Romania as Exile: Stereotyping the Other in Maude Rea Parkinson's *Twenty Years in Roumania*

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Résumé: *Partant de l'hypothèse que, même si elle n'est pas déterminée par des contraintes externes, la migration peut, le plus souvent, entraîner un sentiment d'aliénation du pays d'origine et dans le pays d'accueil en même temps, cet article se concentre sur les mémoires écrits en 1921 par l'irlandaise Maude Rea Parkinson après son séjour de vingt ans en Roumanie pour analyser la manière dont l'altérité est interprétée au niveau mental. Investiguant ce texte d'une perspective imagologique, on arrive à la conclusion que, bien qu'elle prétend être animée par la xénophilie, cette représentante d'une culture occidentale tend à représenter l'altérité des roumains par des images négatives et stéréotypiques.*
Mots-clés: *l'autre, aliénation, Occident/Orient, imagologie, acculturation.*

1. Introduction

In its primary sense, based on its etymology (Lat. *exsilium* – banishment), exile is said to signify "the state of being barred from one's native country, typically for political or punitive reasons" (OED). Focus is laid on punitive or coercive aspects; that brings exile very close to the Greek form of banishment during the Athenian Democracy (roughly the fifth and fourth centuries BCE), namely ostracism. In modern times, the term 'exile' has been associated with the personal choice of leaving one's country due to political constraints and the inherent interdiction to return. Experiences like totalitarianism in the Eastern European bloc seem to have fixed this second meaning. However, in its broader sense, exile may apply to any conscious or unconscious departure from one's personal space, no matter if it involves an actual relocation. In other words, people may feel as exiles even in their country of origin, if their beliefs differ from the official ideological frame or the mental patterns of the majority. Along the same lines, one may choose the actual exile by relocating to

another space without enforcements from any political, religious or
social impositions. Various reasons – economic, social, etc. – make
then the return impossible and the displacement begins to feel like
coercion.

This is the reason why the present investigation starts from the
premise that the Irish Maude Rea Parkinson's stay in Romania from
1889 to the outburst of the First World War may be regarded as self-
imposed exile, although her reasons for choosing Romania as an
'adoptive' country had been determined rather by a sense of adventure
than by any political, social or economic justifications:

> Some Viennese acquaintances of mine had visited Bucharest, and from
> them I had gained an alluring impression of a wonderful race of people,
> rich in the primitive virtues, dwelling in a charming country and amidst
> scenes of Oriental luxury. I will frankly admit that the glamour of the
> Arabian Nights was over all my thoughts and ideas about Romania
> [Parkinson, 1921: 18].

Upon her return to the United Kingdom, Maude Parkinson writes a
memoir entitled *Twenty Years in Roumania*, published in 1921. Her
intention, announced in the Preface, is "to give English readers an
insight into the character of the people, and enable them to find there
[…] a great deal to love" [*Ibid.*, 5]. As this paper will strive to prove,
her memoir, though generally positive in remarks and intentions, bears
the sign of otherness in its each and every line, an otherness which the
authoress acknowledges, unsurprisingly, not as her definitive trait in
her relations with the Romanians, but, on the contrary, as a mark of
the representatives of the Romanian people whom she encounters.
Therefore, the aim of this article is to demonstrate that the
representation of the other, with regard to ethnic or national groups,
depends, to a great extent, on the writer's sense of belonging to a
Western culture.

2. Image Studies or the critical reading of the conceptualization of alterity

Based on "the dynamics between those images which characterise
the other (hetero-images) and those which characterise one's own,
domestic identity (self-images or auto-images)" [Leerssen, 2007: 27],

travel accounts have been the main form of representing the experience of alterity since the early writings of Classical Antiquity (e.g. Herodotus, Strabo, Diodorus of Sicily, etc.), which make the clear-cut distinction between Greeks – a projection of a refined and civilised self – and barbarians – seen as the less civilised other, perceived, more often than not, negatively. However, they found their most refined expression in the Western European literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which the text here in focus follows closely, despite its publication in a period of full modernist bloom.

A simple and clear definition of imagology as a critical reading is provided in Eugenia Gavriliu's *Theory and Practice of Imagology: Experiencing the Other in Anglo-Romanian Cultural Encounters*. Thus, imagology is "the study of the representations of the foreign other in a literary work, in a national literature, or in the mental structures prevailing in a cultural community at a given historical moment in its evolution" [2002: 5]. As apparent from this definition, the Romanian scholar starts from the fictional mirror viewed in its discrete components – "in a literary work" – and as a whole – "in a national literature". Yet, focus should be laid first and foremost on mental structures because, as Joep Leerssen remarks, "texts that say something on national character frequently rely, not on a first-hand observation of reality, but almost always on an existing reputation" [imagologica.eu, 1998]. Thus, the representation of national characters follows patterns of thought accumulated in many generations. This view is also shared by Dyserinck [2003], who claims that "images and imagotypical[1] structures managed to stay alive for generations by their very consistency and resistance".

The French authority in Comparative Literature Daniel Henri Pageaux explains the concept of image as emerging from "*I* versus *Other*, *Here* versus *Elsewhere*" [2007: 29]. According to him, the image is the representation of a cultural reality in which cultural and ideological spaces are revealed and translated. This social imaginary is marked by an identity/ alterity bipolarity; however, alterity is not only opposing, but also complementary to identity [2007: 29]. Further, he identifies four types of attitudes that an individual may develop in the relationship with an observed culture: *mania* (the tendency to consider the foreign culture as superior to the base culture), *phobia* (the perception of the examined other as inferior), *philia* (positive judgement of the other seen as equal, although different) and one

aiming at *cultural unity* within national groups (e.g., Pan-Slavism, Pan-Europeanism, etc.) [Pageaux in Gavriliu, 2002: 6-8].

In *'Imagology: History and Method'* [2007: 27-29], Joep Leerssen synthetizes a few principles of imagology which both confer justification for the presence of image studies among the literary studies (famously denied by René Wellek in the 1950s[2]) and, at the same, create a methodological frame for an imagological analysis. Thus, what needs stated from the beginning is that imagology is a theory of national stereotypes and not one of national identity, being concerned with representations. The attributes of a given nation are not anthropological or sociological data, but textual tropes circulating in a certain context, from the perspective of the *spectant* (examiner). The imagologist should bear in mind that imagology addresses a set of characteristics outside the factual statements. (For example, he says, "France is a republic" is not a statement that may be analysed with an imagological grid, whilst "Frenchmen are individualist" is.) An imagological analysis should begin from the identification of the intertextual connections of the national representation as a trope: "What is the tradition of the trope? What traditions of appreciation or depreciation are there, and how do these two relate historically?" Furthermore, the trope must be integrated in its context of occurrence with respect to the type of text that contains it (e.g. narrative, descriptive, humorous, propagandistic, etc.), the audience targeted and the historical background of the moment of text production and/or reception. What has to be further taken into account is the so-called *imageme* (a term also coined by Leerssen[3]) or national cliché, but also the auto-image, i.e., the representation which the *examining I* has acquired about his/her own nation.

3. Twenty Years in Roumania: zero acculturation and self-imposed exile among the Others

According to the Canadian sociologist John Berry [2003], the acculturation process represents a shift in the behaviour of an individual exposed to a different culture. The choice of a particular acculturative strategy reflects the attitude that an individual assumes towards both his/her native heritage and the host culture. He identifies

four possible directions: *assimilation* – the desire to identify with the host culture, occurring especially in situations in which the individual belongs to a 'minor culture' or a minority group; *separation* – when the individual avoids interaction with the representatives of the host culture; *marginalisation* – the individual shows little involvement in learning about other cultures, and *integration* – when the individual holds an interest in both his/her heritage values and in participating in other culture(s) [in Organista et al, 2010: 110]. The sociological perspective has been considered relevant for the present case study, as the text in focus represents an unmediated, subjective experience of its *authoress*, revealing little interest in acquiring literariness, despite the fact that it belongs to the memorialistic genre.

As she states it, Maude Parkinson arrives in Bucharest in 1889, after having travelled across Western Europe, aiming to work here as a teacher of foreign languages [1921: 6]. She will work in a few private schools in Bucharest, but also as a governess for the children of the future Prime Minister Take Ionescu. It may be said that she had access to the highest circles of the Romanian high-class at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. One might wonder, under such circumstances and considering her statement that she had spent the happiest years of her life here, why she did not at least try to learn the Romanian language, except for a few disparate words, most of them misspelt: *batiusi, dulchatza, tzuika, hora, dot* (dowry), *Mărţişoara, randasch*, *Cocăniţa* or *Cocoiana* (the lady of the house), *serat mana* etc. One cannot reasonably assert that she was completely uninterested in accessing the host culture, as the thirty-three chapters of her memoir touch upon each and every topic of interest in the analysis of a given culture: geography, history, literature, mentality, religion, traditions, the royal family, politics (both domestic and foreign affairs), minorities and social, economic and cultural life. By isolating herself, constantly choosing the company of other British expats, and by her refusal to learn the Romanian language despite her twenty-year stay, Maude Parkinson seems to have adopted the *marginalisation* attitude from the scheme presented above. However, this would be only a hasty conclusion that would disregard the historical context of the time, when the Romanian language was treated as secondary by the Romanians themselves:

> Life in Bucharest is very agreeable, especially for foreigners, and more particularly for the English, who are looked up to and admired by the

Romanians. Many of our customs have been adopted in recent years, and English has gained so enormously since the war that it will probably soon take the place of French as the polite language of the country. It is curious that with the better-class Romanians it has become more fashionable than their own language. If one enters a drawing-room, a shop, or even a very intimate family circle, English or French will be heard, very seldom Romanian which language is usually left to the servants [1921: 56].

One cannot refer to the British-Romanian relationships at the turn of the century in the terms in which they are referred to nowadays, when the Brits are geared through stereotypical imagery of the Romanian other towards xenophobic stances by the media. Instead, as the Irish authoress observes, at that time, the British showed rather ignorance with regard to the Romanian culture: "When I announced my intention of going to Roumania, I occasioned real consternation amongst my friends. 'Why, you must be quite mad to think of going so far away to a country of which nobody knows anything at all' was one of the mildest criticisms of my project" [Parkinson, 17]. To Parkinson, Romania is a *mirage* and by far more Oriental than it actually was, even at that time, shortly after the War of Independence from the Ottoman yoke (1877). The memoir depicts surprise at the ignorance of the authoress' compatriots with regard to a country which is, after all, European and an ally of the British Empire:

In the preceding chapter I have given some indication of how little was known of Roumania a quarter of a century ago, but it is still more astonishing to find in these days of enlightenment what hazy ideas people in this country have about the land and its inhabitants. I received a letter once addressed to "Bucharest, Turkey". Staying for a few weeks one summer at Sinaia, a letter was sent to me from England addressed simply 'Sinaia'. When it reached me some months later, the envelope was a curiosity. I still keep it as a proof of the perseverance of post-office officials. It bears the post-marks of Italy, Switzerland, Turkey, and, all these failing, it had been dispatched to Simla [Parkinson, 24].

In this context, it may seem rather difficult to integrate Romanianness in a predetermined trope, as Leerssen and Dyserinck suggest, as the intercultural encounters had been rather scarce before the period in focus. From this perspective, Maude Parkinson's memoir would become all the more relevant as it plays a significant role in the construction of the stereotype. Indeed, she arrived to Bucharest with

the preconceived idea that she was coming to an uncivilised, Oriental country, and her initial remarks seem to confirm this view: "when we reached the Romanian frontier, I really became a little alarmed for the first time" [1921: 21]; "What a dreadful town! I thought, as I was driven at a speed reminiscent of the Dublin jarvey through narrow, atrociously paved streets, filled both as to road and footway with half-melted snow" [Parkinson, 22]. The contrast between West and East is thus established through the observation about the gloomy Eastern city. Parkinson refers quite often to her original culture; she makes comparisons, always careful not to offend her Romanian friends and sometimes even in favour of the host culture ("When, after my long absence from England, I compare our own methods and ways of thought with those which have become so familiar to me in Romania, the latter do not always suffer in the comparison" [Parkinson 1921: 5]). She resorts, nevertheless, to a series of stereotypes which she brought to Romania with her. It is interesting to note that, to her mind, all these stereotypes are eventually proven real by her personal experience.

The Balkans have become, starting with the beginning of the twentieth century, the other of Europe, or, as the Bulgarian historian Maria Todorova remarks, "a synonym for a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian" and a place whose "inhabitants do not care to conform to the standards of behaviour devised as normative by and for the civilised world" [2009: 3]. This perception is still valid now, so it would not be surprising if the Irish woman writer had accessed this cultural space from a prejudiced standpoint and without any geopolitical knowledge of Romania's position in or outside the Peninsula. Notwithstanding, she proves awareness in this respect and even cites from Romanian authoritative figures of the age:

> I may here incidentally remark that D. Stourdza in one of his articles strongly repudiates the assumption that Romania is one of the Balkan States. This view does not however, by any means, meet the general acceptance. In conversation recently with a highly-placed Romanian of scholarly attainment, this gentleman argued convincingly that Romania is, beyond doubt, one of the Balkan States. Every great movement in the Balkans, he pointed out, has originated in Romania or has, at least, been participated in by that country [Parkinson, 1921: 243].

Despite the generally positive attitude towards her host culture, Maude Parkinson does not overcome the prejudice of her cultural heritage when it comes to ethnic minorities, to which she attaches

racist, anti-Semite and xenophobic stereotypes. She dedicates an entire chapter to Jews [1921: 82-88], whom she describes as rapacious moneylenders and merchants who would tear to pieces "the unsophisticated peasant who ventures to go alone to that neighbourhood [Lipscani Street] to buy some article of clothing" [1921: 83]. Also, the peasant (who is always presented as naïve, not to say stupid) should consider himself fortunate "if he gets out of the Jew's hands still having a roof over his head" [*Ibid.* 84]. She cannot refrain from anti-Semite remarks even when she quotes official statistics from the census: "The Jews, *who, like the poor, are always with us*, will continue to be represented by a million of their race" [*Ibid* 254, my emphasis]. The gypsies are looked down with a sort of amusement: "I have never yet seen a gypsy with new clothes on. They would seem quite out of place. Rags and gypsies seem somehow to belong to each other" [*Ibid.* 143]; they have "comical figures", while their children are "picturesque and would delight the eye of an artist" [*Ibid.* 149]. She notices, however, that "gypsies as a class have not a good reputation for honesty; therefore, if any are seen near one's house, a sharp look-out must be kept" [*Ibid.* 150]. In both cases, her observations seem influenced by local prejudice but also 'imported' from the Albion.

She is ready at all times to mock various religious traditions and superstitions, which she sees as ridiculous. Also, she depicts a condescending attitude towards peasants, servants, beggars and other socially-challenged categories, but all her remarks seem to originate in class prejudice, and not in national prejudice, in which case they would not be of interest for the present paper.

It would be misleading and even unfair if this paper did not provide a few examples of the positive remarks the Irish writer makes about the Romanian others. At this point, it may seem like her attitude is rather xenophobic, despite her claims that some of the best friends she had in the world were Romanian, who helped her and showed her "kindness and sympathy" [Parkinson 1921: 5]. Worried that her Romanian friends might "find cause for offence" in her memoir, she states that she would rather tear it to pieces: "rather than be suspected of repaying such kindness by holding up my friends to ridicule, I would tear up these pages which I – a tyro in the art of letters – have written with so much labour, but also, I must add, with so much pleasure" [*Ibid.* 6]. These many precautions that Maude Parkinson takes in the Preface are indicative of the fact that she is fully aware

that some of her assertions might be considered offensive. However, she finds a convenient refuge in yet another national stereotype – this time, a positive one: "then I remember that they have a sense of humour and the doubt vanishes" [*Ibid* 5].

The positive stereotypes fit, in general, the auto-image that the Romanians have about themselves. In Maude's eyes, they are warm-hearted, "hospitable to an extraordinary extent", "extremely charitable and invariably courteous and polite" [249], very proud of their 'race': "it was this pride which rendered the Germanisation of Romania an impossible task even for King Charles to accomplish, and which the enemy had to reckon with in the last war" [i.e., the First World War] [*Ibid* 248-249]. The Romanian women are beautiful and elegant, although their taste is acquired, as "they are always ready to profit by the example of others who may be more advanced in some directions than themselves" [249]. Thus, she asserts that the Romanian ladies know how to dress and "as every article of clothing comes from Paris, their taste is surely to be guided aright" [*Ibid* 122]. (Mention should be made that the image of the French as arbiters of elegance is equally stereotypical.) The question in which the Romanians' views about themselves part ways with the foreigner lady's opinions concerns the former's diligence. To Parkinson, the Romanians are characterised by national indolence, "*laisser-aller* which hinders endeavour" and "disinclination to engage in industrial or commercial occupations, so long responsible for failure to develop the resources of the country" [*Ibid* 248].

Apart from great figures like King Charles I, Prince Ferdinand or Take Ionescu, to whom she shows great respect and whose political skills she is ready to applaud at all times, Maude Parkinson, is usually dismissive about politics in Romania. Thus, she describes in great details the process of elections, with its electoral frauds ("names of people long dead are inserted in the register") and intimidations: "electioneering agents […] employ gangs of men (known as *batiusi*) who, armed with big sticks, are posted at the entrance to the polling booths, frankly for the purpose of intimidating those who refuse to vote as their party wishes" [Parkinson 1921: 36]). She is ironic about the changes that take place in Romania after elections, when the winning party replaces all the people in an institution, starting with the doorman or "the man who runs the nearest café for the cup of afternoon coffee" [37]. She finds laughable – and even alludes to the difference of opinions as to which end the egg should be broken in Swift's *Gulliver Travels* – the fact that the politicians revert the

established order in the least significant aspects: "if the Liberals have adopted a sloping style of writing, Conservatives, upon assuming power, are sure to insist upon the re-formation of the characters and the setting of them up in a perpendicular position" [40]. The striking resemblance with the present-day politics seems to suggest that the Romanian political inability may not be a stereotype grounded in western prejudice, but a pattern of behaviour that is, unfortunately, very close to being factual.

It is this factuality and long-lastingness of the stereotype what makes one wonder if the image one constructs at the mental level is grounded exclusively in the acquired or inherited representation of the other and in prejudiced observations. The present undertaking has strived to find balance in the amount of positive and negative stereotypes that Maude Rea Parkinson engages in her description of Romania and its people. Her constant reassurances that her sole intention is to make her compatriots love and understand the Romanians the way she does, but also her positive remarks, are indicative of the fact that the Irish woman does not intend to alter the image of the Romanians in the west, but quite the contrary, to try to improve it with her modest writing skills and through an appeal to objectivity which is not always successful.

Although Maude Rea Parkinson's memoir is insightful with regard to various aspects of the Romanian culture at the turn of the twentieth century from the perspective of the foreign other, and although she repeatedly claims that Romania was her second home for twenty years, a westerner's sense of superiority is obvious along her entire account. Her 'exile' is clearly a cultural, not a political one and may be understood in two ways: she is exiled to a land which she perceives as inferior to her own cultural space; consequently, she chooses a different kind of exile: she seems to enjoy her position as the other and makes no move in the direction of integration within the host culture. The representative of a Western culture, the woman writer does not completely accommodate with the ways of the Romanians and, though not disdainful, her inclination to dwell on negative stereotyping may become, at times, downright offensive for the Romanian reader. Nonetheless, one should definitely take into consideration her representation of Romanianness in the analysis of the British-Romanian cross-cultural encounters.

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Notes

[1] The term may be used interchangeably with *stereotypical*.

[2] See also Dyserinck's comment on René Wellek's critique of imagology: "Exactly the interdisciplinary possibilities and ambitions of imagology, he did not like at all. For him this was "rather a study of public opinion useful, for instance, to a program director in the Voice of America". Or more in earnest: It was 'national psychology, sociology...' and so on. As a matter of fact, he did not want to recognize the legitimacy of such research as part of a larger concept of the study of literature. The basis of these negative statements was lying, of course, in Russian Formalism and in the principles of New Criticism and the so-called 'intrinsic study of literature'." (Dyserinck, H., 'Imagology and the Problem of Ethnic Identity' in *Intercultural Studies,* issue 1/2003, par. 3)

[3] In Leerssen's view, an imageme is "a 'blueprint' underlying the various concrete, specific actualizations that can be textually encountered. […] An imageme is the bandwidth of discursively established character attributes concerning a given nationality and will take the form of the ultimate cliché". (Leerssen, J., 'The Rhetoric of National Character: A Programmatic Survey' in *Poetics Today*, 21: 2, 2000, p. 279)