

## Romanian National Identity and *Specificul Național*.

### To Be or Not to Be: Is That Still the Question?

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“To be, or not to be, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them: to die, to sleep  
No more; and by a sleep, to say we end  
the heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks  
that Flesh is heir to? 'Tis a consummation  
devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep,  
To sleep, perchance to Dream; aye, there's the rub,  
for in that sleep of death, what dreams may come,  
when we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
must give us pause.

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act III. Scene I

#### I. INTRODUCTION

The familiar opening words of Prince Hamlet's soliloquy set an appropriate frame for consideration of the issues connected to seemingly endless debate on Romanian national identity to which the present volume is seeking to make a contribution. Romanian culture has indeed endured many “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” and this has been reflected in discussions about national distinctives, the *specific național*.

Occasionally, Romanians have taken “Arms against a Sea of troubles.” But usually they are seen as having a tendency toward a Mioritic strategy for passively avoiding “the heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks that Flesh is heir to,” reflecting the fundamental Mioritic myth famously described by the philosopher/poet Lucian Blaga.<sup>1</sup> However, this lack of resistance to the “sleep of death” and the dreams that may come has raised second

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1 See Lucian Blaga, *Spațiul mioritic* (București: Cartea Românească, 1936).

thoughts and even hostility. An extreme instance was Emil Cioran, who considered the Mioritic "fatalism of our people" to be "a gangrene," "a poetic and national curse...which constitutes an open wound in the Romanian soul," "a collective self-denigration," and "a substantial defect in the Romanian spiritual structure."<sup>2</sup> Withal, the Romanian search for being, becoming, and meaning often "must give us pause," and even becomes a bit tiresome.

Be that as it may, what Hugh Seton-Watson wrote more than 45 years ago remains true today:

"...from some experience I am fairly sure of one thing: in the Danube countries, national history, or if you like historical mythology, is something about which not only professors of history but also working men and women, in factories and farms, feel bitterly. Attacks on it create a smoldering resentment which does not die out and can easily turn into a flame."<sup>3</sup>

One of the things that Romanians feel strongly and often bitterly about is the *specific național* involving questions of national being and identity which have fascinated Romanians since the dawn of the modern era and have engaged them in considerable polemics both with other Romanians and non-Romanians. "It is incontestable that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Romanian consciousness was preoccupied above all by an absorption with the process of our historical national becoming," the best analyst of such matters wrote more than forty years ago.<sup>4</sup> This is linked to the *ceartă pentru istorie*, the "dispute for history" that has long characterized modern Romanian intellectual discourse.<sup>5</sup>

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2 See Cioran's vitriolic and intemperate *Schimbară la față a României* (București: Editura Vremea, n.d., 1936), pp. 59 ff.

3 Hugh Seton-Watson, *The "Sick Heart" of Modern Europe: The Problem of the Danubian Lands* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), p. 70.

4 Z. Ornea, *Junimea și junimismul*, second revised edition (București: Editura Eminescu, 1978), p. 23.

5 For the *cearta pentru istorie*, see Al. Zub, "Adevăr și militantism," in Al. Zub, *Biruit-au gândul* (Iași: Editura Junimea, 1983), p. 33. For details, see my "Romanian Perspectives on Romanian National Development," *Balkanistica*, Vol. 7 (1981-1982), pp. 92-120; and "Myth and Reality in Rumanian National Development," *International Journal of Rumanian Studies*, Vol. 5 (1987), Nr. 2, pp. 5-33. Further materials may be found in my "Unity and Continuity in Romanian History," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*, Vol. 8 (1981), Bibliography, pp. 29-69; "Romania," in: Gale Stokes, ed., *Nationalism in the Balkans* (New York: Garland Press, 1984), pp. 31-67; and "Themes in Modern and Contemporary Romanian Historiography," in: S. J. Kirschbaum, ed., *East European History* (Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1988), pp. 27-40.

## II. THE CEARTĂ PENTRU ISTORIE

It began with the Moldovan chroniclers: Grigore Ureche (1590-1647), Miron Costin (1633-1691), and others.<sup>6</sup> It involved the scholar-savant princes, such as Constantin “Stolnicul” Cantacuzino (1640-1716) and Dimitrie Cantemir (1673-1723). It was continued by the Școală Ardeleană, the Transylvanian writers such as Samuil Micu (1745-1806), Gheorghe Șincai (1754-1816), Petru Maior (1756-1821), and Ion Budai Deleanu (1760-1820).<sup>7</sup> It was also linked to Romania culture and civilization's apparently endless quest to catch up with the rest of Europe, to overcome deficiencies (*decalaje*) more or less across the board which began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, first in culture, then in politics, and finally developmentally.<sup>8</sup>

The pattern of change in the Romanian lands was the reverse of the progression in the Western world of what Robert Anchor has labelled “the Triple Revolution.”<sup>9</sup> The West experienced a series of dramatic changes, beginning with the Industrial Revolution in England in the 1760s, followed by the political upheaval of the French Revolution in the

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6 See my “The Origins of the Romanian Historiographical Tradition and the Development of Romanian Historism,” in Gheorghe Cliveti, ed., *Clio în Oglinziri de sine: Academicianului Alexandru Zub: omagiu* (Iași: Editura Universității Al. I. Cuza, 2014), pp. 161-178.

7 See Keith Hitchins, *The Rumanian National Movement in Transylvania, 1780-1848* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1969); and Pompiliu Teodor, *Sub semnul luminilor. Samuil Micu (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2000).*

8 Here is a sampling: For the 18<sup>th</sup> century background and after, see the work of D. Popovici, *La littérature roumaine a l'époque des lumières* (Sibiu: Centrul de Studii și Cercetări Privitoare la Transilvania, 1945); Alexandru Duțu, *Romanian Humanists and European Culture. A Contribution to Comparative Cultural History*, revised edition (București: Editura Academiei, 1977); and *European Intellectual Movements and Modernization of Romanian Culture*, revised edition (București: Editura Academiei, 1981); Pompiliu Teodor, ed., *Enlightenment and Romanian Society* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia, 1980); Pompiliu Teodor, *Interferențe iluministe europene* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia, 1984); and Alex Drace-Francis, *The Making of Modern Romanian Culture: Literary and the development of National Identity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006). For the economic side, see the impressive analysis by Bogdan Murgescu, *România și Europa. Acumularea decalajelor economice (1500-2010)* (Iași: Editura Polirom, 2010). For a sociological and cultural view, see Henri H. Stahl, *Eseuri critice despre cultura populară Românească* (București: Editura Minerva, 1983); and the collection of essays edited by Al. Zub, *Cultură și societate. Studii privitoare la trecutul românesc* (București: Editura Științifică, 1991). For the Communist era, Katherine Verdery's *National Ideology under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceaușescu's Romania* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1991), is a comprehensive study. A representative of the reactionary, “protocronist” approach is Ilie Bădescu's *Sincronism european și cultură critică românească* (București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1984).

9 Robert Anchor, *The Triple Revolution*, in Robert Anchor, *The Modern Western Experience*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1978, p. 1. Compare my “The Triple Revolution and the Birth of Modern Times,” in: Sorin Mitu, et al, eds., *Biserică, societate, identitate: In onorarea Nicolae Bocușan* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2007), pp. 639-648.

1790s, and ending with a cultural revolution that took wing in the German lands in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> In the Romanian lands, the process was reversed.

What was the result? As Tudor Vianu put it:

"Our culture found itself in an interesting process of rational adaptation.... centuries old traditional forces weakened at a certain moment because of...an entire series of economic and political conditions through which the country needed to pass at a certain stage of its development....It was then that this preoccupation appeared in our literature about who we are, thinking about Romanian culture and its purposes."<sup>11</sup>

This preoccupation has continued down to the present, with the discourse being expanded to include the traditionalist vs. modernizer debate of the interwar period, autochthonizing of some of these ideas during the Stalinist-Nationalist Communist post-World War II era, via so-called "protochronism," down to trendy current terminologies seeking to identify "avatars" or "manifestations" of national identity.

The sovietization of Romania that followed World War II obviously directed the debate into other directions as Marxist teleological approaches smothered Romanian tradition.<sup>12</sup> However, with the beginning of the 1960s "Romanian National Deviation," in R. V. Burks' useful phrase,<sup>13</sup> identity politics emerged once more. This was gradually transmuted by the process of what Katherine Verdery has labeled "genealogical appropriation"<sup>14</sup> into what might be called "Stalinist National Socialism" under the aegis of the Ceaușescu. It found its most articulated form in the idea of "protochronism," which is the idea of looking "for

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10 Cf. Lewis B. Namier, "Basic Factors in Nineteenth-Century European History," in Lewis B. Namier, *Vanished Supremacies. Essays on European History, 1812-1918* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), pp. 165-175.

11 Tudor Vianu, *Filosofia culturii*, 2nd edition (București: Editura Publicom, 1945), p. 287, first edition=1943, based on lectures given between 1929-1935. For a stimulating commentary on Romanian culture, modernization, and politics, see Daniel Barbu, "Modernizarea," in his *Șapte teme de politică românească* (București: Antet, 1997), pp. 17 ff.; the articles in the theme volume "Modernizarea în spațiul românesc" of *Xenopoliana*, Vol. 6 (1998), Nr. 1-2; Z. Ornea, *Tradiționalism și modernitate în deceniul al treilea* (București: Editura Eminescu, 1980); and Cristian Vasile, "Modernitate, modernism, modernizare între discurs ideologic și realitate în România comunistă," in Cristian Vasile, ed., *Ne trebuie oameni!" Elite intelectuale și transformări istorice în România modernă și contemporară* (Târgoviște: Editura Cetatea de Scaun, 2017), pp. 284-316.

12 See my forthcoming paper "Teleological History and the Romanian Past: Just Say 'No!'"

13 See R. V. Burks, "The Rumanian National Deviation: An Accounting," in Kurt London, ed., *Eastern Europe in Transition* (Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), pp. 93-113.

14 Verdery, *National Ideology*, 1991, p. 138.

developments in Romanian culture that had anticipated events in the better-publicized cultures of western Europe” and was “an intensified resuscitation of interwar indigenist arguments about the national essence...”<sup>15</sup>

### III. SINCE THE FALL OF COMMUNISM, 1989 AND AFTER

Following the 1989 collapse of the Communist dictatorship in Romania, the debate was obscured by a myriad of emerging controversies: from General Antonescu and Holocaust revisionism (associated, *inter alia* with the writings of Gheorghe Buzatu) and counter-revisionism (Michael Shafir); to the legacy of Communism in Romania (the Tişmaneanu Commission Report, the creation of an astonishing number of totalitarian studies enterprises); to the demythologizing of the Romanian past (Lucian Boia and others);<sup>16</sup> to puerile debates over school textbooks in the late 1990s;<sup>17</sup> to altercations, including charges of plagiarism, concerning the Romanian Academy's endlessly-delayed treatise on Romanian history; to

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15 Verdery, *National Ideology*, 1991, pp. 167-168. For the work of some of the leading lights, see Edgar Papu, *Din clasicii noştri: Contribuţia la ideea unui protocronism românesc* (Bucureşti: Editura Eminescu, 1977), *Thèmes fondamentaux dan la littérature roumaine* (Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, 1983), a pamphlet intended for international consumption which, for example, identifies Prince Dimitrie Cantemir as “one of the founders of the philosophy of history and one of the precursors of European romanticism (the fact that Europeans are unaware of this is merely just more evidence of a conspiracy against recognizing the true value and contributions of Romanian culture to world culture), and *Lumini perene. Retrospecţii asupra unor clasici români* (Bucureşti: Editura Eminescu, 1989). Papu, who seems to have coined the word “*protocronism*,” is a bridge between the 1930s (he was born in 1908) and the 1965-1989 era. Interestingly, while Editura Eminescu was publishing Papu's extreme theories, it was also publishing the excellent analyses of “specificul naţional” approaches by Z. Ornea. It is also interesting that in general historians did not like Ornea's work, though virtually all of them skirted these issues. See also Ilie Bădescu, *Sincronism*, 1984, as well as his *Timp şi cultură. Trei teme de antropologie istorică* (Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, 1988). Bădescu continues to promote this line of thinking and was recently rewarded by being elected to the Romanian Academy.

16 The pathbreaking books were Lucian Boia, ed. *Mituri istorice româneşti* (Bucureşti: Editura Universităţii Bucureşti, 1995); Lucian Boia, *Istorie şi mit în conştiinţa românească* (Bucureşti: Editura Humanitas, 1997); and Lucian Boia, ed., *Miturile comunismului românesc* (Bucureşti: Editura Nemira, 1998). This work was anticipated by Walter Kolarz, *Myths and Realities in Eastern Europe* (London: Lindsay Drummond, 1946); Stephen A Fischer-Galati, “Myths in Romanian History,” *East European Quarterly*, Vol. 15 (1981), pp. 327-334; Alexandru Zub, “History and Myth in Rumanian Society in the Modern Period,” *International Journal of Rumanian Studies*, Vol. 5 (1987), Nr. 2, pp. pp. 35-58; and Michelson, “Myth and Reality,” 1987.

17 See Boia, *History and Myth*, 2002, pp. 1pp. 19-25; Dan Pavel, “The Textbook Scandal and Rewriting History in Romania: Letter From Bucharest,” *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 15 (2001), pp. 179-189; Ovidiu Pecican, *Poarta leilor istoriografia tânără din Transilvania (1990-2005)* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Grinta, 2005), pp. 157-159; and Victor Neumann, “The Alternative Textbooks on the History of Romania as Places of Memory,” in Victor Neumann, *Essays on Romanian Intellectual History*, translated by Simona Neumann (Timişoara: Editura Universităţii de Vest, 2008), pp. 115-131.

religious controversies (pro and contra over the role in Romanian society—past, present, and future—of the Romanian Orthodox Church); to the radical dispersion of Romanian scholars into politics, ranging from the neo-communist/Social-Democrat variety (Eugen Simion, Răzvan Teodorescu) to reformist strains (Andrei Pleșu, Sorin Alexandrescu).<sup>18</sup>

Among Romanian works relevant to the national identity wrangles that appeared in the first decades after 1989 (the list is by no means comprehensive) were Sorin Antohi's perceptive *Civitas imaginalis* (1994);<sup>19</sup> H. R. Patapievi's biting *Politice* (1996);<sup>20</sup> various works by Daniel Barbu, including *Șapte teme de politică românească* (1997),<sup>21</sup> *Bizanț contra Bizanț* (2001),<sup>22</sup> and an edited work, *Firea românilor* (2000);<sup>23</sup> Lucian Boia's myth-busting *Istorie și mit în conștiință românească* (1997),<sup>24</sup> Sorin Mitu's study *Geneza identității naționale la românii ardeleni* (1997),<sup>25</sup> which explored the Transylvanian “*imagnarul*” and its interaction with foreigners; several collections of important essays by Sorin Alexandrescu, especially *Paradoxul Român* (1998);<sup>26</sup> Cristian Preda's *Modernitatea politică și Româanismul* (1998),<sup>27</sup> and *Occidentul nostru* (1999),<sup>28</sup> on modernity and on Romania and the West; Ioan-Aurel Pop's rebuttal to Boia's

18 This would be an important topic for elucidation in regard to Edward Shils' thesis about the role of intellectuals in politics. See Edward Shils, *The Intellectuals and the Powers and Other Essays*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1972. For a useful recent exploration of this subject in an East European context, see Daniel Citirigă, Georgiana Țăranu, and Adrian-Alexandru Herța, eds., *Intelectualii Politicii și Politica Intelectualilor* (Târgoviște: Editura Cetatea de Scaun, 2016).

19 Subtitled *Istorie și utopie în cultura română* (București: Editura Litera, 1994), revised and expanded edition (Iași: Editura Polirom, 1999).

20 București: Editura Humanitas, 1996. 2<sup>nd</sup> expanded edition=1997.

21 București: Editura Antet, 1997.

22 Subtitled *Explorări în cultura politică românească* (București: Editura Nemira, 2001).

23 București: Editura Nemira, 2000.

24 București: Editura Humanitas, 1997. 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition=2000. The second edition also appeared in English as Lucian Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness*, translated by James Christian Brown (Budapest: Central European Press, 2001).

25 București: Editura Humanitas, 1997. An English version appeared as Sorin Mitu, *National Identity of Romanians in Transylvania*, translated by Sorana Corneanu (Budapest: Central European Press, 2001).

26 București: Editura Univers, 1998.

27 București: Editura Nemira, 1998.

28 București: Editura Nemira, 1999. On Romania and the West, see also my “Romanians and the West,” in Kurt W. Treptow, ed., *Romania and Western Civilization* (Iași: The Center for Romanian Studies, 1997), pp. 11-24; Alexandru Zub, “‘Europa’ in der rumänischen Kultur—ein Essay,” in Harald Heppner, ed., *Die Rumänen und Europa vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Wien: Böhlhau, 1997), pp. 273-291; Hans-Christian Maner, “The Notion of Europe from the Perspective of Romanian Historical Studies,” in Victor Neumann and Armin Heinen, eds., *Key Concepts of Romanian History. Alternative Approaches to Socio-Political Languages* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2013), pp. 223-261; and Armin Heinen, “Images of Europe—Images of

*Istorie și mit* (1997) under the banner of *Istoria, adevărul și miturile* (2002);<sup>29</sup> and a trio of volumes edited by Vasile Boari and others: *Cine sunt românii?* (2009),<sup>30</sup> *Identitatea Românească în Context European* (2009),<sup>31</sup> *Regăsirea identității naționale* (2010).<sup>32</sup>

#### IV. LUCIAN BOIA: *DE CE ESTE ROMÂNIA ALTFEL?*

The simmering national identity debate was revived full force with the appearance in 2012 of the maverick historian Lucian Boia's provocative and surprising historical essay, *De ce este România altfel?*<sup>33</sup> The book outlines a series of ways in which Boia thinks Romania and the Romanians differ from a kind of hypothetical European norm, ranging from Romanian underdevelopment, to extensive borrowings from the West, to a national inferiority complex, to sketches of how Romanians behaved “otherwise” in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, to values confusion, to feckless efforts at “rebranding” Romania, to the existence of an apathy syndrome among Romanians. A good deal of this essay drew on Boia's earlier demythologizing efforts, mentioned above, as well as on the wide-ranging catalogue of his previous work.

The root cause of Romania's deficiencies, according to Boia, was its multi-faceted and “impressive backwardness”—the late appearance of the Romanian states, late appearance of Romanian literary texts, late appearance on the “historical” scene itself (“coming sometime from somewhere”), late entry into cultural, economic, political, and social modernity. It was and remained situated at the margins of an unfortunate frontier situation. As a result, Romanians both accepted and rejected the “outside.” Romanians were influenced by the Romans, the Slavs, the Hungarians, the Germans, and the Ottomans, among others,

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Romania (1945/1948-2008),” in Neumann and Heinen, *Key Concepts*, 2013, pp. 263-288.

29 București: Editura Enciclopedică, 2002.

30 Edited by Vasile Boari and Natalia Vlas, with the subtitle *Perspective asupra identității naționale* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Risoprint, 2009).

31 Edited by Vasile Boari, Ștefan Borbély, and Radu Murea with the subtitle *Coordonate Istorice și Culturale* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Risoprint, 2009).

32 Edited by Vasile Boari, Sergiu Gherghina, and Radu Mirea (Iași: Editura Polirom, 2010).

33 București: Editura Humanitas, 2012, 128 pp.

amalgamating “neighboring traits.”<sup>34</sup>

A second key shortcoming of the Romanians, according to Boia, was the inherent “weakness of the state,” in the sense that they continued to be dominated by patriarchal and poor social structure, with a haphazard succession system. Arbitrary rule in an area lacking in urban development was recipe for backwardness and a culture that relied on imitation for its alphabet, constitution, educational institutions, and the arts. Foreigners played too prominent a role in commerce and industry.<sup>35</sup>

This contributed, in Boia's view, to an inferiority complex, shown graphically in the periodic re-writing of Romanian history. The “insignificance” of little countries grated on the Romanian psyche and led to appeals to a romanticized past, including appeals to the Romans, then the Dacians; to mythologies of independence and heroic struggles of Christianity against the East. Romanians liked to think of themselves besieged but not beaten; invaded (by Turks, Russians, and Jews), but not conquered.<sup>36</sup>

The “Forma fără Fond” argument foregrounded by Titu Maiorescu and Junimea in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was equally valid in 2012. How could the old be harmonized with the imported and new? Were Romanians westernizing or just mimicking the West? Modernization really only occurred at the elite level. In the end, he argues, corruption and clientelism were carried over from traditional society, informal “arrangements” outweighed laws and contracts, and submissiveness to rulers coupled with passive resistance continued to be the order of the day. (The peasant revolt of 1907 was an exception.) The usual Romanian solution was humor, the making fun of misfortune (“haz de necaz”). This provided and provides the principal safety valve for Romanian society.<sup>37</sup>

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34 Boia, *De ce este România altfel?* 2013, pp. 35-41.

35 Boia, *De ce este România altfel?* 2013, pp. 42-59.

36 Boia, *De ce este România altfel?* 2013, pp. 59-65.

37 Boia, *De ce este România altfel?* 2013, pp. 66-70.



From this, Boia turns to a period by period look at Romanian history—from 1918, to the alleged golden age of the 1930s, to World War II and the Holocaust, to the Communist takeover, to the Ceaușescu's "dynastic Communism," to 1989 and the exit from Communism—using these to illustrate his "altfel" thesis. The gap between elite and masses remained huge, economic development continued to falter, and intellectuals and politicians moved with ease from party to party as power shifted.<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately, accommodation and survival continued to be supreme values. As a result, Romanian society and culture suffered immense loss of credibility and respect. They often "saved the state," but at what cost? Submission to power was the story of the late 1930s to 1989, and intellectuals led the way in what could only be described as a combination of Caragiale and Stalin.<sup>39</sup>

True, there were bright spots: culture in the interwar period was effervescent and some Romanians transcended their borders (Brâncuși, Tzara, Urmuz and the avant garde). The universities of București, Cluj, and Iași basked in a "perioadă de vîrf," functioning at a level, Boia believes, not achieved before or since. And Romania's large Jewish population made a definite contribution in the press and the arts.<sup>40</sup>

When it comes to the post-1989 era, Boia minced no words, but this is probably what drove the debate into the public sphere, which would be an excellent subject for another day and need not detain us here. In the end, Boia "doesn't have any solution" and "doesn't know if one exists" because one cannot know where the future will go. "The competence of the historian...stops with today."<sup>41</sup>

Boia's book was surprising in that it not only elicited the usual horrified, astonished,

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38 Boia, *De ce este România altfel?* 2013, pp. 71-81.

39 Boia, *De ce este România altfel?* 2013, pp. 86-109.

40 Boia, *De ce este România altfel?* 2013, pp. 83-85.

41 Boia, *De ce este România altfel?* 2013, p. 150.

hostile and viewing-with-alarm responses from the usual suspects, but that the first edition of 40,000 copies sold out in a few months. This launched an astonishingly stormy public debate and provoked the author (who usually considered it to be a waste of time to respond to critics of his books) into replying by name to some of his critics with a lengthy preface, entitled “Filozofia lui *altfel*: Răspuns unor critici,” to a second edition which appeared 2013.<sup>42</sup>

Subsequently, some of these critical reactions were gathered in a 2017 book, edited by Vintilă Mihăilescu, entitled *De ce este România astfel? Avatururile excepționalismului românesc*,<sup>43</sup> twice the size of Boia's slim volume.<sup>44</sup> Mihăilescu's book might be described as dividing the two sides into what might be described as “The Romania is Otherwise (*Altfel*)” camp, that is a description and critique of a Romania that is different in many ways from the other countries of modern and contemporary Europe in ways that are generally unfortunate versus “The Romania is So (*Astfel*)” camp, which is a critique of negative exceptionalism, and an attempt to place Romanian exceptionalism, however that may be, in a broader geo-political, sociological, and anthropological context.

The title to Boia's book is a bit misleading since his book quite clearly is aimed only at describing *how* Romania differs and not explaining *why* it differs. “Why?” (*De ce?*) and “How?” (*Cum?*) are two rather different questions. Of course, Boia is not obligated to explain the “why” when he doesn't claim to, but the “*De ce?*” in the title does wrong-foot the discussion. Unfortunately, the Mihăilescu book does not pick up on the difference between the *how* and the *why* of Romanian differences, so a good deal of its criticism seems misplaced or misdirected.

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42 Second, expanded edition (București: Editura Humanitas, 2013), pp. 5-29. The second edition does not otherwise alter the original text.

43 Iași: Editura Polirom, 2017, 309 pp.

44 This work flowed out of a round-table discussion organized at the New Europe College, on February 20, 2013, followed by a report in *Dilema Veche*, February 28-March 6, 2013. The preface to the second edition of Boia's *De ce este România astfel?* elaborated above was a partial response..

Boia's book was surprising because its demythologizing author apparently deployed a series of myths concerning Romanians to illustrate how they differed from a kind of hypothetical European norm. On the other hand, Boia clearly does not think myths are unimportant or can be dispensed with. In the new preface to *De ce?*, he stresses that the demolition of myths is necessary, but they are "inevitably present in the life of the individual and the community....I believe in myths: not in their truthfulness but in their function." The Romanian belief in Mihai Viteazul the Unifier might be mistaken, "but it is well that they believed because it was thus that they made Romania."<sup>45</sup> Of course, that stance isn't likely to make friends or win over his critics.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

It is well to reflect on a nation's and peoples's pasts, but good opportunities to do this are often lost because failures lead generally to attempts at blaming others for defeats or blunders and success blinds one to ones own shortcomings. It remains to be seen if 2018 is a good opportunity or not. Current developments in Romania cause one to be pessimistic about the prospect.

Secondly, as Paul Valéry has written, "History is the most dangerous product which the chemistry of the mind has concocted. Its properties are well known....It fills people with false memories, exaggerates the reactions, exacerbates old grievances...and encourages either a delirium of grandeur or a delusion of persecution. It makes whole nations bitter, arrogant, insufferable, and vainglorious."<sup>46</sup> Romanians' preoccupation with the past is healthy and unhealthy, as history can be used and abused. Constant attention needs to be given to Valéry's warnings.

The recent disastrous fire which completely destroyed Brazil's National Museum

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<sup>45</sup> Boia, *De ce este România altfel?* 2013, pp. 24-25.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1970), pp. 307-308.

in Rio de Janeiro stands as a salutary parable.<sup>47</sup> The smoldering ruins of the two-hundred-year-old institution “stands as a painful reminder that, as a nation, Brazil has never placed much value on its past.” The head of Rio's Municipal Council for Cultural Patrimony, wrote “We are a nation without memory, wandering through the cosmos without knowing who we were, what we could be, or even aspire to be. Now it is these ashes that must inspire young people to guide our nation.” And a leading popular historian, noting that Brazil was floundering amidst economic and educational decline, skyrocketing crime rates, and spiraling corruption scandals, pointed out “All that makes us wonder who we are, and history can help find the answer.”

Historians are fond of saying that “The Past is Prologue.” And this is true to an extent. Countries and cultures never start with a *tabula rasa*, especially in political culture. That is why historical understanding is important. But with Lucian Boia, we need to avoid seeing this as deterministic. Individuals make choices, these choices determine what will happen and we can never know how all these choices will interact.

Thirdly, the place of myth in all of this continues to need attention. William H. McNeill's study of “Mythhistory” argues that

“Myth lies at the basis of human society....This is mankind's substitute for instinct. It is the unique and characteristic human way of acting together. A people without a full quiver of relevant agreed-upon statements...soon finds itself in deep trouble, for in the absence of believable myths, coherent public action becomes very difficult to improvise or sustain....<sup>48</sup> Without such social cement...no group can long preserve itself.”<sup>49</sup>

However, McNeill goes on to argue that historians are not only necessary as myth makers; in the interests of truth, they also need to be myth breakers.<sup>50</sup> Let's not err too much to one side or the other.

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47 What follows is based on John Lyons and Paulo Trevisani, “Brazil Mourns the Loss of an Ignored Museum,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 8-9, 2018, p. C 3.

48 William H. McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). p. 23.

49 McNeill, *Mythistory*, 1986, p. 7.

50 McNeill, *Mythistory*, 1986, p. 35.

In the end, writes McNeill,

"...myths may mislead disastrously. A portrait of the past that denigrates others and praises the ideals and practices of a given group...can distort a people's image of outsiders so that foreign relations begin to consist of nothing but nasty surprises....it is obvious that mythical, self-flattering versions of rival groups' pasts simply serve to intensify their capacity for conflict."<sup>51</sup>

As for “*altfel*” and “*astfel*,” at least some of this debate is a tempest in a teapot: Boia is arguing that Romanians are “different,” mostly in ways that are detrimental. His critics are generally arguing that Romanians are “different,” largely in ways that are to be expected or are positive. The surprising conclusion here might be that both are to some degree right.

Nevertheless, endlessly shifting discussions of national identity, national character, national specificity, national exceptionalism, collective identities, and the like persist. Two recent American books illustrate that there will likely be no end of the pursuit of these matters: Francis Fukuyama's *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (2018)<sup>52</sup> and Kwame Anthony Appiah's *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* (2018).<sup>53</sup> Perhaps the present volume will bring us further down the road to reconciling this apparently paradoxical conclusion. “’Tis a consumation devoutly to be wished,” but perhaps this won't be before “we have shuffled off this mortal coil.”

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51 McNeill, *Mythistory*, 1986, pp. 14-15; 23. Compare Al. Zub, “History and Myth,” 1987.

52 New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.

53 New York: Liveright, 2018.

SHORT BIO (edit as necessary)

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He has been three times a Fulbright fellow in Romania (1971-1973, 1982-1983, 1989-1990). His book, *Romanian Politics, 1859-1871: From Prince Cuza to Prince Carol* (1998) was selected by *Choice Magazine* as an Outstanding Academic Book for 1998 and was awarded the 2000 Bălcescu Prize for History by the Romanian Academy. He is a member of the editorial boards of numerous journals, including the *Revue des Études Sud-East Européennes*, the *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie A. D. Xenopol*, *Revista Istorică* and *Historical Journal* of the N. Iorga Institute, *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie Gh. Barițiu*, the *Transylvanian Review*, *Revista Arhivelor*, and *Archiva Moldaviae*, among others.

His areas of interest and expertise include historiography, Romanian history in the 19th-21st Centuries, Historiography, Totalitarian and post-Totalitarian societies, the History of Venice, and the work of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien.

Dr. Michelson was President of the Society for Romanian Studies from 2006 to 2009, and served as SRS Secretary-Editor for over thirty years; was a national board member of the South East European Studies Association for twenty three years, and served as the Secretary of the Conference on Faith and History for ten years.

He is currently completing a history of Romanian historiography between 1882 and 1940, and is working on a history of the Romanian 1848.