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## მრგვალი მაგიდა

### Round Table

#### მცირე ერების ლიტერატურები თუ მცირე ლიტერატურები?

#### Literatures of Small Nations or Small Literatures?

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#### **Romanian Sea Fiction: a Small Literature Within a Small Literature?**

My articles tries to place Romanian Black Sea fiction within its own national literary space, as well as determine which works acquired international validation. As a small literature, Romanian literature was focused from its beginnings on nation building. Gaining control over Dobruja and the Black Sea littoral only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was also the period of the most intense nationalist sentiments, Romania had a difficult and complex relationship with the new space, which required integration into national consciousness. The multi-ethnic make-up of the Dobrujan population both prompted assimilation and defied it. Overall, Romanian Black Sea fiction is highly complex, as it deals with various topics: symbolic nation-building, literary tradition (Ovid), the “lived” experience of that space, as well as literary *topoi* such as the association sea-woman, or marine adventures.

**Key words:** Black Sea space, marine literature, nation-building

#### **I. Introduction**

If Romanian literature can arguably be categorized as small, in the sense of Pascale Casanova's definition of small literatures from the *World Republic of Letters* (2004), as dominated national literatures, how can Romanian Black sea fiction be regarded within its own national field? Has it been affected/dominated by the nationalization/universalization of literatures? Is it a unitary literary field? Is it visible internationally? This are the questions that my article is trying to elucidate, taking into account that the Black Sea space has always been a multi-ethnic, multi-national region at the crossroads of historical empires, the sea guaranteeing access to many trade routes uniting Asia and Europe. With the development of the modern tourist and fishing industries, as well as the recent discovery of oil and gas resources, the Black Sea became not only a bone of contention among its coastal states, but also a major interest spot for the great powers.

Romanian maritime literature is rather young: though intermittently part of either Moldavia or Wallachia, our current Black Sea littoral became part of Romania only during the modern age, and its integration into the Romanian national imaginary was slow and gradual. Since the cultural and literary appropriation of the Black Sea space was more or less concomitant with the process of modern Romanian

nation-building, the Black Sea space was mobilized as a symbolic resource in the development of the national project. The instrumental figure of this symbolic modeling was Ovid, the Roman poet banished on its shores in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. Though roughly until the 19<sup>th</sup> century the exact place of Ovid's exile had remained a mystery, and the presence of the poet was disputed between the (current Ukrainian) shore in the vicinity of Cetatea Albă/Belhorod/Akkerman\* and the (current Romanian) city of Constanța/Küstenge/Tomis. The exact location of Ovid's exile was established by the Italian journalist Bruto Amante (1852-1923), by providing both historical and geographical arguments in *La Romania illustrata. Ricordi di Viaggio* (1888), as being the former Tomis rather than Ovidiopol, as the Russians claimed.<sup>1</sup>

## II. *The role of Ovid in the genesis of Romanian sea fiction*

The history of the production and reception of Romanian sea fiction is related, on the one hand, to the paradoxical (un)importance of the sea for the construction of national identity, and, on the other hand, to the ways in which the Romanian population perceived/experienced the sea as well as to the first-hand experience of sea-life of the Dobrujans engaged in sailing, fishing and sea trade.

In Northern Dobruja, at the time it was transferred to Romania, most of the population were of Bulgarian, Romanian, Russian (Lipovan), and Greek origin. According to a statistics from 1888, ten years after Dobruja had passed under the control of Romanian administration, in Tulcea county there were 2815 Romanians, 3556 Bulgarians, 3725 Russians, 1997 Greeks, 2027 Jews, only 29 Turks<sup>2</sup>, 485 Tatars, 453 Germans, 241 Armenians and 109 Gypsies (Coman, 2023, p. 121). Apart from being a border zone since its earliest history, a part of the Byzantine and Bulgarian Empires during the Middle Ages\*, and of the Ottoman Empire from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, in the 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the competition for supremacy over the Black Sea region and the Danube question had turned it into a territory frequently crossed and colonised by refugees fleeing ethnic conflicts from the adjacent territories. Today, as numerous studies testify, Dobruja is still a space where numerous ethnic communities live side by side: Romanians, Turks and Tatars, but also Germans, Bulgarians, Armenians, Cossacks, Jews, Italians, Ukrainians and Lipovan-Russians (Flaut 2007:9). The multi-ethnic make-up of Dobruja has turned it both into the object of national policies of assimilation/acclaculturation, starting with the reign of Carol I and ending with the totalitarian dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu, and into an internal exotic other, a mythical/fantastic land of inspiration for bohemians, writers and artists.

Compared with the semiotics of the forest and the mioritic space, traditionally related to the Romanian ethnogenesis and the national myth of Romania as the “shield of Europe”<sup>3</sup>, the sea and its meanings are mostly absent, or marginal in the Romanian literary space. The first to use the figure of Ovid as a poetic prophesy of future Romania (the united principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia) was Vasile Alecsandri (1821-1890), one of the Forty-eighters, whose unionist ideals prompted him to employ the legend of the Roman poet exiled on the Black Sea shore in his last play, *Ovidiu*. In 1878 Alecsandri was the first Romanian poet to receive European recognition (the great Latinity award from Montpellier) for his “Cântecul gintei latine” [The song of the Latin tribe], and his last plays focused on two important Roman poets: Horatius and Ovid. While Horatius was conceived as an ancient alter-ego of the author's private life and personal ideals, Ovid embodied Alecsandri's social and political persona, for, in the play, just before

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\* Two different places, one in Odessa county and the other in Constanța county are named after Ovid: Ovidiu (in Romania) and Ovidiopol (in Ukraine).

\* Virgil Coman, in his introduction to *Dobrogea în arhivele românești* [Dobruja in the Romanian archives], notes that most of the archivistic evidence about Dobruja in the Middle Ages was “destroyed during the military confrontations developed in the territory between the Danube and the Black Sea” (Coman, 2023, p. 5).

dying, the Roman poet articulates a vision of the future Romanian people as the heirs of Roman civilisation in Eastern Europe<sup>4</sup>. Thus, Vasile Alecsandri was the first to give literary expression to the idea of the inherited Latinity of the Romanians.

Alecsandri's play became one of the foundational narratives of the nation<sup>5</sup>, establishing the exiled Ovid as the “tutelary genius” of Romanian literature and culture and as a “symbol of its cultural continuity since classical antiquity”, according to Theodore Ziolkowski (2005, p. 115) and setting the tone for the tens and thousands of Ovid poems, plays and stories present in Romanian literature. Nicolae Iorga, the first Romanian historian to write about the relation of the Romanians to the Black Sea, authored a five-act dramatic poem called *Ovidiu* [Ovid] in 1931, which, similarly to Alecsandri's play, ends with Ovid's prophetic vision of the rebirth of the Roman civilisation in the Danubian-Pontic space. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ovid and his exile among the Getae, Greeks and Sarmatians becomes a major topic for Romanian poetry. Victor Eftimiu writes “Statuia lui Ovidiu” [Ovid's Statue] in 1915; in 1924 Adrian Maniu, publishes “Elegie” [Elegy], a poem in which Ovid's banishment turns into a paradigm of the eternal condition of the poet and Corneliu Moldovanu brings out “Ovidiu la Tomis” [Ovid in Tomis], another sombre meditation on the fate of the Roman poet exiled on the shore of the “wild sea, forever gathering/on its mountains of waves the snow of its foam” (1966:118). Later, Grigore Sălceanu (1901-1980), a Francophile like Alecsandri, with studies in Bucharest and Paris (Sorbonne) pens two plays dedicated to his native county, Dobruja, one entitled *Ovidius* and the other one, *Hyperion*, dedicated to Eminescu. Again, Ovid and Eminescu, the two statuary poets of Constanța, appear as inspirational figures for Romanian national identity. Marin Mincu (1944-2009), a writer and literary critic, revisits the myth in his *Moartea la Tomis. Jurnalul lui Ovidiu* [Death in Tomis. Ovid's journal], which has been recently (2017) adapted for the theater by Alexander Hausvater (*Ovidius in Love. Jurnalul unui exilat îndrăgostit*). Even the nationally and internationally acclaimed Mircea Cărtărescu, contributing a short story for a collective volume<sup>6</sup> on the literature of the Black Sea, resorts to the legend of the exiled Roman poet in “Die Küste des Exils. Tomis, Constanța und der Pontos Axeinos” (2009).

The cultural resonance of the Ovid myth and its importance for the national project made it popular during the Communist regime, when the exilic figure became in turn a symbol of anti-communist resistance in the poetry of the detainees from the labour camps at the Canal, and the tutelary deity of Communist worker romance in the movie *Eu, tu și ... Ovidiu* [I, You and ... Ovid] (1977). In “Die Küste des Exils” Mircea Cărtărescu lists 33 common uses of the name Ovidiu(s), among which are the town Ovidiu (near Constanța)<sup>\*</sup>, Ovid's Island (Insula lui Ovidiu), the university Ovidius (also in Constanța), hotels and guesthouses both on the Romanian Black Sea littoral and in the mountains, the cognac Ovidiu and the famous wine (Eminescu's favourite, as the story goes) Ovid's Tear, a type of salami, various kinds of shops and even an optician's (Cărtărescu 2009: 101-102). The popularity of Ovidiu as a male name in Romania may be put down not only to the fame of the Roman poet, but also to its meaning in Latin, *shepherd*, for the tending of sheep was the traditional occupation of the Vlachs.

The Romanian maritime fiction centering on the figure of Ovid as the founding father of Romanian letters (and through its origin a guarantee of our Latinity) has, and still is, one of the most popular and most anthologized, with almost every great (in the sense of internationally known) Romanian author producing a literary piece (play, short story, poem) focusing on the famous Roman poet.

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\* This is the place where Ovid was allegedly buried.

### III. *Maritime literature and nation-building*

On August 15<sup>th</sup> 1934 the statue of Mihai Eminescu, the Romanian national poet, was inaugurated in Constanța, by the Black Sea shore, in the presence of Carol II, the Romanian monarch, prince Michael, as well as several ministers and commanders of the Romanian navy. The official speech, delivered by Ioan N. Roman, epitomized Romania's cultural and literary engagement with the Black Sea space, historically going back to Ovid and Roman antiquity, politically, however, only six decades before. The province of Northern Dobruja, with the corresponding Black Sea littoral had been ceded by Russia, in exchange for Southern Bessarabia, to modern Romania following the Russo-Turkish war of 1876-1877 – as specified in the Treaty of San Stefano (1878). Eminescu had been born in 1850, before Dobruja had officially become part of Romania, yet, after a short visit (of only 10 days) to Küstenge (Constanța) in 1882, the image of the sea in his poetry became associated with intimations of mortality (maybe, understandably so, as he had gone to Constanța on doctor's orders, for a heliomarine cure). One year later he produced several versions of his testament poem, “Mai am un singur dor” [One wish alone have I], “De-oi adormi” [If I were to fall asleep], “Nu voi mormânt bogat” [I do not want a rich grave], “Iar când voi fi pământ” [And when I am earth]. In all versions of the poem Eminescu expressed his wish to be buried by the sea: the sea's “rough chant” which “roars with passion” (Eminescu 1970:268) became, next to the pastoral elements (the forest, green branches, the moon sailing through the fir-trees, the cow-bells), an integral part of the poet's way of imagining a peaceful death. This solemn wish became a reference point in the official opening discourse of Ioan N. Roman:

With an uncanny tenderness, the poet who in life gave us all his rich soul and asked for nothing in return, expressed “one wish alone”, for when he was going to become “earth”: the desire to be buried “at the edge of the sea” so that “his sleep would be serene”, near “the deep waters” and, “ceasing to be a vagabond”, memories “should lovingly embrace him”. Perhaps in deference to this “only wish”, repeated with obsessive persistence in four variants of the same admirable poem, Eminescu's grave should have been here, in the ancient land of Mircea, “the prince of Wallachia” whose majestic figure he evoked like no other, with such power and pride, – in the ancient Milesian Tomis, where another poet, Ovid, unhappy like him, two thousand years before, had suffered and sang like him (Cheramidoglu, 2023).

Roman's speech, illustrating almost six decades of nation-building in Dobruja, established Eminescu's statue as one of the landmarks of Romanian identity by the Black Sea shore. With Ovid's statue strategically placed in the city centre, and Eminescu's statue near the Genoese Lighthouse, quite close to the sea shore (“the edge of the sea”), the historical continuity of the Latin tribes on the Black Sea shore was symbolically emphasized, as was also the fact that the modern day Romanians were the heirs of the great Roman empire, a force to be reckoned with in the Slavic sea<sup>1</sup> which threatened to overflow and drown them.

Thus, paradoxically, the sea entered the Romanian consciousness as one of the symbolic sites of national identity, though it had been conspicuously absent from the Romanian imaginary for centuries. This prolonged absence may have been the reason why, as the historian Lucian Boia pointed out, “Receiving Dobruja in 1878 was not met with joy; the disillusionment caused by the loss of the southern Bessarabian counties was bigger. The maritime potential of Dobruja only became obvious with the passing of time” (Boia 2014:20). The only one who saw and appreciated its potential was Mihail Kogălniceanu, Prime Minister and Minister of External Affairs, who, in a letter to Prince Carol I (Coman 2013:93), called the

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<sup>1</sup> In Romanian history textbooks, it has become something of a truism that Romania represents an island of Latinity in a Slavic sea, an allusion to the fact that most of Romania's neighbors are Slavic people (Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Serbs).

new addition to the body of the country România Transdanubiană [Transdanubian Romania]. This re-naming proved to be the starting point of the national effort of assimilation. In contrast, Eminescu himself, one year before his visit to Constanța, in one of his newspaper articles on the “question of the Danube” had noted in a down-to-earth manner that Romanians, originally a mountain people, “only had contact with the sea and the Danube in their heroic age, in the golden age of a Mircea, of Alexander the Good and Stephen the Great” (395).

Quite accurate from a socio-historical point of view, Eminescu's observation was taken over and used as an argument in different contexts by both writers and historians. In A.E. Baconsky's “Farul” [The lighthouse] the main character asks himself “What could the sea mean for one who descended from people of the forests and mountains?” (Baconsky, 1967, p. 16-17). Geo Bogza, in “Schiță de cosmogonie a pământurilor dintre Dunăre și Mare” [Literary sketch of the cosmogony of the lands between the Danube and the sea], argues that “The lands between the Danube and the sea may have been inhabited by Getae, and the first shepherds from our people may have descended so far, yet they could never have been the matrix of the Romanian people. Sunburnt and wind-crossed, they represent the maximum contrast to the soft arching of the ridges [...] of the Carpathian space” (1979, p. 157). Two historians with a propensity towards what Hayden White called historiography have recently made similar claims. Lucian Boia resumes the argument in the second chapter of his book about Balchik: “Romanians were not easily caught by the sea. A people of the hills, mountains, fields, in fact a 'continental' rather than maritime people: the sea was not a part of the Romanian civilizational synthesis” (2014:20). Adrian Romilă notes that Romanians “have never had the vocation of great journeys and neither were they great ship-builders, though maritime trade had flourished during numerous periods” (2015:105). Finally, the cultural historian and theorist Andrei Oișteanu makes a similar note in a recent study: “Romanians have never been good sailors. Neither the Danube, nor the Black Sea have sparked an interest in aquatic adventures” (2022, p. 112).

Nevertheless, in spite of these reservations, or rather as a compensatory effort, much of the sea literature produced by Eminescu and other writers take up the topic of the Black Sea space, investing it with a symbolic national resonance. Lucian Blaga, a poet and philosopher and one of the most extensive theoreticians of Romanian cultural identity, for whom the Romanian archetypal cultural matrix was the mioritic space<sup>7</sup> (his own coinage) pointed out that in Eminescu's poetry the undulating structure of the mioritic space, is rendered not so much through valley and hill, but through the image of the undulating sea, the waves<sup>8</sup> and their rhythmic movement. In other words, far from perceiving the undulating rise and fall of the waves as a symbol of infinity (the oceanic feeling), Eminescu projects onto the sea the archetypal Romanian cultural matrix. This 'nationalization' of the sea, visible in the work of many Romanian authors, stands in stark contrast to the other, larger perspective, which takes into account the specificities of the Black Sea space, infusing it with qualities of otherness and turning it into the object of exoticization.

#### ***IV. The Black Sea space and exoticization***

If the myth of Romanian Latinity, first shaped around the figure of Ovid proved to be almost equally successful throughout different political ages, the sea as an internal exotic other enters Romanian consciousness only in 20<sup>th</sup> century, first and foremost due to Queen Marie's love of the Black Sea littoral, especially Balchik. Born into the British royal family, Queen Marie of Romania (1875-1938) remarked that “Balchik was my return to the sea – my first love. Born on an island, I have in my soul an eternal deep craving for the sea” (5). She was an active promoter of the Great Union (1918), a lover of Romanian folk art and the bohemian patron of the artists and writers gathering around her summer residence in Balchik on the Silver Coast.

Writing about Balchik as the 'arcadian' experience of the Romanian artistic imaginary, Dalina Bădescu remarks that during the very short period of the Romanian administration of Southern Dobruja (1913-1940), "the Romanian imaginary went through a fruitful stage of assimilating a new, exotic and almost unreal culture" (2024, p. 25). Lucian Boia, in his "petite histoire" of Balchik and the Cadrilater, explained that its charm was more deeply felt by Romanians because of an imagological paradox: the Bulgarians were used to its beauty, whereas the Romanians, on taking over Southern Dobruja from the Bulgarians, reacted more intensely to what they perceived to be its exotic, paradisiac beauty: the white chalky slopes descending picturesquely into the sea (2024, p. 19). The multi-ethnic structure of the Balchik population (its human picturesque, as Boia calls it), of which Turks and Tatars were by far the most colourful characters for Romanians, became a source of inspiration for painters, many of whom would be later grouped by art historians into the "Balchik school". The lively cultural atmosphere of a small town like Balchik, with a vibrant painting school, several literary magazines and even a "free university" was the result of the perceived exoticism of the place, which attracted the imagination of artists and their patroness, Queen Marie. Following Iosif Iser's exhibition in Bucharest in 1913, displaying picturesque characters like the old Tatar, Ismail the coffee-house owner, Turkish and Tatar women in shalvars, the image of the Black Sea as an exotic space is firmly established, both painters and writers giving free rein to their imagination of Dobruja as the internal other of the mioritic space. As Traian Coșovei, one of the poets from the Eighties Generation, put it, "Dobruja has always been a fantastic world" (1979, p. 403) for a host of Romanian writers.

Therefore, much of the fiction and literature focusing on the Black Sea space from the interwar period was replete with picturesque images of people and places, documenting its multi-ethnic background, its rich cultural melange and historical heritage, as well as construing the image of Dobruja as an earthly paradise. Ion Pillat, one of the Romanian poets who used to spend his summers in Balchik, notes in his introduction to the eponymous poetry volume that:

Balchik had been however destined for me as the crowning of my love for the Southern seas and the Mediterranean sky. It gradually enveloped me like a fresh love, with all the powerful nostalgia of the water and light. It was a delight for my eyes, an initiation for the soul and education for the mind. Over the picturesque fortress with minarets, old Turkish houses, whispering water fountains and sycamore-sheltered coffee houses; over the beauty of the white ravines up which run Asiatic streets, ash-coloured donkeys and Tatar women in orange shalvars; over all this somehow unreal Halima magic, Balchik offered me the Biblical story and the Greek myth. When at sunset I discovered at the well, under the fig tree, the very Samaritan woman with a copper vase on her shoulder, pulling down her veil; when under the trough I recognized a worn-out sarcophagus in the stony riverbed; behind the scenes I experienced a more profound reality and the hidden gods were clearly showing me the road to Hellas and the meaning of my true soul. Under the sunny sky, in the ancient Dionysopolis, a city dedicated by the Greeks to the god of the vine, balance occurs naturally between the Dionysian ecstasy and Apollo's serenity. Thus, in me, the impetus of the Scythian nomad settles down in Geto-Roman villages on an ancient dreamland (Pillat, 2022, p. 10).

The dream, however, would soon be shattered by the hurricane of WWII. The swan song of the multicultural imaginary of the Black Sea was Pavel Chihai's novel *Blocada* [The blockade]. It was originally published in 1947, just one week before King Michael's forced abdication, but had never made it to the reading public. The copies were withdrawn from bookshops and shredded, as were many other works considered undesirable by the Communist nomenclatura (Chihai, 1991b, p. 350). *Blocada* was eventually reprinted in 1991, after the '89 Revolution. The reasons behind this modern form of book burning were many: its author was connected with an anti-communist organisation, while the book itself, with its multicultural references and refined aestheticism went against the ideology of socialist realism.

One of Chihaia's accomplishments, according to Petru Comarnescu, the literary critic who wrote the introduction to his novel, was his ability to describe the landscape around the Black Sea in such a manner that it made atmosphere prevail "over people, a landscape made perceptible by the winds that sweep the steppe, sometimes rough and thorny like weeds, yet other times full of luminous calls and longings for marine escapes" (1991, p. 5). Comarnescu emphasized the picturesque quality of Chihaia's style, able to evoke, in its aestheticised depictions, the same feeling as the paintings of Iser and the other Romanian seascape painters from that period.

However, what had impressed Comarnescu the most was the huge scale narrative of Constanța's fate during WWII, as well as the network of characters participating in the fulfilling of this destiny. Chihaia's propensity towards the atmospheric had shifted, this time, to the human landscape of the Black Sea harbour and its exotic otherness:

It is the story of the city of Constanța, the inner, hidden formation of the great Romanian harbour, where Romanian colonizers meet with Oriental adventurers, peasants who become farmers and sailors over there, merchants and traffickers, lured by the temptations of international trade, the official and the forbidden, finally, a melting pot of so many nations, beliefs, mentalities, which all together turn Dobruja and especially its harbour into a sort of Romanian America, full of passions and interests, ideals and violence. The novelist Pavel Chihaia is the Columbus of this primitive, yet rather colourful and extremely dynamic America, with which Romanians are not quite familiar yet (1991, p. 6).

It is precisely this feature of the Dobrujan space, its otherness compared to the Romanian landscape of hills and valleys, mountains and meadows (the mioritic) as well as its multi-ethnic make-up which become the obvious topic of Chihaia's novel. During WWII, when the events in *Blocada* happen, Constanța, as Chihaia remarks, was a variegated world "with Oriental features" (1991b, p. 353). People and places bear the marks of a complex and convoluted history. Although Chihaia describes present-day Tomis, the neighbourhood in the vicinity of the harbour, as a hybrid, Orientalised place, this Orientalism is counter-balanced by the image of a buzzing industrial port, which brings to mind Comarnescu's remark about it being a kind of Romanian America. The Easternmost border, with all its traces of balkanism and Oriental otherness, gradually metamorphoses into the Other of the previous other, a Westernised metropolis:

Along the twisted streets of Tomis, with their roundabouts, where water-carrying donkeys and people bearing burdens and goods □ embroidered fabrics, tropical fruit, colourful birds from islands far away, disembarked together with all the nations of the earth □ were climbing slowly, there were most of the places in the city, brothels and the warehouses of the numerous companies, together with the small but prosperous counters of money-lenders and trinket merchants. At midday, the white walls came alive under the blinding heat of the pontic sun and one might have mistaken it for an empty neighbourhood, if the cereal dust dripping from the warehouses, the steam of the huge machines under pressure, and the fires coming from the naval construction sites and the ambulant kitchens were not rising from the ground like a flickering, hectic mist, through which one could distinguish the distant rumour of the boiling harbour, with yells, knocks and rattles interrupted by the capstan (1991a, p. 15).

Thus, Tomis/Küstenge/ Constanța<sup>1</sup> turns into a third space where hybridity and otherness are the norm. It is also a place of illicit trade, a fortress of theft, smuggling and drug dealing (the drug which is

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<sup>1</sup> Constanța is first and foremost identifiable by its palimpsest quality: first the Greek colony of Tomis, then a Levantine city, then Küstenge, the Turkish harbour, and only recently Constanța, the Romanian port.

often mentioned is opium, under the local name of 'afion'), a kind of Aladdin's cave: "All its inhabitants knew and were proud that the humble jumble of houses with earthen walls had linked its fate to that of the harbour, which sent in banana bunches and sugar lumps, pinched from the warehouses, rugs hidden in sacs, cigarettes in socks, [...] afion in ordinary cigarette packages" (1991a, p. 16).

Repressed by the communist regime<sup>9</sup>, whose aim was to acculturate ethnic minorities into a homogeneous Romanian population, the interbellum imaginary of the Black Sea, which represented it as a multi-cultural melting pot, with a long history of ethnic inter-mingling and various cultural traditions resurfaced, after the 1989 Revolution, in one of the novels written by American-Romanian author Domnica Rădulescu.

*Black Sea Twilight* (2010) her second novel, goes back to the multiethnic atmosphere of Pavel Chihaiia's *Blocada*, turning it into one of the highlights of the novel, which centers on the friendship – and later the love relationship – of a Romanian young artist-to-be, Nora Teodoru, and Gigi, an aspiring marine officer coming from a mixed Romanian-Turkish background. While Nora's dream will finally come true after her escape to Turkey and further to France, Gigi's will fall prey to the unforgiving dictates of a totalitarian country. After trying to flee the country by sea, Gigi, in an attempt to cover for Nora, is caught by the Romanian border police and imprisoned. At the end of the book, after the fall of the Communist regime, they are reunited and try to catch up with each other's experiences: Nora's semi-vagrant, yet quite rich from an intercultural perspective, experience in France and Gigi's traumatic and humiliating imprisonment. Quite symbolically, Nora's first exhibition is entitled "Looking for the Black Sea in Paris".

The novel has generally good reviews, international readers appreciating it both for the experience it provides of a different culture (Communist Romania), the dramatic love story and Nora's struggle to become a woman-artist. Two years after its publication in the US, the book appeared in Romanian translation, *Amurg la Marea Neagră*, yet the novel did not manage to catch the attention of Romanian readers, arising only a limited scholarly interest in the book.

Cristian Pepino's Vama Veche series (*Cartea de la Vama Veche* [The Book from Vama Veche] and *A doua carte de la Vama Veche* [The Second Book from Vama Veche]), a collection of memories and holiday stories from seaside villages like 2 Mai and Vama Veche, focuses on the bohemian cultural elite from the 60s and 70s, its relation to the communist authorities and the ways in which they carved space for artistic or intellectual freedom. During that period, southern villages near the Bulgarian border like 2 Mai and Vama Veche had been the preferred spots for a large category of people who were (openly or indirectly) against Ceaușescu's cultural revolution. Though lacking in the comfort provided by the new socialist hotels and restaurant chains, these villages became the favourite summer residence of artists, actors and free spirits who savoured the rocky wildness of the beaches and sometimes practiced nudism.

These young rebels who were to dominate Romanian cultural life in the 70s and 80s were the product of a small interval (roughly from midsixties until the Ceaușescu's 1971 July Theses) in which the regime alternated openness and closure towards the West. Pepino notes that during that period a lot of good foreign books were translated, that they wore blue-jeans (bought from the people who had relatives abroad or from sailors) and flower-patterned shirts, read Aldous Huxley and listened to The Doors and other rock, psychedelic or hippie bands. The freedom culture of this cultural elite was meant as cultural resistance against the Communist regime, yet it was also part of the overall hippie culture of the age. Wearing long hair in a period when the communist youth was supposed to show discipline and commitment to party politics meant that they were liable to be taken off the streets by party activists and forcibly shaved.

The multicultural ethnic background of these border villages is revealed in the name of the local characters with whom the youngster used to interact: Matriona, a Lipovan host, Musuret, a Turk who ran

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<sup>9</sup> 'Afion' was the name of the juice extracted from the poppy plant, which contains opioids. The name is derived from the Turkish 'afyon'.



the cheapest pub in Doimai. Holidays were usually cheap because you had to rent a room from the locals, and most of the houses had no running water or electricity. Part of the charm of these holidays, for the cultured youth coming from the capital was the exoticism of the locals, Lipovans, Turks and Tatars:

Musuret's was in fact a nasty looking dump with a large yard, where, now and then, in the evenings, the drunken locals used to rip off pieces of fence from the ground and hit each other on the back with them, or quietly amuse themselves by lifting a table with their teeth without using their hands, or eating glasses. Lipovans did not pick on us, they were nice, polite, friendly and extremely generous. Wonderful souls. If you paid the host 6-7 lei per day, you got some huge pots of borsht and huge bowls filled to the brim with fried anchovies (Pepino, 2015, p. 51).

An exotic figure is Popa Garide (Father Shrimp), a Lipovan priest who had earned his nickname from the habit of fishing shrimps and selling them in paper cones. These shrimps were the staple street food in Doimai, and a lot of Lipovans, who were traditionally fishermen, sold them in paper cones. Popa Garide was the unwitting author of one of the tourist attractions in Doimai, the unfinished Russian church: he had bought vodka with the money destined for the construction of the church. The parishioners had forgiven him for that, but, Pepino explains, the priest had been kicked out of the community when he had been caught selling the head covers which women traditionally brought for the icon of Virgin Mary in the open market (Pepino, 2015, p. 51).

Pepino and his friends' peregrinations through the villages of the Black Sea shore and the Danube Delta familiarize them with different culinary traditions: it is often in the food and the way the food is eaten that ethnic differentiation resides at a time when the political ideology required conformity (and conformism). Apart from seaside staples such as fried anchovies and shrimps, Romanian staples such as *mititei*, a lot of particular types of food are described: the water chestnut soup in the Delta, the Lipovan smoked shark and *scordolea* (mashed potatoes with boiled fish and garlic).

Along with the traditions of the multicultural Black Sea cuisine, another tradition is humorously depicted in Pepino's memoir: the tradition of stealing food. As undignified as it sounds, stealing food for everyday subsistence was a common practice during the Communist regime. Most people indulged in it, as it had a universal justification: the Communist state robbed us, it's no problem if we steal from the state. Forced cooperativization made cultivated land nobody's and everybody's, at the same time. Pepino tells of a time when he was invited to eat with his cousin and a group of other young people from the tents. The price per head being just 1 leu, he wanted to contribute more, but his cousin stopped him, telling him that he stole the potatoes, another guy stole the tomatoes, another the eggs, and they only had to pay for the cooking oil (Pepino, 2015, p. 31).

Multiculturalism is not only a thing of the past. People learn from each other: Pepino remembers that, driven by hunger, he took the example of two French hippies who gathered mussels and started eating them as well. Mussels had never been eaten on the shore of the Black Sea and Pepino notes that the locals were disgusted when they saw them and made the youngsters promise not to boil them in their pots in the kitchen, but outside on a camp fire, in a pail (Pepino, 2015, p. 46-47).

The marine literature I have discussed so far, with its two opposite poles, the nation-building and the exotic imaginary of the Black Sea space, though often contradicting and excluding one another, have nevertheless become part of the mainstream Romanian literature, if not in terms of extensive readership, at least in terms of visibility and a heightened interest on the part of literary scholars and researchers, and also of availability and access: most of the books mentioned so far have been published by important publishing houses.

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\* A traditional Romanian dish made of minced meat, small skinless sausaged which are grilled. It is similar to *ćevapčići* from Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## V. Romanian sea fiction and the “lived” experience of the Black Sea space

Another type of Romanian marine literature is that written mostly by people who have had some sort of connection with the sea and its environment, of which very few authors and novels have caught the attention of readers and researchers or critics. This is the local literature about the sea, which is, paradoxically, the most invisible within the frame of reference of Romanian literature.

To be fair, the first nautical novel in Romanian literature was penned by a marine professional, Jean Bart\* (the pseudonym of Eugeniu P. Botez), working as the commander of the Romanian harbour of Sulina. *Europolis* (1933), translated into French, German and Hungarian, documents Botez's experience with the European Commission of the Danube while engaging in a nationalist self-promoting politics, yet it also manages to offer a vivid picture of the multi-ethnic milieu of a small harbour, where a lot of social drama is going on: seduction, amorous triangles, commercial ventures, etc. In the words of Jean Bart, the story world and the characters in *Europolis* represent Romania as “a nation on the border of Europe, simultaneously a space of transit and a crossroads” (Bart, 2024, p. 154). This lively and evocative fresco of Sulina is so convincing that the reader's image of the (actually very) small port, consisting of 4 parallel streets becomes a larger-than-life one, almost like a cosmopolitan metropolis. On account of its understated, yet still obvious support for a domestic administration of the Danube (and against international bodies such as the European Commission of the Danube), *Europolis* found favour with the nationalist Communist authorities and was turned into a movie, *Porto Franco*, in 1961. The black and white movie stressed the decadence of the bourgeois milieu in Sulina, demonstrating the futility of the American dream through the tragedy of Evantia, the “black siren”. The literary fame of the author was enhanced by the fact that he had been the student of Ion Creangă, Mihai Eminescu's friend and one of the best-read and most popular authors in Romanian literature. Recently, Jean Bart became the subject of a biographical novel by Adrian G. Romilă, *Jean Bart. Argonautul* [Jean Bart. The Argonaut], a heavily romanticized biography projecting the image of the writer-navigator as that of a Romanian Columbus.

However, before *Europolis*, already at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Nicolae Dunăreanu\* (1881-1973) wrote the first collections of short stories\* depicting the lives of poor fishermen and locals from the Danube Delta. Dunăreanu's short prose was influenced, on the one hand, by the critical realism of Mihail Sadoveanu, and on the other, by Anton Chekhov, Vladimir Korolenko\* and Maxim Gorki, whom he translated into Romanian. Overall, his style is forged along the lines of the autochthonous direction in Romanian literature from Bessarabia, as in the interwar period he was stationed there, publishing in the literary journal *Viața Basarabiei* (1932-1944), co-editing *Renașterea Moldovei*, and managing an office in the ministry of public education in Bessarabia. His short stories document the lives of the Lipovan fishermen\* not only through their material culture (the houses, along with the fishing implements, the lodka\*, setka\*,

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\* Jean Bart was one of the most prolific nautical writers in Romanian literature. He also wrote *Jurnal de bord* [Logbook] and *Schițe marine din lumea porturilor* [Marine sketches from the world of harbours].

\* Nicolae Dunăreanu was the pen name of Nicolae Ionescu, born in Galați, a harbour on the Danube (Dunăre in Romanian) – hence the choice of the pseudonym.

\* These volumes were: *Chinușii*, *Răsplata* and *Din împărăția stufului*.

\* Dunăreanu met Vladimir Korolenko personally, as his brother-in-law had escaped from the tsar's punishment to Dobruja, and established a practice for himself as a doctor in Tulcea. Korolenko visited his brother in law in 1908 and then he met and befriended Dunăreanu.

\* The fishermen in the Danube Delta were mostly of Slavic origin, either Lipovans (raskolniki, Old style believers) or Ukrainians (haholi).

\* A type of fishing boat, long and narrow, with a sharp stern and bow.

\* Setka is a type of gillnet.

and vintir<sup>6</sup>) but also through their beliefs and superstitions. As ethnic Russian Old Believers, Lipovans are shown to exist on the margins of the civilized society, excluded from the process of modernization by their poverty and religious superstitions. The young Lavrentie from the story “Oameni din Deltă” [People from the Delta], though a diligent and intelligent student, is prevented from pursuing his studies further by the moral authority of the family (the father) and the village (the local priest), who think he has defiled himself with too much knowledge. To be born with a handicap inside such a community is to be destined for tragedy: the fate of Alioşa, the deaf-mute from the story “Mutul” [The deaf-mute], is to be regarded (and treated) as the fruit of sin during his childhood, and frequently turned into the scapegoat or a victim of abuse in his adulthood. Verisimilitude and local colour are achieved through an extensive use of local language (typical Lipovans expressions like Boje moi!, pajaluista, Lipovan songs<sup>7</sup> and Lipovan names<sup>8</sup>) and local customs like the *paidușca* dance. When entering the class for the first time, Lavrentie is dressed in the Lipovan national costume: a red shirt, a belt with bead tassels, yuft<sup>9</sup> boots, and a jacket with metal buttons over the shirt. Dunăreanu's short stories reproduce the dichotomies of the lived space of the fishermen: pond/lake/delta versus the sea, salt water versus freshwater fishing and the centrality of the boat (*lotka* or *luntre*) in the lives of the locals. Generally, the sea is associated with a larger freedom of movement than the delta, for its space is connected to the larger world: Odessa, Constantinople, etc. Lipovans going fishing on the lake or the delta are often caught in the net of local customs and prejudice. Maxim Ciacara, nicknamed Puriáz<sup>10</sup>, a fisherman from a small village in the delta, finds freedom after personal tragedy by going to the sea.

In his own time, Nicolae Dunăreanu was seen as a minor writer focusing on the quasi-exotic landscapes of the Delta; with the advent of communism and the injunction of social critique, his prose was re-evaluated and the writer's critical realism, in line with Soviet ideology, led to several re-publications of his volumes. Although nowadays his work is virtually unknown and ignored, his pseudonym was taken over by Ovidiu Petcu (born 1950), who, as Ovidiu Dunăreanu, symbolically united (in his name), the Danube with the Pontus, manifesting a keen interest in everything connected with the Black Sea space. Ovidiu Dunăreanu is one of the most prolific writers of the space nowadays, a member in the local writers' union and the editor of the *Ex Ponto* literary and cultural journal, with books translated into German and Bulgarian. He is also the author of a bio-bibliographic dictionary, *Scritori de la Tomis* [Writers from Tomis], a useful resource for any researchers of Black Sea literature. The dictionary attempts to provide an overview of both the activity and the literary achievements of the local writers, and its main merit is that it is quite inclusive, featuring writers of Turkish, Tatar or Russian-Lipovan origin. Dunăreanu's *Vaporul de la amiază* (The afternoon ship) has been published in a bilingual edition, Romanian-German, by the Radu Barbulescu Verlag München, a publishing house which brings out mostly Romanian writers from abroad.

Although almost wholly forgotten nowadays, Nicolae Dunăreanu stands out in the history of Romanian marine literature as the first who referred to the Black Sea space as both a space of alterity and subalternity: it was this very mixture that led to the ambiguities in his reception. Following closely in his footsteps was Geo Bogza (1908-1993), a writer associated with the Romanian avant-garde, the son of a marine officer, himself trained as a sailor, a keen traveller and the inventor of a genre which could be called “literary reportage”. Travelling around Dobruja and to other parts of the country, he brought out a number

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<sup>6</sup> Vintir (vintil) or vârsă is a type of trap fishing net.

<sup>7</sup> Vot spîhnulo utro./Rumianița vodî./Nad ozerom, bîstraia/ciaica letit.” (160)

<sup>8</sup> Duneașa, Nadejda, Hreățca, Vatașa, Vania, Petrușca, Timofti, Nichita, Pricopie, Mișa, Trofim, to enumerate just a few.

<sup>9</sup> Yuft is a type of Russian bark-tanned cow leather. After tanning, the leather is impregnated with birch oil, which makes it water-resistant.

<sup>10</sup> Puriáz is the local name of the Northwestern, a wind that is favourable to marine fishing.

of such pieces (crossing the border between literature and journalism) in which, apart from describing typical landscapes and characters from Dobruja, he set out to forge a secular mythology of the land, in which Dobruja appears as the exotic other of Romanian mioritic identity. At the same time he keeps a vigilant eye on the multi-ethnic structure of the area, documenting customs from the lives of Tatars and other ethnic minorities, and analysing their subaltern status in relation with the “tourists”. Bogza's most important output was *Țări de piatră, de foc și de pământ* [Lands of stone, fire and earth] (1939), a collection of reportages dating back to 1934, when he worked as a correspondent for the *Vremea* newspaper. The volume approaches three Romanian provinces which had been traditionally under foreign rule: Transylvania, Dobruja and Bessarabia, and focuses on small incidents and events which characterize them as periphery. The subaltern status of many of those living there, forced to earn a living under extremely rough circumstances is one of Bogza's main concerns. Dobruja is the land of fire, and Bogza's descriptions of its aridity and wilderness remained a landmark in Romanian literature. Later, after Nicolae Ceaușescu had invested a lot into the technological progress of Dobruja and the construction of the Danube-Black Sea Canal, many writers chose Bogza and his work as a benchmark in the development of Dobruja, charting its metamorphosis during communist times with reference to the symbols of poverty and misery recounted by Bogza (the communal wells, the water carrying donkeys, the local houses made of very cheap materials and often subject to flooding).

Nicolae Dunăreanu and Geo Bogza's legacy was carried further by Traian T. Coșovei (1954-2014), one of the poets of the Eighties Generation, who, in *Dobrogea de aur* [Golden Dobruja] and *Farmecul genezei* [The charm of genesis] grafts Bogza's mythology of the land of fire onto stories about local fishermen from the Danube Delta (“Patriarhul Deltei” [The patriarch of the Delta], “Focul scrumbiei” [The fire of the anchovy], “Marinari de Dunăre” [Sailors on the Danube], “La marginea pustiului” [At the edge of the desert], etc). More outspoken than Bogza in his sympathy for the Communist party, Coșovei adds another mythological dimension to Dobruja, that of creative Man: referring to the Delta as the land of genesis (new islands arise from the waters even today), he situates Man at the centre of this perpetual creation, Man as the carrier of wisdom (in the sense of both technological know-how, mastery of and communion with nature). The hymn to creation replaces its usual biblical connotations with a more secular one, and the rise of Man, its transformation “under the stronger and larger action of the renewal of the whole country” (Coșovei 1979:426) turns into praise for the Romanian Communist Party and its “beloved” leader.

While Traian T. Coșovei became of the most appreciated poets not only of the 1980s, but also of the post 1989 period, other writers from the Black Sea space were not so lucky. Not even Ovidiu Dunăreanu, for, in spite of his many literary awards, his intense literary and cultural activity and his obvious presence in Dobrujan letters, he did not achieve nation-wide fame. In fact, very few writers from the area became nationally or internationally renowned. Success and fame only came to those writers who were in some way associated either with the nationalist ethos, communist party ideology or part of a wider literary movement.

Nowadays the situation of local writers, under the imperatives of the market and the difficulty of publishing is even more precarious. In Constanța for example there is no library which sells local literature, only stores which are part of larger chains, whose profit usually comes from selling translations of popular international authors. Local authors are often forced to publish with independent small presses and distribute the books among friends and relatives. This makes most literature produced locally almost impossible to reach for the average Romanian citizen, all the more as readership is distributed unequally, with most readers in urban centers like Bucharest, Brașov, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara and Constanța<sup>10</sup>. Unfortunately, due to low incomes and lack of time and education, the readership in Romania is limited. Ioana Ceobanu, in a study on reader profiles in Romania, noted that in 2023 only 32% of the interviewees had read a book, with 22% having read 1-5 books per year and only 10% having read at least one book per month (Ceobanu, 2023, p. 85).

## VI. National and international fame: Radu Tudoran's *Toate pânzele sus!* [All Sails Up]

The Black Sea space first entered Romanian consciousness through the convoluted processes of ideologization, myth-making and exoticization; later it received national and international validation with the publication of Radu Tudoran's *Toate pânzele sus!*, a classic of marine adventure, documenting the voyage of the schooner *Speranța* [Hope] from the Black Sea to Tierra del Fuego. The novel was published in 1954, and re-printed several times afterwards. It was “one of the best-liked books of teenagers during the whole socialist period”, as Adrian Romilă pointed out, “its market success” being confirmed in 1976, by Mircea Mureșan's filmic adaptation of the book in 12 episodes. Alex Ștefănescu, in the introduction to another novel by Tudoran, *Un port la răsărit* [A Harbour in the East], noted that after the legendary TV series shot by Mureșan, the total number of copies of Tudoran's books sold in the libraries was 1.5 million, which made him one of the best-read authors in Romania (Ștefănescu, 2011, p. 18). One of the reasons for its success with both the young and the adult reading public, Romilă argues, was the “escapist thrill of the sea voyage, on an old ship, at the time of an extreme ideological closure”, thus serving as a vehicle for the imaginations of those who “were not otherwise able to leave the country” (Romilă, 2015, p. 117).

If the novel came from the imagination of a writer who was both accustomed to the sea<sup>7</sup> and thus familiar with the variegated, multicultural world of harbours, and a keen traveller with an international perspective, Mircea Mureșan's film series bore the visible traces of ideological constraint: one film critic, Marian Țuțui remarked that the series incorporates “typically communist attempts to introduce patriotic episodes even in adventure films for teenagers” (Țuțui, 2011, p. 190). However, paradoxically, the movie, though occasionally ideologically charged and going against the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the book, only enhanced its success. In the end, everybody was satisfied: the teenagers and the adult public reading for pleasure enjoyed the adventure game, the colourful descriptions of foreign ports, foods and characters, while the higher echelons of the party, communist authorities and cultural propagandists were happy with the emphasis on national history, the traditions of rural communities as well as the drive towards science and technological progress, all of which were advertised at the time as the achievements of Ceaușescu's national-communist policies.

The novel has been recently translated into English (2020), by Cleopatra Hensby, and so far it has received only positive and excellent reviews on Amazon, as did also the movie series, now available for an international audience.

The national and international success of *Toate pânzele sus!* [All Sails Up!] may be more instructive if we compare it with the other types of sea literature produced. What differentiates the novel from all the other sea fiction produced is its seafaring plot and focus on adventure. It includes atmospheric descriptions and local colour, seafaring knowledge and specialized nautical terms, a cast of different types of characters, all the elements that are present in the literature of exoticization. Additionally, in the movie the nationalist ethos becomes more prominent: nationalist elements are also present in the book, yet there they get lost among the multitude of other voices.

The book and its adaptation, therefore, function as a totality, eliciting a positive response from a wide range of readers. This may explain its enduring popularity, as well as offer a possible reason for the restricted and limited popularity of other sea fiction: Tudoran's novel is universally appealing because of its genre, the marine adventure. Looking back at the other types of Romanian sea fiction, adventure is what is mostly missing: they concentrate either on nation-building through the description of character and landscape, or exoticise the same in an attempt at aestheticization. Not even the association between the sea and the feminine element or the erotic, a frequent topic in Black Sea poetry, has been as successful as the seafaring plot (which includes the erotic element as well).

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<sup>7</sup> Radu Tudoran was the pen name of Nicolae Bogza. He was the son of a naval officer and the brother of Geo Bogza. An army officer himself, he gave up his job in order to devote himself to full-time writing.

## VII. *Conclusions*

As a multi-ethnic space with a long history of conflicts and population movements, the Black Sea space appears in the literature of its coastal states either as lived or living space, or as an imaginary, ideologized or mythologized space. The borders between the lived space and the imaginary one often permeable: a literary/cultural space can accommodate both of them concomitantly. Though the Black Sea and its literature is – at least for the time being, due to the Russian-Ukrainian war – a topic of worldwide, not just regional interest, I have tried to look at it from grassroots level: the Romanian sea fiction. At the intersection of the small Romanian literature and the big Black Sea topic, the question was: what kind of literature is the Romanian sea fiction?

Analysing it from a historical perspective, I aimed to create a sort of typology: first, the Black Sea literature is mobilized to serve the cause of nation-building through the figure of the exiled Roman poet Publius Ovidius Naso. During late Romanticism, which in Romania coincided with the formation of the nation and national identity, as well as during late Communism (the national communism of Nicolae Ceaușescu), the Black Sea, with or without Ovid, becomes a nationalist *topos*: the Romantics saw it as the cradle of our Latinity (what differentiated us from our Slavic neighbours), while during Communism Dobruja turns into the land of genesis, the creation of the new man through socialist technological progress. A counterpart to the national inflection and colonization of the Black Sea space is its aestheticization through exoticization: the Black Sea with its iconic staples (the landscape, the food, its colourful ethnic minorities) becomes the internal other of the mioritic space (the cultural matrix of Romanian identity) and the favourite topic for modernists who saw themselves as part of a cultural cosmopolitan elite. Last but not least, there is a whole literature, part of it still obscure and ignored, focusing on ethnic minorities, especially on the lives of local Lipovan-Russian and Hohol-Ukrainian fishermen, as well as on the Tatar, Turkish and Greek minorities (less on the Bulgarian minority). If ideologization and exoticization served to make the Black Sea literature visible (in terms of access, publication and critical attention), focusing on the realist description of the “lived” and “living” space was mostly a sure recipe for oblivion.

In terms of international circulation only few Romanian productions managed to reach an international audience. Among these were Jean Bart's *Europolis*, Mircea Cărtărescu's “Die Küste des Exils. Tomis, Constanța und der Pontos Axeinos”, published in *Odessa Transfer*, a collection of Black Sea stories published in Germany (whose cultural interest in the Black Sea space reveals strategic importance of the Black Sea for German geopolitics) and, more recently, Radu Tudoran's *Toate pânzele sus!* However, the translations of *Europolis* were mostly due to the international interest in the Danube question, the novel having been mentioned by Claudio Magris in his book on the Danube (*Danube: A Sentimental Journey from the Source to the Black Sea*). Cărtărescu's short story, though published in German, French and Polish, still does not have any Romanian version, and, again, is part of a cultural project underlining a geopolitical strategy. Domnica Rădulescu's *Black Sea Twilight/Amurg la Marea Neagră* demonstrates that a book's international success does not guarantee an audience in the author's native country: though relevant for academics and cultural theorists, it did not become popular with the Romanian public, even though it contained (almost) every ingredient for success, and it relied heavily on the association of the sea with the feminine/erotic. On the other hand, the translation of Radu Tudoran's novel into English, the lingua franca of today's intellectual space, proves that the book has managed to captivate an international audience.

The national and (more recently) international success of Radu Tudoran's *Toate pânzele sus!* and of its filmic adaptation in terms of readership and audience (as limited as they are in Romania, as in other low income countries) illustrates the importance of the seafaring adventure as an incentive for reading. It seems that the old tradition of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, grafted onto the European novel and adapted locally is still the best recipe for a book's overall success. Yet, however, with this one exception, the status of Romanian sea fiction within its own national field remains rather uncertain and fluctuating: it becomes visible only when mobilized politically and ideologically for diverse purposes.

## Notes:

1. In the last chapters of his book *La Romania illustrata. Ricordi di Viaggio* ("Ovidio in esilio", "Le pretese Tomi e Constanza sul mar Nero", "Sul lago di Siutyghiol. Gita all'isola d'Ovidio"), Bruto Amante discusses Ovid's exile on the shore of the Black Sea and attempts to determine the exact location of Tomi, his place of exile. Citing a host of historians and geographers, Amante decides that the historical and geographical evidence in favour of Tomis as Ovid's place of exile is overwhelming, and notes that the name of lake near the Dniester delta (Lacul Ovidiului) is not connected with Ovid, but with shepherds and sheep, as the place was used by shepherds to wash the fur of their sheep.

2. As Dobruja had been under Ottoman administration for a long time, most of the names of villages and communes, towns and cities were Turkish/Tatar (Babadag, Ceamurlia, Eschibaba, Congaz, Hagilar, Casapchioi, Alibei-chioi, Ortachioi, Caraorman, etc), with some of Slavic origin, usually fishing villages inhabited by the Russian Lipovans or Ukrainians (Jurilovka, Ciucurova, Sfistovka) (Coman, 2023, p. 119-121).

3. Being geographically positioned at the borders between Western Europe and the Ottoman Empire, Moldavia and Wallachia, the two Romanian principalities have often played the role of buffer-states, and Romanians envisage themselves as the 'defenders of Christianity'. The Russophobia of most Romanians goes back to the Russo Turkish wars, when Russia invaded the Danubian Principalities several times, with the intention to annex them.

4. Ovid's prophetic vision of Romania as the heir of ancient Rome in the East comes at the end of the play. Here is the speech in my translation: Oh, I do see and tremble, for time comes with a force/To change Rome's sacred glory into a heap of ruins./And how, from far away the barbarian flood/ Increases, sweeping away the altars of the gods.../I see Rome dying!... Alas! Rome is no more!/ Its power? Only myth! Its history? A fairy-tale!/It was, its name and glory now wiped out,/Oh, I see so much, so much, that I cannot express.../I am so terrified... the words stick in my throat [...]/But wait... The heavy cloud is gone... light shines again/Centuries pass... Oh! Wonder... Here in the East/The sapling, son of Rome, will turn into an oak,/ And Istros will inherit the great name of Tiber. /A new Rome will arise, a new world will be born./My grave will open... and from it in the future/A long flood of life will come and bear fruit. [...]/Oh, Gods, no! The Latin nation will never die! (Alecsandri, 1920, p. 139)

5. Alecsandri's play premiered on the stage of the National Theatre in Bucharest on the 9<sup>th</sup> of March 1885. In *Istoria Teatrului Național* [The history of the National Theatre], Ioan Masoff notes that the premiere of *Ovidiu* was the highest-grossing in the entire eight-year existence of the theatre (Masoff 1937:146). However, later performances of the play were not so successful. The public rushed to see a play which had been advertised as an event for the whole nation, yet the rather uninteresting plot and the ideologically charged speeches contributed to its later decline in the public's preferences.

6. The volume, edited by Katharina Raabe and Monika Sznajderman is entitled *Odessa Transfer. Nachrichten vom Schwarzen Meer*. Initially published in 2009, the short story and poetry collection (featuring authors like Attila Bartis, Aka Morchiladze, Nicoleta Esinencu) has been translated into French and Polish. Now the editors are working on bringing out a second collection of Black Sea literature.

7. The mioritic space was defined by Blaga as a rhythmic space of ups and downs, modelled on the typical Romanian landscape, a succession of valleys and hills. Most of Blaga's philosophy was influenced by the German idealists, Kant and especially Hegel, whose philosophy was permeated by a deep geographical sensibility. The name comes from the folk balad "Miorița" [The Ewe], which is based on the lives of Romanian shepherds and contains elements of the symbolic relation of Romanians with the natural environment as well as a fatalist worldview.

8. Here is part of Blaga's argument: "In Eminescu's subconscious we can notice the presence of all the stylistic determinants which we have discovered in the layer of our folk spirit, only in a different dosage and constellation due to the individual factor. That horizon of the undulating space is not symbolized in Eminescu's poetry so much by the image of the "plateau", as by the image of the "sea" and "water". The undulation, the waves, the rocking – these are among the most frequent elements in Eminescu's poetry" (Blaga, 1969, p. 246).

9. Although generally repressed by the communist authorities and their censorship machine, the image of the sea as the Other of ordinary human experience reappears in Anatol E. Baconsky's *Echinouxul nebunilor și alte povestiri* [The madmen's equinox and other stories] (1967). The short stories in this volume belong to a period of both physical and psychic repression in Romanian history, and would be best characterized as expressionist, on account of the elements of the fantastic, the uncanny, and the subjective distortion of reality.

10. These data are provided by online bookstore chains (of which the largest is Libris.ro), according to their top sales. As for public libraries, their number has constantly diminished. Ioana Ceobanu, in an extensive research on reading practices in Romania. Carmen Croitoru and Ștefania Matei, in a study on the groups of public cultural consumption showed that in 2023 the percentage of people who either borrow books from the local library or go to bookfairs is larger for urban communities (usually the larger the city, the bigger the percentage of book readers (43). Also, according to recent data, 70% of the reading public is made up of students and young people who only read the mandatory lists for school. A report published by the National Institute of Statistics in 2023 for the year 2022 showed that the percentage of readers from the urban environment was 2.3 higher than that of the rural readers (121-122).

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