

Romania – Identity/Alterity
– A review of *Herito - heritage, culture & the present* 12 (2013) * –

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Writing or merely thinking about ‘Romania’ is a difficult task. There is no trait of union which would resume the ‘essence’ of Romania or Romanians, the famous ‘country brand’¹, although the feeling of ‘Romanianness’ is very present. Perhaps the most obvious trait of union is exactly the lack of it, and the constant efforts to search for one. Facing the ‘phenomenon’ named Romania you are left with a feeling of exhaustion and with a split conscience between admiration and adversity. Admiration for its beautiful minds, for its genuine talents and audacious initiatives, while, on the background, a totally anomic society, lacking some basic civility principles; television, which occupies most of the public space, intruding also into the private, being the showcase of societal behaviour.

Therefore, as a self-exiled, fleeing from the hysterical mode in which Romanian society has been living lately (or has it always been like that?), in search for that ‘fullness of being’ felt when you take a fresh breath of Western air, formerly known as ‘normality’, I was more than pleased when asked to review *Herito*’s no.12/2013 issue dedicated to “Romania”. I was willingly ready to take a look back at the ‘phenomenon’, knowing that I was protected by a buffer zone, the outsider’s gaze, which usually guarantees some objectivity. The detached reader could effectively delight herself or himself learning about the downfalls and accomplishments of a country in the process of “modernization” (the second modernization is still ongoing after the fall of communism), and therefore full of creative potential. Instead, the editors have managed to ‘put the finger on the wound’ (and, being a wound, it hurts), so to speak, touching on some of the most ardent problems which

* *Herito* is a bilingual Polish-English quarterly published by the International Cultural Centre from Krakow, which focuses on the “heritage, culture & the present” of Central Europe. While most of the issues treat miscellaneous subjects such as “Conflicts of memory”, “The elusive centre (of Europe)”, “Stories from countries which are no more”, debating both “unique and highly relevant cultural dilemmas” as stated on , there are also issues entirely dedicated to one specific country generically belonging to the (imaginary?) space referred to as Central Europe. The *Herito – heritage, culture & the present* 12 (2013) issue is specifically dedicated to “Romania”. See *Herito – heritage, culture & the present*, accessed March 18, 2014, <http://www.herito.pl/en>.

¹ A controversial publicity campaign from 2010 financed by the Romanian government.

still torment us, Romanians, such as: “Why, while *obviously*¹ being better than others, we are still doing worse?”, “Who’s to blame for this? recent or ancient history? a national trait? a curse? Gypsies, communists, the European Union?” (and the list of laments can continue...)

Although the content is structured on five sections, namely “Romanian dilemmas”, “Art”, “Ideas in practice”, “Reflections, impressions, opinions” and “By myself”, throughout the whole issue there are two main types of approach: one consists in lucid analyses which focus on exposing the imaginary constructions regarding Romanian history, identity and “pride”, constructions which subsequently weigh down the collective task of facing history – past and future, while the other approach points to the success stories, the examples to follow, presenting interesting artists or cultural products that (in spite of the above mentioned prejudices) have made and make Romania’s fame internationally. I would remark the very involved tone of the articles, especially in the first section, where authors are mainly Romanians, which shows that the discussed issues are addressed by the people concerned by them: an inside vision reflecting subjectivities which try to objectivate, compared to the more paced tone of the Polish authors. We could also remark that Romanian authors tend to stress out the negative features trying to deal with them, while the Polish highlight the cultural points of reference, in a more objective survey. (Overall we’re not so badly seen after all!)

The content of the issue is conceived so that each article reflects a facet of this (incomplete but veridical) portrait of Romania, like a mirror globe that renders multiple, fragmented and ever different images of the face which casts its gaze upon it.

To begin with, “Romania is a paradoxical country”, as Dr. Jacek Purchla states in his “Editorial”. It’s not hard to understand (don’t we think the same?) the feeling of familiarity and strangeness (of uncanniness?) an outsider can have about this strange “neighbour” which is “different, but somehow similar, close, and therefore – very interesting.”²

In the first section, namely “Romanian dilemmas”, Lucian Boia, Traian Ungureanu, Dan Lungu, Marius Stan, Octavian Logigan and Olga Bartosiewicz “try to answer the question ‘Why is Romania different?’ by taking a closer look at its history, complicated transformation and sometimes paradoxical modernity”.³

Speaking of difference, there always has to be a point of reference. Taken any reasonable point of reference – our closest or more distant neighbours, especially the ones with similar (recent) historical experiences – Romania is scoring negative points on many levels. This is due to a ‘historical backwardness’ to be blamed not only on the communist episode, but rooted deeper in history, as Lucian Boia explains, in the issue’s first two articles, the first, an interview with Cristian Pătrășconiu, and the second, excerpts from Boia’s controversial (how else?) book “Why is Romania Different?”.⁴ It is as if we’ve always been, historically speaking, one step behind the others: for example, while Europe prepared parting with the Middle Ages in the 14th century, Romanian Middle Ages were just beginning; modernization was ‘forced’ upon an underdeveloped,

¹ I ironically underscore this opinion, shared by all kinds of “protochronists”, old and new.

² Jacek Purchla, “Editorial”, *Herito* 12 (2013): 1.

³ *Herito* 12 (2013) fourth cover.

⁴ Lucian Boia, *De ce este România altfel?* (Why is Romania different?) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2013), second edition.

rural country, during a very short period of time in the 19th century; the same as communism, which was imposed on a country with very few communists at the beginning, but with the largest number of them at the end. Romanian communism was also a ‘different version’, states Boia: when other communist countries were starting to loosen the ropes, we strengthened them, heading towards a bloody revolution. (Then, it’s not a surprise that, after the fall, we opted for an ‘original’ democracy, rather than a plain, dull, normal one...)

Besides the differences from the ‘European average’ Romania’s specific ‘difference’ is the one within itself. “Romania is a country of contrasts, a non-egalitarian country”,¹ says Boia. Equally rooted in the past, especially in the hastily done modernization of the 19th century, and the much mythologized inter-war period, the internal paradoxes of the Romanian society are, today, as obvious as ever. For example, in the inter-war period, Romanians played key roles in culture or in science, while the country harvested the highest number of illiterates in Europe. According to statistics, for 97% of Romanians, television is the main source of information,² which is, probably one new form of illiteracy. On my part, I would observe that, while Romanians may often succeed individually, they are more likely to fail collectively.

Another big issue that seems to torment Romanians is identity (or “Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?” to paraphrase the title of Gauguin’s famous painting), the constant reference to a ‘national’ essence, either in a positive way – otherwise the ‘ungrateful’ foreigner tends to forget the benefices Romanian people have brought to civilization – or in a negative way, a collective trait of personality, ‘shameful’ enough as to conceal your Romanian identity when travelling abroad. As Traian Ungureanu points out, “in this respect, Romania is neither an exception nor even an interesting example. [...] Its uniqueness is due not to the persistence and impact of its schemas but to obsessive reference to them.”³ The ‘pride’ and the ‘shame’ of being Romanian, both overstated, are the two faces of the same coin, the superiority complex coined on the inferiority complex, and, as a consequence of both, a persecution complex.

The typical attitude towards everything within that is ‘foreign’ and therefore ‘to blame’ for Romania’s shortcomings is, in fact, a compensation for the country’s unspectacular history: we didn’t get to play a key role in European or world’s history, because we were always held back by others (from outside or from within our borders). This is the typical attitude towards the Roma, who are thought to be, by most of Romanians, “a social problem, and not an ethnic group”, as Octavian Logigan observes in his essay on the issue of minorities.⁴

The second section is dedicated to the arts and culture and focuses mainly on modern literature, modern and contemporary painting and contemporary cinema.

Through Jakub Kornhauser’s paper we discover (those who haven’t yet) the peculiar case of Romanian surrealism, the last incarnation of this avant-garde movement

¹ Lucian Boia, interviewed by Cristian Pătrășconiu, “Why is Romania different?”, *Herito* 12 (2013): 12-39.

² “Standard Eurobarometer 80”, European Commission, accessed 25 March 2014, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb80/eb80_en.htm.

³ Traian Ungureanu, “Who’s had enough of Romania and why?”, *Herito* 12 (2013): 40-59.

⁴ Octavian Logigan, “The absent gadjo Gypsy and the present goy Jew”, *Herito* 12 (2013): 78-89.

in Europe, with Gellu Naum and Gherasim Luca among the most prominent figures.¹ Olga Bartosiewicz's introduction to the work of Benjamin Fundoianu, pointing out his aspirations in creating an interdisciplinary 'total work of art',² along with Wojciech Bondowicz's review of the Polish translation of Max Blecher's morose prose, "Adventures in Immediate Unreality"³ shed light on two of the most outstanding and sometimes overlooked figures of Romanian modernism.

The inter-war period was indeed one of the most validating for Romanian culture in international context. As "Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janco launched the Dada movement in 1916, overnight Romanian culture found itself in the first ranks of the innovators co-creating the history of European thought. For the first time in their short history, Romanians were able to shed their peripherality complexes and abandon efforts to catch up with Western culture by imitating its formulas" states Jakub Kornhauser, pointing out also that "this impression was somewhat weakened by the internationalist character of avant-garde movements."⁴

The contemporary period seems to be one of equal intensity, especially for cinema and the visual arts, although the outstanding accomplishments of Romanian artists are far too recent to enable us to predict whether they will have a long term impact on the national and international scene as the avant-garde artists had. The case of "the young art from Cluj"⁵ is worth taking a closer look, due to its apparent eccentricity. Unlike other cultural movements, which 'centralize' talents from smaller centres, the most fashionable artistic *milieu* currently in Romania is not the capital, Bucharest, but Cluj, the major city in the North-West. The rise of Cluj as "a must-check-out hype in the arts" – to paraphrase Corina Bucea's emphatic expression⁶ – is due to the local synergy of a few individual talents that have managed to outgrow the self contentment and inertia of validating centres, reaching far beyond national recognition. On the other hand, Cluj is more 'central' than Bucharest, being geographically and culturally closer to Western Europe.

Another ingredient which contributed to the success of this generation is, paradoxically, the retrenchment into 'traditional' visual forms such as figurative easel painting with a hint of revisited socialist realism. Instead of adopting the 'forms without content' of western contemporary art, as did many Romanian artists right after '89, the current generation draws upon a so-called tradition of socialist realism, formerly the official version of Romanian art, and therefore refuted by many genuine artists. The curious overturn that the fall of ancient communist regimes has produced in the art world, exsanguinated by the 'dematerialisation of the art object'⁷ was the re-discovery of

¹ Jakub Kornhauser, "Surrealism's second homeland. The mysterious heritage of the Romanian avant-garde.", *ibid.*, 96-107.

² Olga Bartosiewicz, "Benjamin Fundoianu – The Unknown Face Of Romanian Modernism," *ibid.*, 108-113.

³ Wojciech Bonowicz, "The dark revelations of Max Blecher", *ibid.*, 212-215; Max Blecher, *Întâmplări în irealitatea imediată* (Events in immediate irreality) (Bucharest: Art, 2009 [1936]).

⁴ Kornhauser, "Surrealism's second homeland".

⁵ To paraphrase Lukasz Galusek's expression in "The Clujians", *ibid.*, 154 – 173.

⁶ See Corina Bucea's article on "The Paintbrush Factory (*Fabrica de Pensule*)" the 'artistic cooperative' that currently holds the leading role of the art movement in Cluj, "City meets art – how micro big bangs changed Cluj", *ibid.*, 174-189.

⁷ As in Lucy Lippard's definition of the dematerialization of the art object through the new artistic practices of conceptual art. See Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years. The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1973).

old forms as new, fashionable, and a lot more digestible forms of art. A *savoir-faire* in direct lineage from old masters rather than contemporary art, along with clever, often ironic reference to the specific pre and post totalitarian experience has become the label of artists coming from the east. This vision is of course reductive, the artistic reality, even in a close universe as “The Paintbrush Factory” being much more diverse, but the constant reference to this stereotype has made it into a real ‘country brand’. Symptomatic of this, is the fact that every single reproduction illustrating the two articles dedicated to the movement around “The Paintbrush Factory” contains either a reference to the past, or to past artworks.

The last two texts, “Finis Saxoniae and the art of return” by Dieter Schlesak, and a review of Schlesak’s novel “Transylwahnien”¹, show us the other face of the coin, deconstructing the mythical image of the ‘German’ – a symbol of discipline, efficiency and order as opposed to Romanian messiness – revealing us a more gloomy image of the Transylvanian Saxons, fallen under the mirage of Nazism, bringing upon themselves the revenge of history, the burden of guilt and the tragedy of losing their homeland.

The big picture of *Herito*’s issue on Romania shows us – whether through compensatory narratives or critical analyses – a country in search for itself and for a place for itself among nations. The editorial choice of featured authors, artists and themes, although not an exhaustive one (nor could it be) offers an enriching insight, for both the Romanian and the non-Romanian reader, into a mental territory which has its unique cocktail of dilemmas and certainties, of self-assessment and self-enhancement inherent to any nation. I would remark the irreproachable graphical presentation of the magazine, all articles being richly and appropriately illustrated. *Herito* shows us that Romania is maybe not the ‘harvest of civilization’ that professional patriots vocally announce, but, definitely, is a country not to be ignored.

”To Be or Not To Be”*

– Review –

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Discussing a comprehensive monograph about suicide, stemming from the experience of a teacher, healer, researcher, writer and active member of the community,

¹ Claudio Magris, “Return to Transylvania, a spiritual Tower of Babel”, *Herito* 12 (2013) 219-225.

* Doina Cosman, *Suicidology* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2013), 378p. ISBN 978-973-595-601-1