.252, original italics). From a metaphorical perspective, stereotypes are a type of prototype which, through a metonymical process, come to stand in for a larger class of items (e.g., the Romanians). In Lakoff’s (2002) words, a stereotype is “a model, widespread in a culture, for making snap judgments—judgments without reflective thought—about an entire category, by virtue of suggesting that the stereotype is the typical case” (p.10). The heuristic device that is crucial in the operationalization of Romania, however, is a special case of the stereotype: the national self-stereotype, that is a kind of stereotype which is held by the members of the national (i.e., Romanian) in-group and which speaks about that same in-group.

Like perceived reality, the Romanian self-stereotype is not a unitary construction. Indeed, there is no one Romanian self-stereotype, but rather many such heuristics, each one to be encountered on a regular basis both in the public discourse of the academy, the media, and the political circles, and in the private sphere of interpersonal relationships. That is not to say, however, that all self-stereotypes are equal; indeed one could identify several prominent self-stereotypes which can be said to structure the Romanian identity discourse to a larger degree than other, secondary self-stereotypes. As will be detailed in the following sections, I believe this is the case with the “Byzantine-Balkan” string of related stereotypes, which account for a significant slice of Romanianness in terms of this construct’s perceived defining characteristics.

The Byzantine Influence

Arguably the very first historical political entity that (retrospectively) left an indelible mark on Romanian self-perception is the Byzantine Empire. Established in 330 A.D. when the Roman Emperor Constantine made the ancient city of Byzantium his capital, the Byzantine (Eastern) Empire split from the Western Empire (with the capital in Rome) in the year 395. Given Byzantium’s geographical proximity, the territories that would later become the Romanian principalities (i.e., Moldavia, Wallachia, and Transylvania), could not avoid being strongly influenced by the mighty military, political, economic, and religious power that the Empire represented. The multiple political formations that were developing in the Romanian-speaking territories during the early 9th century looked to the Empire for a viable model of organization, both sociopolitical and economic (e.g., feudalism). In two of these territories, Wallachia and Moldova, the “law of the land” was replaced, during the 14th and 15th centuries by Byzantine-style legal codes, written in the Slavonic language (Treptow, 1996).

While often grounded in Byzantine institutions and habits verified by historians of all ideological stripes, much of the Romanian perspective on the Empire’s cultural legacies is tainted by a readily identifiable wish to stigmatize a decadent, rotten “East.” Indeed, as many a Romanian would testify, this is the country’s “dirty little secret”: the fact that the roots of the Romanian state(s) are to be found more in the Byzantine East than in the West. The never-ending Romanian “origin” debate represents precisely such an attempt to negotiate the “East within us.”

“Romania has lived for centuries under the curse of the Byzantine spirit!” lamented philosopher Emil Cioran (2006, p.19) in his stinging indictment of Romanian culture, “The Transfiguration of Romania.” The Byzantine tradition, he argues, when applied to a foreign culture (as the philo-European in him naturally deemed the Romanian culture to
be, in relation to the Eastern Empire), translates into “immobility, abstract schematism, and, from a cultural and political perspective, into organized reactionarism” (p.19). Cioran’s derision and downright hate for Romania’s “Byzantine inheritance” is indeed symptomatic for much of the Romanian literary and political outlook, starting with the 19th century, when the “Byzantium” became a frequently used (albeit in a mostly negatively way) motif of Romanian folklore and literature.

It is at this time that the first of two major characteristics of Homo Balkanicus make an entry in the Romanian imaginary: the “talent” for adapting to any situation whatsoever. This proverbial Romanian “adaptability,” (a concept to which I will return in a later section), while almost universally recognized by Romanian authors, has received a differentiated treatment for the past two centuries (i.e., the era of Romanian organized self-perception). On one hand, adaptability is celebrated, and is presented as a consequence of superior intelligence or of a wise philosophical attitude of fatalism. On the other hand, adaptability is condemned, being perceived as a consequence of laziness, lethargy, or of an utterly unwise philosophical attitude of fatalism. The second interpretation of adaptability—the negative one—owes its existence to a stereotypical understanding of Byzantium’s cultural legacy to Romania.

Briefly put, the Eastern Empire is conceived as an environment that fostered the rise of a devious, untrustworthy type of individual. Indeed, in contemporary Romania, as in the rest of the world, the term “Byzantine” has connotations of “elaborate scheming and intrigue” and “deviousness” (Webster’s Dictionary, 2006). Thus, the well-documented “Byzantine, neo-Platonic tradition of the dichotomy between the world of ideas and the realm of facts, between the value of truth and the value of good,” (Tismaneanu & Pavel, 1994, p.425) becomes, in the Romanian imaginary, an early cause for the Romanian’s duplicity—for his penchant for separating words from deeds, thus ensuring himself a permanent clean conscience (Muthu, 2002). Likewise, the Empire’s deftness at the diplomatic game (which, put bluntly, requires both posturing and groveling) translates into a horrifying lack of principles and moral uprightness on the part of the “Byzantine man,” and, by way of consequence, of the Romanian who inherits the tradition.

The one dimension of Byzantinism most relevant to the Romanian self-stereotype, however, is Orthodoxy (the former Empire’s official faith and its most readily identifiable institution still in existence). The Church’s perceived values and priorities are indeed considered to have played a major role in the shaping of modern “Romanian mentality.”

**Orthodoxy**

Between the 9th and the 13th centuries, most political formations in the provinces later to become Wallachia and Moldavia had strong religious ties to the Byzantium and, when the Christian Church split in 1054 between the (Western) “catholic” (universal) faith and the (Eastern) “Orthodox” (true) faith, the Romanian-speaking land populations naturally aligned themselves, by and large, with the latter camp. Later on, as mentioned above, when the Wallachian and Moldavian centralized states were being formed, their leaders looked to the Byzantium, and not to Rome, for religious legitimation of their rule. Partly due to the pro-Catholic pressure exerted by the Poles and especially the Hungarians in

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the province of Transylvania (both of whom were identified as “foreigners” mainly due to their non-Latin languages), the Romanian populations in the three principalities built Orthodoxy into a pillar of Romanianness—a rhetorical accomplishment that continues to be extremely influential in the Romanian collective imaginary.

In terms of the Romanian self-stereotype, Orthodoxy has four main features which are widely believed to have partaken in the creation of that “Romanian national psyche”: 1) the Church’s absolute deference to secular power, 2) its peculiar sociocultural character, 3) its perceived tolerance towards sinners, and 4) its lack of concern with earthly action. Obedience to the Prince du jour is perceived in the Romanian public discourse as a virtual prerequisite of in-group belonging. Much of that submissive attitude toward the autokrator can be found in the worldview of the Byzantine (and, by extension, Romanian) Orthodox Church:

...For the Byzantines, order, taxis, was the supreme social asset, the intellectual category by which nature, society and politics were analyzed. Ataxia, therefore, was not just a crime against the state, but also a form of blasphemy, as long as social order, in its capacity as a reflex of celestial order, belonged to the domain of the sacred. To rise up against the emperor’s legal authority was the equivalent of rising up against the Heavens, who had granted him the right to rule over time and space. Indeed the Byzantine sovereign is both kosmocrator and chronocrator. For that reason, peitharchia, obedience, had to be the Byzantine’s major virtue. A simultaneously secular and religious virtue. (Barbu, 2001, p. 21)

Romanian Orthodoxy, Barbu (2004) argues, is both structurally and ideologically close to autocratic regimes, which share the Church’s intolerance for pluralism and multiculturalism. Throughout much of its history, the Romanian Orthodox Church was ensured extensive state support (political and financial). Even the avowedly atheist communist regime favored the Church (in exchange for painful political concessions), by dismantling much of the Uniate Church and awarding the Orthodox the latter’s assets.

The second salient characteristic of the Orthodox Church is the already referenced role it played in the formation and development of a Romanian identity. Even before the establishment of the centralized principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, Orthodoxy constituted one of the two major mainstays of Romanianness (the other being the Romanian language).

“For the Romanians,” Barbu (2004) writes, “ethnic belonging and religious belonging were somewhat inseparable, not only historically, but also politically” (p.39). Orthodoxy functioned less as a repository of religious dogma than as a repository of ethnic identity, less as a faith per se than as a way of life: “...Christianity was, more than anything else, the law laid out by the Roman emperors (lex), and not a way of honoring a God (religio) or showing Him one’s faith (fides)” (p.107).6

6 Barbu (2001) puts it pithily: “...Romanian Orthodoxy is more of a tradition without faith than a tradition of faith” (p.96).
The third dimension of Orthodoxy has to do with the Church’s understanding of sin and sinning. As opposed to “Western” Christianity, which metaphorically perceives the sinner to be a transgressor in need of punishment, “Eastern” Christianity sees him as a sick man in need of healing. This difference is due to an element that Orthodoxy is believed to have taken from “Oriental” faiths (especially Islam): the Devil is here perceived as a seducer, who has the power of insinuating himself into the hearts of all but the most faithful men. The Devil is sly; he is charming, even beautiful (Barbu, 2004). In this context, nobody can be blamed for succumbing to sin, since sin is not primarily a matter of free arbiter. The Orthodox weltanschauung, therefore, does not particularly valorize individual responsibility for one’s (sinful) actions.

The fourth characteristic that the Orthodox Church is perceived as extending to Romanian mentality is in close connection to the “luxury” of irresponsibility discussed above: not only is his sin tolerated to a significant degree, but the Orthodox believes is also guaranteed Salvation. In contrast with Catholicism and, later, Protestantism, the Eastern Orthodox imaginary was not overly concerned with the Final Judgment: one’s mere baptism in the “true faith” ensured that one would go to Heaven, as a member of a Christian (Romanian) people (Barbu, 2004). It was only the pagans and schismatics (i.e., Catholics) that went to Hell; the right-believing enjoyed the support of monks and saints who prayed and interceded, respectively, for the Orthodox collective. No particular effort to mend one’s ways and right one’s life was thus required:

If that’s the situation, then it is not necessary to choose, [...] , to mobilize oneself against sin, against the Prince of this earth. To fight against something is a difficult, often dangerous proposition. All that matters is survival. We’ll see what happens, eventually. We’ll manage, one way or the other. (Barbu, 2004, p.82)

With the Romanian perception of Byzantinism and Orthodoxism, therefore, we have the beginnings of the stereotypical Homo Balkanicus: an individual who obeys his leaders (regardless of the source of legitimization for their authority), who perceives faith less as a vertical relationship with the Divinity than a horizontal relationship with his kindred, and who sees no reason to take moral responsibility for his wrongdoings. It is this skeleton that the Romanian perceptions of the Balkans further build on.

With the Byzantium-Orthodox influence, Homo Balkanicus can be said to have acquired a large portion of the features that will permit “him” to play a crucial role in the creation of the contemporary Romanian self-stereotype. The final stage of his development is the “Balkan” stage—not a historical stage per se, but rather a literary (and ultimately cultural) conclusion.

The Balkan Influence

“A specter is haunting Western culture—the specter of the Balkans.” This is how Todorova (1997) begins Imagining the Balkans, her authoritative book on the phenomenon of Balkanism. Paraphrasing her (and, for that matter, the authors she borrows the phrase from in the first place), we might say that “a specter haunts Romanian self-perception—the specter of the Balkans.” The Balkan universe of connotations is without a doubt the most powerful element of the Romanian self-stereotype, fine-tuning the Byzantine-
birthed Romanian characteristics discussed above (e.g., adaptability, immorality, duplicity, fatalism, laziness) and introducing several new ones of its own (e.g., aggressiveness, skepticism, fondness for [auto]irony). “He is a true Balkan-er” (i.e., “He behaves ‘in a Balkan way’”) can be either a statement of admiration or (more likely) an accusation, but it is never a neutral affirmation.

As is evident from most of the literature on the subject (Todorova, 1997, Antohi, 2002, and Muthu, 2002 being just three of the most prominent texts), Balkanism is a “cultural megaconcept with multiple irradiations (historical, philosophical, ethnological, sociological, philological, literary, etc.)” (Mineu, 2006). This section will only address those “irradiations” that are most relevant to the question of Romanian identity and self-stereotypes: historical (i.e., the development of the value-imbued Balkan concept), philosophical (i.e., the implications of the label “Balkan[ic] for its bearer), and literary (i.e., the consolidation of the Balkans privileged role in the Romanian imaginary through the influence of literature).

The Balkans

“Imagining the Balkans, and oneself in relation to the Balkans, has been a Romanian intellectual pastime for roughly two centuries,” writes Antohi (2002, para.11) in “Romania and the Balkans: From Geocultural Bovarism to Ethnic Ontology.” The author connects the historical “Phanariot century” in Moldavia and Wallachia to the emergence, in the Western Enlightenment-influenced imaginary, of the “symbolic geographical category” of the Balkans. Following in the footsteps of Western travel writers (Todorova, 1997), the Romanians took to the term Balkan(s) with much gusto. As mentioned above, to this very day, one would have a hard time finding a Romanian who does not have some opinion about the Romania-Balkans relationship, whether positive (i.e., “Romania is in the Balkans and that’s a good thing”) or negative (i.e., “Romania is not in the Balkans and being in the Balkans is a bad thing,” or “Romania is in the Balkans and that’s a bad thing”).

While notable Romanian authors have, indeed, occasionally embraced a Balkan identity, the overwhelming Romanian response to Balkanism has been negative. The “Romania is not in the Balkans and being in the Balkans is a bad thing” perspective is clearly evidenced in the following anecdote recounted by Todorova (1997):

While covering the Eastern front during World War I, John Reed reported from Bucharest: “If you want to infuriate a Romanian, you need only to speak of his country as a Balkan state. ‘Balkan!’ he cries. ‘Balkan! Romania is not a Balkan state. How dare you confuse us with half-savage Greeks and Slavs! We are Latins.’” (p.46)

“Modern Romanian culture,” writes Antohi (2002, para.13), “from the first decades of the nineteenth century on, has distanced itself symbolically from the Balkans. This distanciation...”

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7 Todorova (1997), Muthu (2002), and Antohi (2002) mention and, in the case of the latter two, discuss such cases.

8 With regards to this dissociation from the Balkans, Pleșu (2004) notes that, if pressed, Romanians might be willing to concede a minimal measure of affinity between Romania and the dreaded Balkan space, characterizing their country as “a Scandinavia of the Balkans” (p.249).
tion[...]is consistent with the overall Romanian[...]symbolic shift to the West.” The image of Balkanism, which had entered Romanian literature at the time of the Ottoman Empire’s demise, is now employed programmatically, either to substantiate Romania’s superiority to its neighbors (a view consistent with the “Romania is not in the Balkans” perspective), or, more frequently, to bemoan the corrupt Romanian society one was born in.

The old motifs of duplicity and adaptability are, not surprisingly, founding members, so to speak, of Balkanism. Muthu (2002) connects the two related phenomena to a genuine “philosophy of survival” that Romanians have formed during their oppression by the Ottoman Empire. The author identifies in the Romanian literature dealing with that period the emergence of a fleshed-out ideal prototype of the Balkan Romanian: *Homo Duplex,* the duplicitous man. While, as shown above, the deceptive Romanian was by no means a new discovery, it is only in this literature that the description of this ideal type goes beyond the tautology that posits the duplicitous individual as simply untrustworthy:

*Homo duplex*’s attitudinal portrait includes the following components, present in various degrees in various literary works: adaptability (at times absolute), laughter in the face of adversity, tolerance, versatility, instinctive behavior, the cohabitation of contrasting states of mind [...], transactional spirit, immorality. (p.80)

What we have in this quote is an admirable description of the Balkan self-stereotype that this paper is concerned with. In addition to the adaptability, versatility, and immorality that we are by now familiar with, Muthu (2002) identifies two other features that are of considerable interest to us: skepticism and “laughter in the face of adversity” (the latter to be examined in a later section).

In Cioran’s (2006) opinion, skepticism is a necessary stage in the development of a people, as it permits Romanians, for example, to step outside themselves, so to speak, and become aware of (and negotiate) their shared principles and values. An initial measure of cynicism is, in other words, a precondition for the transformation of a “people” into a “nation.” Cioran’s complaint, however, is that Romanians never overcame that initial stage and remained frozen in a skepticism that has degenerated into lethargy (of “adaptability-as-lethargy” extraction). Romanians believe in nothing at all and thus nothing is worth fighting for, not even comfort. (In the *Psychology of the Romanian People,* Drăghicescu [2003] also noted that the Romanian peasant—the alleged repository of “true Romanianness”—did not even bother to build a sturdy or pretty house for himself. It is this skepticism born out of lethargy (or, according to other authors, out of laziness) that has purportedly prevented the Romanian from embracing progressive policies and has kept him “behind” many of his Eastern European neighbors.

The development of *Homo Balkanicus* has up to now resembled an ever widening spiral: the initial Byzantine skeleton (made of a healthy dose of duplicity and a hint of laziness) has picked up along the way a cocktail of Orthodox subservience, as well as a measure of Balkan aggressiveness and skepticism. The final element to go into the mix—

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9 Obviously enough, the expression *Homo* (*Byzantinus, Duplex, Balkanicus,* etc.) is particularly suited to render prototypes, as it pairs the general(izing) *Homo* (Latin for “man”) with a feature that is supposed to particularize a subunit of “people.”
and, alongside adaptability, the second of the two “master tropes” of Romanian self-perception proposed in this chapter—is humor, or, more specifically, [auto-]irony.

Enjoying the “Balkan Symptom”

Todorova (1997) found it “axiomatic” that for the peoples inhabiting the Balkan Peninsula the Balkan paradigm is primarily a negative one. In other words, those attributes that they ascribe to [their] Balkanness are such undesirable features as laziness, irrationality, immorality, and duplicity. The Balkans, therefore, could be said to constitute a pathological self-stereotype, that is, a heuristic device which Romanians, among others, use to flagellate themselves or their peers. At first glance, one could certainly equate this self-denigration with lack of self-esteem and thus characterize the phenomenon as psychologically crippling—a conclusion often drawn by Romanian editorialists or politicians who subsequently proceed with calling for a national program of “de-self-stigmatization.” A more thoughtful observer, however, would be somewhat more reluctant to denounce the negative Balkan self-stereotype for this obvious negativity may hide something else, something potentially worth retaining: an element of smugness, of perverse pleasure—a lack of self-satisfaction that spurs further self examination. In other words, when Romanians deplore their Balkanness, and any “Romanian hand” will testify that happens quite frequently, they are indeed expressing a sorrow but, at the same time, they are also putting forward the beginnings of a “fuzzy ideology” of Romanian “specialness.” Pleșu (2004) notes that Romanians are professional complainers, frequently enjoying the “vulputuousness of the negative”:

The Romanian is cantankerous: when things are bad, [he complains] that things are bad, when things are good, [he complains] that things aren’t that good; he’s not the one to fall asleep in self-sufficiency; he’s not the one to be mislead by appearances. We’re doing bad! Thank God! It’s worse without the bad! When things go right, life’s not funny. (p. 140)

Antohi’s (2002) explanation of this phenomenon is worth quoting at length:

...Even internalized ethnic stigma can be ambiguous: E.M. Cioran, for instance, when asking the most cruel identity question, Comment peut-on etre Roumain? [...] and thus turning self-identity (second) thoughts into an ontological scandal, was also apocalyptically suggesting the negative excellence of his nation. One would find here evidence of a nationalism a rebours, not merely delectatio morosa. For being exceptional in suffering, in (self-)destruction, and in evil is as great, if not greater, than excelling in the more banal domains of joy, (self-) construction, and perfection. A softer form of this negative pride is of an epistemological nature: many people(s), in the Balkans and elsewhere, take pride in telling foreigners (if Westerners, so much the better!) that nobody can really understand (let’s say) Romania unless one is a Romanian.
Indeed, there is always something mesmerizing about (one's own) negativity, including the chance of overcoming the burden of passivity, the most characteristic marker of otherness. Escaping from the cursed (Orientalist) realm of passivity seems worth the voluntary self-ascription of negativity. Negativity is active—or, like contagion/contamination—comes close to it, asserting itself as activity’s second best, the middle voice, the ambivalent status in between the agent and the patient, between agency and its opposite. (para.8)

Certain elements, therefore, of the “Balkan curse” (Cioran, 2006), such as immorality and the penchant for destruction, are brought forth in order to upset yet another element of the same self-stereotype: Orientalist passivity. This psychologically sophisticated exercise of redemption not only corresponds to that deviousness à la Balkanique, but also brings Romanianess closer to the ideological ground of Romanianism. Much of the “nationalism a rebours,” however, remains, unlike nationalism-proper, the province of the unconscious and the unintentional.

Romanian Humor

As Antohi (2002) points out, the discourse of collective identity is shaped by all tropes of traditional rhetoric (including metaphor and metonymy), as well as by all of their emplotments (e.g., romance, comedy, tragedy, satire). The rest of this chapter, however, only discusses those rhetorical phenomena that have a humorous component for several reasons: 1) the close link between the above-mentioned experiencing of perverse pleasure and auto-irony, 2) the ease with which the prototypes of Romanianess examined in this paper can be emplotted onto caricature, 3) the pervasiveness of judgments (both internal and external) that claim that humor is a basic Romanian attribute, and 4) the conspicuousness of humor in the Romanian literature described as encapsulating Balkanism.

Humor and Pleasure

The relationship between Romanianess and self-deprecating and black humor can arguably be explained by examining the latter as a specific kind of response to adversity. The most superficial observer of Romanian history cannot fail to note that the Romanians (of all three medieval principalities, as well as of the modern Romanian state) have almost always lived under foreign domination—sometimes indirect, often direct domination. As such, misfortune (whether brought upon oneself or not) has been an undeniable reality of the Romanian life. Indeed, a great deal of the elements that are offered as constitutive of the so-called Romanian mentality are defined in relationship to a perceived hardship. Adaptability itself, that über-Romanian characteristic, is, of course, devoid of meaning in the absence of a threatening Other (after all, one can only adapt to something that is foreign).

To many of the critics of Romanianess quoted in this paper (e.g., Emil Cioran), that same almost uninterrupted sequence of defeats at the hands of imperialistic enemies is a testimony to the Romanians’ fatalist/lazy/lethargic attitude towards anything that necessi-

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10 All references to irony in this paper are strictly humor-related, and do not take into consideration irony's quality as a classical rhetorical trope alongside metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche.
ates great effort and sacrifice (such as fighting enemies). The only “responses” to adversity that Romanians ever delivered were of a “catharsis” nature: complaining (Pleșu, 2004) or, more significantly, laughing. Romanian humor is sharp indeed, but its primary role is to act as a vehicle for psychological relief (Muthu, 2002). (An unverified, yet persistent, post-1989 story says that the ideologues of the communist era purposely invented and disseminated many of the by now legendary anti-communist political jokes in order to provide the population with a venue for the safe release of their many frustrations). Needless to say, this blowing off of steam is very much in line with the Romanians’ perceived fatalism discussed in an earlier section of this paper.

In one of his rare interviews (Walcott, 1997), author V.S. Naipaul describes himself as an ironist rather than a satirist because, he says, “satire comes out of a tremendous impulse of optimism,” an attitude towards life which he does not share (p.8). While satire, he continues, is “a type of anger,” irony and comedy “come out of a sense of acceptance”—a feeling more in sync with his general outlook on things (p.8). Taking after Naipaul, I argue that Romanian humor characteristically presents itself in the ironic mold and, more to the point, in a reflexive manner:

Our superficiality comes out of [our penchant for] positioning ourselves as comfortable spectators of our own inertia, for enjoying our own agony through irony. The Romanian mocks his own condition and wastes himself in an effortless and sterile self-irony. (Cioran, 2006, p.46)

Indeed, this ironic mold born out of acceptance, out of inertia, fits right in with the Romanians’ negative, yet perverse, self-image: how best to effortlessly enjoy one’s own Balkan foibles than by simply laughing at oneself in an ironic key (a key that does not involve genuine moral denunciation and, as such, does not require restorative action)?

**Humor and Prototypes**

One can find national (or ethnic, or religious, etc.) prototypes in virtually all kinds of discourse: political, scientific, informational, philosophical, etc. Humorous speech, however, can be said to be particularly suited to be employed as a locus for the creation, negotiation, and legitimization of stereotypes. The very structure of most humorous genres favors the use of ready-made prototypes in illustrating one’s point:

In a comedy, a satirical dialogue, monologue, or a popular joke, there is usually no time for introductory remarks about the characters, for drawing their images gradually and adequately. The author simply prefers to take well-known stereotypes and begin the plot straight away. (Fedorowicz, 1995, p.265)

Fedorowicz (1995) even goes as far as wondering whether stereotypes would exist at all, were it not for comedy, which, in his view, is responsible for many of the “ideal images” out there (whether negative or positive), particularly as far as inter-ethnic and international relations are concerned. Conversely, in a manner consistent with the self-fulfilling prophecy, vicious-circle nature of stereotypes, comedic caricatures are based on already existent prototypes, which they then seamlessly validate or amend. This process
is, of course, facilitated by the esthetic value of humor, by its artistic import: the more attractive the packaging, the more desirable the contents.

**Humor and the Romanians**

“When we judge the behavioral clichés that guide a society, we should not ignore jokes, because they reflect a community’s mentality,” writes Gheo (2004, p.105). As argued in the previous section, humor (jokes included) does often operate with many of the stereotypes that also shape the greater societal discourse. It might not be true that every joke, every caricature, and every funny stanza structurally mirrors the thinking-by-heuristics that characterizes the society-at-large. What could be said, however, is that Romanians seem to strongly believe that they (i.e., their “national” community) express themselves best through humor—and black, sarcastic, self-deprecating humor, at that.

A 1997 qualitative study using focus groups found that Romanians list their sense of humor as the most representative Romanian feature—that is, as a defining characteristic of the “Romanian prototype” (referenced in Frost, 1997). This opinion—to my experience widely held to this day by Romanians of all stripes and colors—is often corroborated by foreign observers. A North American folklorist who studied Romanian humor during the communist era observes that,

> Romans express themselves most characteristically and most profoundly in their joking. In the ironies, obliquities, and covert aggressions natural to the genre they find a vehicle suited perfectly to their situation, their history, and perhaps even their temperament. Living in a secular purgatory that at times must seem infernal, they inhabit a joker’s paradise.... If you knew all the jokes, you’d know everything important. (Cochran, 1989, p.260)

Admittedly, the communist years were the “good old days” of Romanian black humor, but Cochran does go beyond matching the humoristic genre to the situation: he also speaks of the Romanians’ history and “perhaps their temperament,” which are allegedly suited to jocular discourse. In his archaeology of the Romanian people, Drăghicescu (2003) also speaks of the Romanian’s “natural talent for mocking” within a historical framework. More specifically, in keeping with the rationale of his entire book, the nation’s first sociologist proposes a simple ethnogenetic equation: the Romanians’ superior intelligence plus their ancestors’—the Romans’—practicality equals Romanian wit (which Drăghicescu argues is almost undistinguishable from English wit):

> Of the entire Romanian mentality, his satirical, epigrammatic spirit is the smoothest, most precise, and best defined characteristic. At this, the Romanian was and is better at than anything else. (p.409)

Regardless of the purported source of Romanian humor, Romanians believe that they were indeed born funny, and that black humor is a *sine qua non* attribute of Romanian-

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11 Drăghicescu (2003) proposes that irony and sarcasm both have powerful “practical” effects such as the punishing of immorality.

**Humor and Literary "Balkanism"**

Balkanism is a combination of drama and parody, argues Muthu (2002) in his history of the Balkanist literary typology. The initial body of Romanian-language literature that had reflected on the Phanariot century and its cultural and political legacies had been written in a predominantly tragic key, its authors being mainly concerned with the denunciation of foreign occupation and the identification of various commonalities between the Balkan peoples. The year 1821 is considered in this respect a watershed moment, as the replacement of Phanariot princes with natives in both Moldavia and Wallachia also impacts the "Balkanist" (semi-)literary current, which acquires ironic overtones. Romanian society becomes something of a panopticon, with everyone watching everyone; an orgy of communication sweeps through, and the tragic is repeated obsessively to the extent that it becomes the burlesque. It is only towards the end of the 19th century, however, that literary satire becomes a pillar of the Balkanist tradition, as evidenced by the numerous epic or dramatic works heavily impregnated with sarcasm and irony that appear at this time in virtually all southeastern European literatures.

Within this new tradition, I.L. Caragiale, Muthu (2002) argues, does something truly unprecedented in Romanian literature: he distances himself polemically from Balkanism, but he does it with the "means and the temperament of the 'Balkan-er'" (p.150). It is this phenomenon that, I believe, is the very key to Romanianness: the ability on the part of the Romanian to recognize and denounce the "corrupt," "typically Romanian" Homo Balkanicus, while at the same time sanctioning this prototype with a wink and even taking perverse pride in it. It is this ambiguity—indeed, this duplicity—that makes the analysis of Romanian self-perception a difficult, yet fascinating exercise.

**Conclusion**

To paraphrase Venclova's (1995) assertion in an identity-related essay, love and hate gave birth to this paper. More precisely, love and hate for the question of Romanian identity—a question which, as a Romanian emigre of 10 years, doubles as a personal and academic interest. My initial reluctance in approaching such a thorny subject was based on uncertainty about the best way to go about analyzing identity in a rigorous manner, compounded by uncertainty about selecting (and limiting) my data. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) classic, *Metaphors We Live By*, allowed me to get a crucial early grip on the concept of identity. Regardless of the exact interpretation one chooses to bestow upon it, identity is a complex category with numerous elements. My own Romania, for example, is made up of a set of millions of life experiences, contextualized feelings, impulses, actions, conversations, sights and sounds, laws and rules, etc. Try as I may, I would never

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12 The saying "Romania is a sad country full of humor" is instantly recognized in Romania as one of those ambiguous, yet undoubtedly wise, *bon mots*.  
13 The Phanariots were Greek families given control of the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia by the Ottoman Empire. The name comes from the Phanar quarter of Istanbul, where these families originated.  
14 Naipaul's (rhetorical) differentiation between "satire" and "irony" does not apply to this (literary) context.
be able to account for each one of these elements: a faulty memory and a lack of resources, among others, would make such an enterprise impossible. How was I, then, to describe Romania? Simply put, I found the answer in the scholarly literature that dealt with frames and cognitive metaphors and the role they play in people’s conceptualizations of categories such as identity.

The first thing I learned from reading that literature is a rather commonsensical (and yet rarely acknowledged) idea: that people do not come into direct contact with the raw information around them, but rather filter such information through a number of frames, whose role is to prioritize and structure empirical observations. Romanian identity, therefore, is a concept that individuals manage to infuse with meaning thanks to certain structures that are already in place. If I could identify some of those structures I could begin to understand what Romanian identity was all about. One such salient structure was that of Romanianness—a cultural frame, which equated the identity narrative with a diffuse feeling of togetherness, of sharing into a pool of characteristics that were perceived as typically Romanian.

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Perusing the literature of the Romanian idea, it soon became obvious some authors did not conceptualize their belonging to Romania only in terms of a common past or a common set of beliefs (i.e., Romanianism), but also in terms of certain unintentional, yet very similar, attitudes towards certain situations and events. “Romanians are lazy!” “Romanians have a good sense of humor!”—these self-stereotypes were certainly not part of any Romanian political ideology that I had encountered, and yet seemed to be just as influential in one’s determination of national identity as the “Romanians have always been united!” cry of National Communism.

I was then able to argue that the frame of Romanianness was organized around one overarching cliche, one image that greatly contributed to the conceptualization of Romania: Homo Balkanicus, the Balkan man, a prototype of “that which is typically Romanian.” This paper has traced the development of this prototype, and identified several elements that went into its composition: the Byzantine stereotype, the Orthodox stereotype, and the Balkan stereotype. Each one of these “ideal types” is based on certain perceived historical events and is to be found in highly influential Romanian literary works. All of the three stereotypes exhibit a noteworthy valorization of adaptation: the ability to adjust to hostile situations is perceived as a characteristic of the Byzantine man, the Orthodox faithful, and the Balkan-er alike. In the different stages of Homo Balkanicus’s development, this adaptability was operationalized in different ways (adaptability-through-duplicity/immorality, adaptability-as-laziness, adaptability-as-lethargy, adaptability-as-fatalism). Each operationalization legitimized a different perception of “Romanian specificity.”

The second pillar of Romanianness examined in this paper was auto-irony (i.e., the perceived “all-Romanian” ability to laugh in the face of disaster and to mock one’s own role in bringing that disaster about). An analysis of the connection between humor, Romanian self-stereotypes, and literary Balkanism rounded off the study.

So, what does it mean to be a Romanian? Based on the images discussed above, here’s what “the Romanians” self-perception might be said to look like: The Romanians are a unique (hence interesting) people who have always been able to adapt to hostile situations (a polyvalent attribute that could be interpreted in a myriad ways), who possess a pronounced sense of self-irony (meaning they are intelligent and fascinating in their
negativity), and who have a tendency to obey an authoritarian figure (meaning they admire strength, but have none of their own). While this metanarrative of Romania certainly suffers from all the evils of stereotyping (e.g., active ignorance of individuality and propensity for self-fulfilling prophecies), it does put forth a compelling image, which, I submit, can be detected in much of the Romanian discourse that deals, either directly or indirectly, with national specificity.

References


