# IMAGES OF SULINA IN ROMANIAN LITERATURE

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**Abstract** My paper aims to provide an overview of how Sulina was depicted in Romanian literature. Starting with its geographical location, which provided a basis for its hybridity, and ending with its multicultural milieu and history of piracy, Sulina has been predominantly portrayed as an exotic Other. Another recurring representation of Sulina, also deriving from its geographical position - that of being the terminal point of the Danube - is that of the confluence between two related, yet different manifestations of water: the Danube and the Black Sea. Represented as the clash of two powerful entities in Alexandru Vlahuţă's *România pitorească* and Alexandru Macedonski's *Cartea de aur,* this meeting of the two titans is portrayed more realistically and professionally in Jean Bart's *Europolis*, the most detailed fresco of Sulina's golden era.
**Keywords** Marine literature, Danube, Black Sea, cultural and literary geography.

Giving an account of his journey across Dobruja, an area which has exerted a deep fascination on artists and writers since its incorporation into Romania in 1878, following the War of Independence (the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878), geographer George Vâlsan observed that Sulina stood as the sole town in the Delta, its growth attributed to its location at the mouth of the only navigable distributary of the river Danube. Additionally, he pointed out that one is likely to encounter water merely by digging half a metre beneath the surface in Sulina. His conclusion stated that, like everywhere in the Delta, any segment of land is invariably a mixture of water and land, and his precise scientific rationale led him to assert that the region in question is neither completely dry, not classified as wetland, but rather something in-between, an amphibious terrain.[1] This hybrid nature of Sulina, originating from its very geographical setting, appears to have influenced both its historical and contemporary perceptions in Romanian literature. Europolis, the fictional representation of Sulina in Jean Bart's eponymous novel, embodies a sense of in-betweeness,

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[1] George Vâlsan, "Dobrogea," in Simion Mehedinți and George Vâlsan, *Lecturi geografice* (Bucharest: Editura Albatros, 1973), 400.

hybridity and multiculturalism, accommodating a melting pot of ethnicities: Greeks, Armenians, Turks, Lipovans, Romanians. While its geographical location allows for such a description, it is no less true that these qualities are projected onto Sulina, which has been constantly re-mythologized as a hybrid space throughout different chronologies of Romanian literature. Vâlsan refers to the nearly 3000 kilometres that the Danube traverses across Europe, highlighting it as the origin of the alluvial mixture that accumulates at its mouth, thus forming the international soil upon which Sulina is situated. In contrast, Eugeniu P. Botez (Jean Bart) adopted a narrative centred on navigation, more familiar to him in order to elucidate this phenomenon. According to Adrian G. Romilă's biography of Botez, the commander would invariably commence every story about Sulina with an account of the ships' ballast: cargo vessels arrived laden with ballast from every corner of the world, docked at Sulina, discarded their ballast and took on goods for export, thereby augmenting Sulina's soil with material from around the globe. This undoubtedly Romantic narrative sought to supplant the geographic explanation with a story more focused on human experience, in which navigation played the main part.

Apart from its peculiar location and hybrid make-up, Sulina possesses an additional attribute that has rendered it a popular subject in travel literature and fiction: it is, in the words of Claudio Magris, "the infinitely distant mouth of the Danube on the Black Sea"[2] and the official terminus of the Danube.[3] As the place where the great river which crosses Mitteleuropa dies, it is understandable that it naturally incites feelings of nostalgia, sadness and longing. It is also a landmark of the political imagination, an imagination that will later be articulated as "cosmopolitan" Sulina or "Europolis": Magris mentions Constantin Franz, a political theorist who was the "champion of a federal, multi-national Mitteleuropa in which the German element was to make for unity but not transgression" and who dreamt of a supra-national organization, a Danubian federation" which would encompass the mouths of the Danube, its delta, as well as the "lighthouse at Sulina which marks the point where the river flows into the sea."[4]

At a distance of just one year, Alexandru Vlahuţă (1901) and Alexandru Macedonski (1902) refer to Sulina in their respective works *România pitorească* [Picturesque Romania] and *Cartea de aur* [The golden book]. *România pitorească* stands out as one of the earliest literary works in which descriptive geography contributes significantly to the process of nation-building: following the incorporation of Dobruja into Romania after the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878, the assimilation of this region into a Romanian cultural-geographic imaginary necessitated several decades of efforts from both the early and late Romantics. This work embodies a blend of genres, combining elements of travel-writing with romanticized historiography. Alongside George Coșbuc, with whom he co-edited the literary journals *Curierul Literar* and subsequently *Sămănătorul*, Vlahuţă emerged as a vigorous champion of a national literature that should articulate the traditions and aspirations of all Romanians. The narrative commences with Vlahuţă's recounting

[2] Claudio Magris, *Danube. A sentimental journey from the source to the Black Sea* (Colins Harvill, 1989), 32.
[3] Ibid., 468.
[4] Ibid., 469.

of his journey along the Lower Danube, starting in Orşova and concluding in Sulina. Although numerous Romanian authors had chronicled their travels (including Dinicu Golescu, Dimitrie Bolintineanu, Vasile Alecsandri, Ion Ghica, Gheorghe Sion, among others), *România pitorească* was initially conceived as an instructional literary and geographical initiative, commissioned by the Ministry of Education. Vlahuță's initial project, into which he desired to attract more educators, was to compile a picturesque geography of Romania, emphasizing its inhabitants and their local customs.

*România pitorească* consists of three sections: *Pe Dunăre* [On the Danube], *Pe Marea Neagră* [On the Black Sea] and *În munții noștri* [In our mountains]. The initial part narrates the author's expedition from Orșova to Sulina. During his stay in Sulina, Vlahuţă will spend several days in the company of the commander of the port, his fellow writer and colleague at the literary circle Viața românească, Jean Bart, the pseudonym of Eugeniu P. Botez, who would later become the author of the first nautical novel in Romanian literature.

Coming to Sulina from Tulcea, Vlahuţă describes the landscape in the delta as a "breakdown and dissipation of waves," which the anthropomorphized river uses as a ruse to "to hide from and run from the overwhelming power of the sea, which attracts and calls to it from the distance with the roar of its waves."[5] A kind of "green, deserted and infinite land," the Danube Delta is sparsely populated, with only "a fisherman's house, a long building covered in reef" seen from time to time on the shore."[6] The green desert of the waters is crossed only by a sailing boat, which "suddenly appears, like a bird from another world, on the silvery patch of water."[7] Another miraculous sight are the horses: "emerging from the underbrush, wild horses, with long mane shake their heads, and stare at us with an astonished, questioning air."[8] The desertic air, the wild horses and the reed forests will become for decades staples in any description of the Danube Delta. The imprint left on the traveller's mind is that of a natural Other: "The wilderness, the wildness of these unpopulated places, the vast forests of reeds that sway their heads in the wind, this deep silence, ruling over the whole area, all make you think you are far from the earth, in an uninhabited planet."[9]

The town of Sulina is described as another miraculous apparition, rising slowly above the waters as if conjured by the power of a spell, anticipated first by "a few wisps of smoke drifting slowly in the clear blue sky," then by the "sharp-pointed masts," from which hang "networks of rope like spiders' webs,"[10] the high chimneys, church towers and rooftops. The town itself appears as "the happy boundary before which the ships of the sea and the Danube draw - the wide gateway through which the riches of all the continents pass, carried from one end of the world to the other on the smooth and dust-free waters."[11]

[5] Alexandru Vlahuță, *România pitorească* (Editura Sport Turism, 1982), 35.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 35-36.
[11] Ibid., 36.

The sorcerer who had conjured up this charming little town amid the green expanse of water and transformed it into the gateway for the riches of all continents is none other than the European Commission of the Danube, an international body that operated from 1856 to 1939 with the objective of guaranteeing freedom of navigation on the Danube. Sulina, a predominantly Turkish town, as Jules Verne succinctly described it in *The Pilot on the Danube*,[12] thus emerges in Romanian literature as the nodal point connecting all maritime activities on the Black Sea (in its turn connected to the seas and rivers) to the Danube and thus to Central and Western Europe. A modest town with a monumental purpose, and a small place with a great destiny, these perceptions converge in Vlahuţă's portrayal of his initial impressions of the area:

> "Along the waterfront, gazing toward the sea, the hotels, the agencies, the palace of the Danube Commission and all the towns's notable structures are lined up. Two wide stone jetties direct the waves of the canal into the sea. Here ends the long and glorious voyage of the ancient Ister. Here the pride and power of the river-king collide with the immense waves of the sea, enveloping in the thunder of this crash the waves and the cries of all the tributaries and rivers it has ripped from the sides of the mountains."[13]

There is a tension between the human symbols of domination and control over the waters and the inherent symbolism of the natural environment. For Vlahuţă, leaving aside geopolitics and economy, Sulina represents a site of death. It is the place where the Danube, or the Ister (the Greek name of the Danube, now a term exclusively assigned to its lower part) ends its lengthy voyage in the almost apocalyptic embrace of the sea. Fittingly, the final portrayal of Sulina will be likewise associated with night and mortality:

> "It is night. Beneath the black, starless sky, the town rests. I can hear the weary lapping of the waves - the ancient, futile agitation of the sea. In the distance, the two lighthouses at the end of the breakwaters flicker in the darkness like two candles in a graveyard. Now and then I seem to hear moaning voices wailing on the waves. The tolling of the bells echoes slowly, mournfully, in the fearful kingdom of night."[14]

Macedonski's description of Sulina, though visibly more literary in an aesthetic sense than Vlahuţă's, was nonetheless more anchored in firsthand experiences. While Vlahuţă was just a visitor to the town, after the War of Independence Macedonski had been appointed as the administrator of the county of Sulina in 1879, shortly after his previous office, that of administrator of the Silistra county had ceased. His short story, "O noapte în Sulina" [One night in Sulina], centres on the aestheticized reflections of the narrator, the young administrator of the mouths of the Danube, which arrives to take hold of his office on the 23rd of April, coinciding with St. George's day in Romania.

[12] Jules Verne, *Pilotul de pe Dunăre*, trans. by Nicolae-Bogdan Muşat (Bucharest: Adevărul Holding, 2010), 223.
[13] Vlahuță, *România pitorească,* 36.
[14] Ibid.

Unlike Vlahuţă, whose literary work was grounded in national sentiment and intended to inspire social action, Macedonski opted for a more intimate, aesthetic[15] form of writing. The depiction of the natural environment is more detailed than Vlahuţă's, and rendered through the lenses of a refined and heightened sensitivity. He had also spent a large part of his youth in Italy, and thus his vision of Sulina partakes from the Mediterranean spirit:

> "The new administrator of the Danube mouths, on a spring day - April 23 and St. George's Day - was getting off the boat in a skiff to land in Sulina. The wind, rising up from the sea, was blowing the blue water of the huge river in a gust of wind, and tossing it back. The sky was crystal clear and the sun filled it with joy. The town, with its white houses and slender minarets, straddled the arm of the Danube. On some of the awnings, gardens of oleanders and lemon blossoms filled the air. Shades of pink and green were mingling. A flight of dragonflies - the devil's horses - azure cloud of wings - coloured the Delta in blue, with distances that the reeds and the young papyrus were fraying. [...] The sea, driven by the wind in the waters of the Danube, smashed against them, and a noise of battle broke out. Above the waves, where the sun was pouring out its full flames, the wings of otherworldly birds flapped like the wings of a fire: the sun. As the shore drew near, the silver tinkle of church bells rang in the ears of those sailing in the boat."[16]

What Macedonski takes over from Vlahuţă is the sense of tension existing between the waters of the Danube and those of the Black Sea, in addition to a sense of otherness. Both Vlahuţă and Macedonski introduce Sulina to the Romanian reader as a site of conflict, of the clash between two interconnected, yet distinct manifestations of the same element: water. The tension between the river and the sea is a literary motif[17] that will endure through time. This theme is more prominent in the literary than the geographical imagination, because, as any traveller of Sulina can attest, the sea is substantially distant from the dock where the boats carrying visitors are moored, and the clash between the Danube and the Black Sea[18] is not immediately visible.

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[15] Macedonski's literary style was close to the French Parniasianists; however, though this literary movement relied on the concept of "art for art's sake," with Macedonski, as with most poets from minor literatures (which, in Pascale Casanova's definition are national) things were somewhat different. As Theodor Vârgolici argued, Macedonski was deeply dedicated to the cause of the 1877 War of Independence and to the Romanian national cause (95-104).

[16] Alexandru Macedonski. "O noapte în Sulina," in *Poezie și Proză* (Bucharest: Editura Tineretului, 1965), 159.

[17] While in Sulina, Magris describes his own encounter with the point of transition between the river and the sea in literary terms: "I walk towards the sea, curious to see the river-mouth, to dip my hand and my foot in the mixture of transition or else to touch the solution of continuity, the hypothetical point of dissolving. The dust turns to sand, the soil beneath me is already the dunes of the beach, my shoes get muddy in puddles which may themselves be mouths, tiny crooked mouths through which the Danube bleeds away" (470).

[18] Not all writers perceive the meeting of the Danube and the Black Sea as a clash between two strong, yet different elements. When describing Sulina, Jean Bart notes that is is located on the spot "where the old Danubius loses both its name and its waters into the sea" (147), a more factual observation than Vlahuţă's and Macedonski's description. At the other end of the spectrum, Panait Istrati, in one of his short stories,

Secondly, maybe under the influence of his cosmopolitan education,[19] Macedonski pays close attention to the double hybridity of the place: the meeting place of river and sea, as well as a confluence of diverse ethnic groups. Unlike Jules Verne, who only remarked the visible Turkish aspect of Sulina (due to the presence of the several mosques), Macedonski acknowledges that the town, recently taken over by the Romanian administration was full of Greeks and Maltese:

> "In the holy places of the town inhabited mostly by Greeks and Maltese,[20] hosannas were sung for the glorification of King George, whose name day it was then. […] From the terrace of the house where he had been lodged, Sulina, a fairy bathing in the water up to her waist, revealed herself to him in all her beauty. Nuances of blood saddened the sunset in horizontal stripes. The strong outlines of the two lighthouses at the entrance to the harbour, the minaret of the mosque, and the spire of a church stood out against the pearly bottom of the greenhouse."[21]

Macedonski's description of the palace of the European Commission of the Danube is more exhaustive than Vlahuţă's, capturing fragments of the lively activity of the harbour:

> "On the sea, on the Danube and through the reeds, the sun's reflections, seemingly saying goodbye for the day, seemed to fly like yellow and reddish butterflies. Steamboats, with the movement of the deck-pipe seamen, enlivened the harbour. From the waves and from the Snake Island side, a pilot-ship, stunned by the sun, which had drowned three-quarters of itself in the sea, showed itself covered with flames. To the right of the harbour, the palace of the European Commission, a building as grand as that of the University of Bucharest, in the midst of the little town of houses of its clerks, looked out on the sea with its whole row of superimposed windows, as if thousands of candles were lit in silver and crystal candelabra inside the rooms."[22]

The most impressive part of the short story comes at the end, with Macedonski's colourful picture of one of the grandest spectacles of the sea, the sunset over the sea:

> "But slowly, the waves became velvety with the lilac shades of an indigo that was constantly fading. Roses died in sky and water. The silvery lilies were expiring in the sunset. The windows of the palace had gone out and opened mouths of gloom over the grandeur and its surroundings. The sunset alone remained bright for a while. It was not long, however, before the sky on that

describes the feeling of Adrian Zografi, when meeting Stavru, a friend he had not seen in a while, as one of contentment, similar to "the rivers when they flow into sea" (15).

[19] Macedonski studied in Vienna, Geneva, Pisa and Naples, lived for a while in Florence, Turin and Rome, and travelled extensively across Western Europe, in France, Tyrol, Southern Germany and Bohemia.

[20] The Greek and Maltese, as Jean Bart notes in *Cartea Dunării* (42) and *Europolis* (276), were the pirates who controlled the mouths of the Danube during Ottoman rule, using lamps to attract ships into the sandy areas, and then robbing them.

[21] Macedonski, "O noapte în Sulina," 159-160.

[22] Ibid.,160.

> side too took on the greenish aspect of wigs growing old and dying. The moon's diamond sickle cut with a milky sweetness."[23]

The English ship whose sailors and recruits feel lost amidst "the swamps of Scitia" bears an unusual name, Cocatrix. The Cocatrix, a mythical beast in the shape of a dragon or serpent with a rooster's head is definitely part and parcel of Macedonski's imagination, which superimposes, over the "crowd of men and women in hats," coming out for a stroll in the evening and trying to protect themselves against the mosquitoes with handkerchiefs, the figures of ancient mythology: "Many of the faces that fit in their light revealed unparalleled beauty. Strength escaped from colour and form. The women looked like wonders of ancient Greece, and in every young man there was an Alcibiades or an Antinous, whose features took one's thoughts back to the Propylaea, to Socratic times and to the Rome of Hadrian."[24] The presence of Greek mythology may point both to his parnassian leanings as well as to an influence of German romanticism, especially that of Friedrich Hölderlin, who at the beginning of the 19th century had dedicated an enigmatic poem to the Danube (*Der Ister*), a poem in which the river becomes the connection between the sunny south and the dark north.[25]

However, despite their differences, both Vlahuţă's and Macedonski's descriptions end on the same note. With sunset and nightfall, Sulina reverts to the imagery of battle and death:

> "The wind, at this time of the year, was getting sharp. Black, wild clouds swirled in the sky. In an instant the streets were deserted. Roars came from the ropes of the anchored ships. The sea and the Danube howled. At midnight, the storm knew no bounds. The window panes rattled.
> And Sulina collapsed into deep darkness."[26]

The one who introduced 'cosmopolitan' Sulina into Romanian literature, and at the same time established the foundation of Romanian nautical literature was the naval officer Eugeniu P. Botez, who wrote under the alias of Jean Bart. The pioneer of Romanian maritime literature was, according to Mihail Sevastos, "a European writer in the broad and good sense of the word,"[27] a former student of Ion Creangă, a devotee of Mihai Eminescu and occasionally associated with Garabet Ibrăileanu's literary group at *Viaţa Românească*. Despite his numerous literary affiliations and his attachment to Jassy, the city of his birth, he chose as a pseudonym the name of the most intrepid sea wolves,[28] French admiral Jean Bart.

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[23] Ibid., 160-161.

[24] Ibid., 162.

[25] As Magris observed, "[f]or Hölderlin the voyage of the forefathers of the Germans along the Danube was the movement towards days of summer, towards the land of the sun, Hella and the Caucasus" (455).

[26] Macedonski, "O noapte în Sulina," 162.

[27] Mihail Sevastos, "Jean Bart," in *Amintiri de la Viaţa românească* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2015), 202.

[28] In addition to his literary work, Jean Bart leveraged his expertise and technical knowledge to co-write, together with Nicolae Kirițescu, the documentary work *Războiul pe Dunăre* [War on the Danube], in which he thoroughly documented the strategy of Romanian navy during the War of Independence. According to

Writing enthusiastically about Jean Bart's *Jurnal de bord*, H. Sanielevici remarked that Bart was a realist, as for him "the world is not just a decor of the *ego*, a view from which he tries to extract rare sensations or artistic effects."[29] He concluded his critique expressing the hope that one day the author "would tackle the great social novel, a novel of inquest and anthropological record", following the tradition established by Caragiale and Vlahuță, while avoiding "their individualistic and reactionary tendencies."[30] Europolis represented the realisation of Sanielevici's aspiration.

The first chapter of *Europolis* was published in *Viața Românească* under the title "Scrisoarea miraculoasă" [The miraculous letter] in 1929, while the complete novel came out in April 1933. The title may be traced back to Paul Bourget's *Cosmopolis,*[31] a drama of passion depicted in a realistic-naturalist manner, as is *Europolis*. The miraculous letter heralds the arrival of Nicola Marulis and his daughter Evantia from America: it is miraculous because it comes from the land of endless opportunities. The American dream had permeated Romanian literature almost a decade earlier through Cezar Petrescu's novella "Unchiul din America" [The uncle from America]. Sulina is the backdrop against which the drama of Nicola and Evantia Marulis unfolds, a Europolis of many races which, however, proves unable to accommodate individuals of mixed heritage. Evantia, a creole born in French Guiana is referred to as 'the Black Siren.' Before settling on the name of *Europolis* for his novel, Bart had considered alternative titles such as *The Levant*, *The Return from America* and *The Black Siren*,[32] indicating the significance of the creole character within the economy of the novel. C. Mohanu remarks that there is an infusion of exoticism in the novel, and the inclusion of a creole as a main character in a Romanian novel was undoubtedly an innovative element. The pseudonym of Black Siren may have been inspired by the visit of Josephine Baker, in 1928, only a few years before the novel's release. She was engaged to perform at Constantin Tănase's Cărăbuș theatre, and, as expected, she made quite a sensation in the Bucharest of those days, with press extensively covering her as "the siren of the tropics," "the black panther" or the "black pearl."

Apart from being the earliest nautical novel in Romanian literature, *Europolis* is also the first with an apparent colonial theme, emphasizing Evantia's plight as a tragedy of deracination and transplantation to an unfamiliar setting. On the surface, Sulina appears to be exactly the place where such an exotic blossom could thrive, a Romanian embodiment of the American dream:

> "[T]he life of this small cosmopolitan port is original and interesting. It possesses a special charm, it is picturesque. It is the only place in the country where you can find the real life of a port. [...] it has

Sevastos, he was one of the first to suggest to the Ministry of War that Romania should invest in a submarine fleet (201).

[29] H. Sanielevici, "Jean Bart – Jurnal de bord," in *Cercetări critice și filozofice* (Bucharest: Editura pentru literatură, 1968), 43.

[30] Ibid., 47.

[31] Bourget considered Rome, the eternal city, a kind of Cosmopolis, a quintessentially international city. In a similar vein, Jean Bart may have intended to portray Sulina, which, as a port, functioned as one of the gates through which ships could reach the heart of Europe, as a quintessentially European city.

[32] C. Mohanu, preface to *Jean Bart. Restitutio*, vol.I (Bucharest: Editura Minerva, 1979), XLI.

> nothing in common with the rest of the country. The life here is that of the colonies. The Levantine commerce attracts adventurers of all races, who travel here to fish in the Danube's troubled waters. A mosaic of races. All the nations, all the types and all the languages."[33]

However, the apparently cosmopolitan port is torn between the mercantilistic interests of the Commission, which supplies a facade of "political and diplomatic dignity"[34] and those of local and international seafarers, pirates, and adventurers. Apart from narrating the tragedy of Evantia Marulis (and in parallel, that of Penelope Marulis, her aunt) and thus offering a vivid picture of the multi-ethnic milieu of a small harbour, Europolis also documents Botez's experience with the European Commission of the Danube. As the author notes, "[t]he small world of this institution – a miniature Europe – with props, backstage and protocols, has a special life. The Commission keeps itself at an arm's distance, hiding, under the mask of an exaggerated politeness, its meagre contact with the indigenous crowd, in whose midst it got disembarked, here at the gates of the Orient."[35] The phrase "at the gates of the Orient," echoing Raymond Poincaré's famous phrase "Mais que voulez-vous? Nous sommes ici aux portes de l'Orient où tout est pris á la légère," which Mateiu Caragiale chose as motto for *Craii de Curtea-Veche* [The rakes of the Old Court], defines Sulina not as a cosmopolitan, but as a strictly Balkan and orientalised environment with corrupt Levantine customs. As previously stated, the European Commission of the Danube (ECD) was a techno-political body created after the Crimean war in order to regulate, on a temporary basis (which, however, got prolonged indefinitely, from 1856 to 1939) the navigation regime at the mouths of the Danube, or, as the author puts it, "Because Turkey could not and Russia would not regulate navigation on the river, the Great Powers, in need of Romanian wheat, created, following the Crimean War, the European Commission of the Danube."[36] It had two headquarters, one in Galați and the other one in Sulina, on the quay, very close to the place where Bart lived. In *Europolis*, the politics of the Commission are resented by the local national authorities: the author writes that in Sulina there were "two states. […] to the right of the fence is Romania, to the left the European Commission of the Danube," each with its own flag: "to the right of the fence flutters the Romanian three-coloured flag; to the left the Commission's flag: white with blue and red bands."[37] The cosmopolitanism of Sulina is visible in the policies of its flags, for even shop owners like Stamati Marulis, are free to show, besides the Romanian flag, their own flags (in his case the Greek blue and white flag). These two states are in their turned divided and "balkanised" according to the (often) clashing material or political interests. The wife of one of the Italian representatives in the European Commission, we find out, set up a local branch of the Dante Alighieri society in order "to combat the Austrian influence at the mouths of the Danube."[38]

[33] Jean Bart, *Europolis*, in *Jean Bart. Restitutio*, vol. II (Bucharest: Editura Minerva, 1979), 152.
[34] Magris, *Danube*, 470.
[35] Bart, *Europolis*, 151.
[36] Ibid., 277.
[37] Ibid., 151.
[38] Ibid., 273.

The distinction between the local and international authorities is clearly maintained, not only technically and politically, but also socially, for at Stamati Marulis' coffee house the two large tables of each party are situated at quite a distance, near two opposite windows: there were "two worlds which met in the life of the port."[39]

As a commercial hub, Sulina is the meeting place of export agents and foreign consuls, who close deals over the Turkish coffee served by Marulis, and dream of raising local commerce to the level of that in Galați, Brăila and Constanța. An aspirer to the status of large ports such as the latter, Sulina remains, however, only a "petty provincial town", at least in the eyes of Penelope Marulis, born and raised in Constantinople. A true "flower of the Bosphorus" in Bolintineanu's tradition, her aristocratic pride and elegance make her stand out and leave a lasting impression on the sailors hired by her husband for the trips they made to Galați or Brăila. Again, according to the "nationality" of the ship, Penelope was treated with "English tea, Turkish coffee, Italian vermouth, French champagne, Russian candy, Malaga wine, Jaffa oranges, Syros loukoumi and Egyptian cigarettes."[40]

However, if Marulis' place sticks to a certain "well established hierarchy of occupations, social caste and class,"[41] at the other end of the quay, near the coal warehouses, the tavern "Peter the Grics" is the meeting place of all nations, a truly multi-ethnic "melting-pot", "a miniature Tower of Babel"[42] accommodating the influx of human destinies which arrive in Sulina "like wreckage from a sunken ship:"[43]

> "All races of people, all tribes met here; the cowardly dregs of the Levant were at one and the same place, twinned with the haughty British power […]
> The Greeks, limpid and inflammable, rubbed day and night between their anxious fingertips the blackened and sooty playing cards. The Turks, Lazi[44] and Anatolian Kurds sipped their coffees, silent and grave. The Romanians, ever defiant, with their plum brandies before them, were plotting protests and strikes. The pale Armenians, tattooed with coal dust, sat dully in front of their teacups. The Lipovan fishermen poured brandy into saucers and set it on fire with matches - if it didn't burn, they indignantly rejected it."[45]

Above all these looms the bigger than life figure of an old sea wolf, captain Aristidi Lecca, "focused and cool,"[46] a fluent speaker of five languages, the oracle whom everybody consulted regarding sailing know-how; he also was the chief strategist of all smuggling and wheat stealing. As Sulina is

[39] Ibid., 83.
[40] Ibid., 98.
[41] Ibid., 83.
[42] Ibid., 299.
[43] Magris, *Danube*, 270.
[44] The Laz or Lazi people are an ethnic group from the South Caucasus, who mainly live on the Black Sea coast in Turkey and Georgia. Their language is Kartvelian, related to Georgian. In Romania, a population of Lazi had founded Lazu, a village in Constanța county.
[45] Bart, *Europolis*, 269.
[46] Ibid., 270.

a porto-franco,[47] Bart notes, "the goods come in without a toll, and go out by smuggling."[48] Everybody, the smugglers, the customs officers and the guards play their part in the general consensus, because "on the water stealing is permitted, being viewed as a kind of legitimate right, associated with maritime trade."[49] The novel begins with the lively atmosphere in Stamati Marulis's coffee house, the great expectations associated with the arrival of Nicola Marulis and Evantia and ends with the description of the motley criminal gang at the "Peter the Grics" Tavern, Nicola and then Evantia's death. As Magris points out, *Europolis* is a "story of dashed hopes, of decadence, of deceit, solitude, unhappiness and death. It is a symphony of the End, in which the town that sets itself up as a miniature capital of Europe turns into a slum and an abandoned roadstead."[50]

This feeling of a "symphony of the End," floating over the entire realist documentation of life in the port of Sulina, is, in my view, tied to the myth of Danube and Sulina as its endpoint. As a matter of fact, in 1933, together with *Europolis*, another book by Jean Bart was published posthumously, as an homage to the Commander Botez: *Cartea Dunării* [The Book of the Danube]. In the introduction, Jean Bart spoke about the "majesty of the ancient river[51] – The River-King"[52] and acknowledged that, though a "history of the Danube is a gigantic work which no man can undertake on his own,"[53] his wish is to take, similarly to Magris, a journey down the Danube until Sulina, from the Black Forest to the Black Sea. Sulina is not only a Romanian port, but a part – a very important part – of the history and geography of a river which for the ancients represented a whole world of "riches, events, bravery, love and poetry."[54] *Cartea Dunării*, far from being realistic or naturalistic, is an eulogy of an anthropomorphized object which turns into a national symbol: "We [Romanians] cannot forget the Danube[55] and cannot live far from it."[56] His injunction to the reader echoes that of the unique conception of nature belonging to German Romanticism:[57]

[47] A porto-franco is a port or part of a port where imported goods are not subject to custom duties or other fiscal formalities.

[48] Bart, *Europolis*, 272.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Magris, *Danube*, 470.

[51] Bart takes over from Vlahuță the mythology of the ancient Istros, a sacred river which could wash away all sins. Vlahuță mentioned this at the beginning of his book, and his mention was on a quotation from Sophocles Oedipus Rex.

[52] Bart, *Cartea Dunării* (Biblioteca Ligei Navale, 1933), 7.

[53] Ibid.*,* 9.

[54] Ibid.*,* 8.

[55] To support this rather nationalist claim, Bart recounts that while visiting the U.S., a Romanian living "in the new world of sky-scrapers", without asking him anything about the country and his native place, only confessed that he longed to see the Danube (10).

[56] Bart, *Cartea Dunării,* 10.

[57] Though Liber Naturae was a concept originating in the Christian Middle Ages, the concept of using nature as a teacher came to us via German Romantic philosophy, which rejected the rationalism of ancient classicism and united religion with the newly developed scientific spirit.

"because the Danube itself is like a huge book of nature, let us accustom ourselves to reading directly from it."[58]

Moreover, like Vlahuță and Macedonski before him, Jean Bart provides the reader with a description of the meeting of the two titans: the Danube and the Black Sea. Unlike Vlahuță and Macedonski, his description is neither idealized, nor too aesthticized, but rather imbued with the understanding and emotion of one who had navigated both waters extensively. Indeed, this account is given by a sailor, Captain Neagu, who explains the phenomenon to one of his passengers:

> "You are about to see one of nature's greatest spectacles. Notice the color of the water. Two very distinct hues. We're out at sea, but we're already floating in the waters of the Danube. You see, the whole surface is blue all the way to the horizon, and only in the direction we're sailing there is a wide brownish band, cutting the mirror of the sea. That's the sweet, muddy water of the river, passing over the clear salt water of the sea, without mixing yet. Two reigns, two formidable powers of nature meet here before our eyes. The dominating river, which has never known any obstacle in its path, and no force could have stopped it, still goes on further into the sea, until it loses both its name and its waters into it."[59]

In contrast to Jean Bart, Geo Bogza, who also completed his education at the naval academy and practised in Galați and Constanța, perceived Sulina as a quintessential marine town: "During my journeys on the Danube, I came across a city of the sea situated at its mouth. More so than the coastal resorts, Sulina is a city of the sea. From one end to the other, all the streets and people bear the imprint of the sea."[60] Writing about Sulina in 1935, two years after the publication of *Europolis*, Bogza offers a fresh viewpoint. His was a voice from a different generation, that of the rebellious avant-garde. Vlahuță, Macedonski and Bart focused on the sacredness of the Danube, thus unconsciously responding to the pull of tradition and identifying themselves with the unwritten local history; Bogza defies the established pattern. He sees a new dichotomy, not between the river and the sea, but rather between earth and water. The sea is par excellence the aquatic medium, and Sulina's peculiar geographical location entitles him to call it a city of the sea:

> "Constanța, Mangalia, and Balcic are less of the sea. Built on firm ground, on solid limestone cliffs, they are backed by the Dobrujan plains, a reality just as powerful as the sea.
> Sulina has no reality behind it. Sulina, behind it, has a dream: endless stretches of water, swathes of marshes, a vast network of canals [...] On the other side. the only reality, the sea. And Sulina has become engaged with its blue boundlessness over which seagulls fly. [...] the city threw itself into the arms of the sea. […] On its few streets you can feel, stronger than anywhere else, the deep, salty breath of the sea. And all that it brings: nostalgia, storms, and shipwrecks."[61]

[58] Bart, *Cartea Dunării,* 11.
[59] Bart, *Europolis*, 147.
[60] Geo Bogza, "Sulina," in *Scrieri în proză*, vol. 2 (Editura de stat pentru literatură și artă, 1957), 25.
[61] Ibid., 25-26.

Unlike his predecessors, who perceive Sulina as an exotic Other, trying either to integrate it into the national landscape, or to celebrate its exoticism, Bogza sees it as intimately connected to the aquatic element and thus partaking of its ontological values of instability and change, flux and transformation. This association also triggers the myth of Genesis: "It is like in the first days of creation. A chaotic mixture of lands and water, which leads one does not know where."[62] The myth of Genesis, which aptly describes the landscape from the Delta that perpetually forms new aits and islands, will later become a trope in the marine literature of Traian T. Coșovei, and will even be employed by Communist propaganda upon the completion of the Danube-Black Sea canal.

Although the modest size of Sulina and the scarcity of its landmarks prevent Bogza from deviating too much from the perspective of his predecessors, he still finds new things to concentrate on: the hospital which takes in the sick sailors who are quarantined there, and the tattoos exhibited on the naked bodies of the sailors. Again, Bogza is the first to give an account of the tattoo as a specific sailor practice: "A sailor without a tattoo is not a full person."[63]

Sulina is also referenced in Radu Tudoran's *Toate pânzele sus!* [All Sails up!]. Radu Tudoran was the pseudonym adopted by Nicolae Bogza, the younger sibling of Geo Bogza and the author of the most successful nautical novel in Romanian literature. Nevertheless, Tudoran was less interested in the cultural geography of Sulina: *Toate pânzele sus!* is first and foremost an epic of marine adventure. In keeping with tradition, Tudoran positions Sulina as both the starting and the concluding point of the sea voyage: the novel commences with the Kir Ianis's ship Penelope heading to Sulina, while Anton Lupan's journey around the world begins with the discovery of the wrecked Penelope (renamed as L'Espérance by his friend Pierre Vaillant) in Sulina. Lupan undertakes repairs on it, renaming it Speranța, and then takes on board the motley crew of a new Romanian Noah's Ark. His search for the lost ship commanded by his friend leads to Sulina, the hideout of the pirates. The storyline unfolds in the latter half of the 19$^{th}$ century, around the time of the War for Independence. Upon reaching Sulina, Lupan approaches the commander of the port to inquire about the route of the lost ship. He discovers that the commander was illiterate: employed during the early years of the European Commission of the Danube's jurisdiction, his story is illustrative of the small port's formative years. The commander had been a gardener growing vegetables on the narrow aits from the Delta, who knew how to get around its canals: the officials of the Commission required a local guide and appointed him to the role, without any formal training. The shipwreck, abandoned and partially buried in sand near the lighthouse, is remindful of another part of Sulina's tumultuous past: the time when it was under pirate control.

Part of Sulina's exoticism, the story of the pirates, especially that of the pirate's skull ("hârca piratului") re-emerges in one of Felix Brunea Fox's volumes: *Hârca piratului: peisaje dunărene* [The pirate's skull: Danubian landscapes]. This story is important because, as Romilă notes in his seminal study on *Pirați și corăbii. Incursiune într-un posibil imaginar al mării* [Pirates

[62] Ibid., 26.
[63] Ibid., 29.

and Ships. Journey into a possible imaginary of the sea], the Romanian Black Sea is rather scarce in epic pirate histories in which other seas, like the Mediterranean, are abundant.[64]

In Brunea-Fox's writing, a new way of looking at Sulina is made to fit a novel genre, which Geo Bogza called "literary reportage." Brunea-Fox's reportages are characterized by "the fervour of the real, of the quotidian, the febrile seizing of the moment, of any life experience,"[65] which, according to Nicolae Steinhardt, had been one of the main features of the interwar generation.[66] If for most of the avant-garde this zest for life was translated into a refusal of old forms (*l'esprit de la fronde*) and an aesthetic vitalism, for Brunea-Fox and Geo Bogza reportage was a form of literature best fit to describe the quotidian and the new forms of life defined by a class which had recently entered Romanian literature: that of the proletariat and the lumpen-proletariat. As an agricultural country with a predominantly rural population, Romania had defined itself as a peasant culture; the avant-garde, however, living mostly in the city, looks at the working class through its own self-made lenses and invents new genres and new heroes. As Dan C. Mihăilescu notes in his introduction to Brunea-Fox's *Memoria reportajului*, "in its modern form, reportage is tightly linked to the German expressionist movement, to the profound redimensioning of the relation reality/literature, produced after 1905 and 1917 in Russia, to the internationalism and militant intellectualism in Europe following WWI."[67] A literary reportage is that genre in which real facts are transformed into socio-literary objects. Yet what is also important is the gaze, the eye that watches, not only the pen which tells the story. For Brunea-Fox, "the eye of the reporter is like a fly's eye: a compound eye."[68] This compound eye is responsible for offering a multiple perspective on reality, so that the reporter's point of view is both contradicted and supported by the testimony of people and places described. Brunea-Fox's visits to Sulina were part of his overall programme of "lifting barriers:"[69] "I went to see the small ports, to see how people lived there. Everybody stopped in Constanța, this was the gate to the rest of the world. Who would go to Corabia or Calafat?"[70] Before him, Panait Istrati had written reports about the life of the porters, yet Brunea-Fox's coverage is more extensive, addressing a wider range of people and occupations.

His description of Sulina, titled "The canary drinks from the pirate's skull" is double-layered: on his second visit there, in 1955, after the end of WWII and the communist takeover, he engages in a dialogue with the local dentist Boris, and revisits places he had previously known during the last years of the European Commission of the Danube, in 1928. Introducing Boris to the reader, Brunea-Fox discusses the situation of the port before the war and introduces the word 'colony':

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[64] Adrian Romilă, *Pirați și corăbii. Incursiune într-un posibil imaginar al mării* (Bucharest: Editura Cartea Românească, 2015), 105.

[65] Dan C. Mihăilescu, Preface to *Memoria reportajului*, F. Brunea Fox (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1985), 11.

[66] Nicolae Steinhardt, *Geo Bogza, un poet al Efectelor, Exaltării, Grandiosului, Solemnității, Exuberanței și Patetismului* (Bucharest: Editura Albatros, 1982), 4-5.

[67] Mihăilescu, 20.

[68] Felix Brunea-Fox, "Ochiul reporterului e ca un ochi de muscă: un ochi multiplu," in *Memoria reportajului*, F. Brunea Fox (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1985), 41.

[69] Ibid., 39.

[70] Ibid., 40.

> "Years ago, when Sulina was a colony of Western powers, epitomized by the famous European Danube Commission, Boris's dream was to practice his profession without humiliating competition. Having started in Brăila, a large city, and continued for a number of years in Tulcea, a smaller city, he had brought his dental forceps here, in this little port [...], bold and wealthy, as it had been known in the age of the porto-franco and of the famous smuggling."[71]

Jean Bart's description of the workings of the ECD would have entitled him to use the word 'colony' and 'colonial powers,' but he had lived before the age of decolonization. Brunea-Fox, however, had been an active anti-fascist with communist sympathies, and in the 1950s, when Romania was part of the Soviet sphere of influence, one could speak of Sulina as a colony of Western powers. Boris' dental practice is used as an indicator of the colonial hierarchy: freshly arrived in Sulina, he could find no work there, for the middle class, who afforded dental treatment, were split into clients of the Liberal and of the Peasant party dentists. The worker population was too poor to afford a dentist, while the clerks and the administration of the Commission either went to Bucharest for treatment or travelled to their own countries.[72]

Brunea-Fox's description of Sulina and of its environment seems to revel in its otherness, an exoticism which is translated both in metaphor and analogy. Travelling on a small ship through the Delta, he describes it as "a battle of fans, a gigantic cat fight, a colossal gesticulation, whose energy would strongly impress you if you didn't see it directed towards minor objectives."[73] However, the small port at the mouth of the Danube is compared with landmarks of marine literature, Stevenson and Conrad, and then of course, Jean Bart himself:

> "Against such a dramatic backdrop, the image of Sulina gathers the contour of a backstage, as it never was in my memory. Whenever I call it forth, now even, it appears to me as if enveloped in a bright light, like those islands on the oceans described by R. L. Stevenson and Joseph Conrad, where docile and generous nature has no other purpose but to entertain the happiness of the aborigines with pineapple and banjo. […]
> A very original and picturesque[74] port. The most variegated, the most outlandish, the most cosmopolitan, most nomadic and rapacious of all the small Danubian ports."[75]

Brunea-Fox compares and contrasts the Sulina of yore, of the European Commission, the Sirs and the Misses, of the wooden houses, with the place whose growth he is witnessing, more than two decades after. Though the wooden houses have been inevitable decaying, some them torn apart and destroyed by the bombing during WWII, he is happy to find out from one of the locals that

[71] Felix Brunea-Fox, *Hârca piratului: peisaje dunărene* (Bucharest: Editura Tineretului, 1957), 11-12.
[72] Ibid., 12.
[73] Ibid., 19.
[74] "Cosmopolitan", "original" and "picturesque" were the very adjectives used by Jean Bart to introduce Sulina to the reader of *Europolis.*
[75] Brunea-Fox, *Hârca piratului,* 20.

new houses are going to be built there, out of solid brick. Sailing on the Medgidia ship, he notices a pearly reflex coming from one of the buildings on the shore, and discovers in astonishment that it was a marble building: the headquarters of the Communist Party. The double layered narrative, that of Sulina as a colony of the Western powers, contrasted to the narrative of present Sulina is aimed as propaganda for the Communist regime, who had already ordered the work at the Danube-Black Sea Canal. The language of the reconstruction already starts resembling the wooden language of communist propaganda: asking the local what the imposing building meant, the reporter receives the following answer: "What could it mean? The end of the Wooden Age. The age of Concrete and the Marble has begun."[76]

Brunea-Fox additionally concentrates on an aspect which had been previously overlooked from descriptions of Sulina: The Lipovan communities from the delta along with their lifestyle and fishing traditions. Often regarded as one of the most impoverished ethnic groups, the Lipovan were often depicted as exotic characters, yet Brunea-Fox provides a thorough examination of their navigational skills, their techniques for fishing as well as their distinctive culinary practices. This clearly aligns with the ethos of the era, when the dominant literary theory in the Soviet bloc was socialist realism.

To conclude, depictions of Sulina in Romanian literature mostly concentrate on its exoticism, which comes first and foremost from its specific location at the estuary of the Danube, as well as on its poetic character, as the endpoint of the Danube or Ister. Situated at the confluence of two mythological giants, the Danube and the Black Sea, Sulina was also, at least as long as it possessed the status of porto-franco, a multi-ethnic "melting pot" and a "miniature Tower of Babel." Also, because of the presence of the European Commission of the Danube for almost a century from 1856 to 1939, Sulina could be viewed as a colony of the West on Romanian land. Additionally, its previous history of smuggling and piracy had made it appealing to several Romanian writers, who deemed it an original, interesting and cosmopolitan place.

[76] Ibid., 28.