

NATION BRANDING THROUGH TRAVEL WRITING

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Abstract

Our intention in this article was to display the way in which travel writing can be used by governmental institutions, and not only, as an instrument of nation branding, by focusing mainly on Peter Hurley's travelogue about Romania, *The Way of the Crosses* (2013). Our assumption was that Romania is in the position of struggling to craft an improved image in the eyes of its Western partners and outline a profile framed around motifs such as unspoiled rural landscapes, which have inspired foreign visitors during the last five centuries. Travel writing itself has raised controversy, as some consider it as a literary work while others assign it to journalism. However, although there are indeed many elements which are also found in journalistic products, a certain consensus has been reached, that travel writing represents at least a literary subgenre with the main feature of disseminating ethnic and national images and, thus, 'culturally translating' a distant, exotic place. Moreover, we shall see that such governmental attempts in nation branding through travel writing are not really an innovation, as similar efforts were made, in the case of Romania, no less than eighty years ago.

Keywords: *nation branding, national images, travel writing.*

unspoiled rural landscapes, and have been disseminated as such for several centuries through travel writing. More recently, after the collapse of Communism in 1989 and the subsequent adhesion to the European Union (2007), stereotypes such as chronic poverty and systemic corruption came to be associated with the image of Romania (and disseminated heavily both by travel writers and, especially, journalists), a fact which has been acknowledged by reputed scholars (e.g. DELETANT, 2007). Thus, as shown in a recent article, the image (*i.e.* moral or typological representation of an ethnic/national group through discourse) diverges into the two main axes mentioned above, and these two mega-images have been summarized as *the woods and waters Romania* (a paraphrase of Fermor in *Between the Woods and the Water*) and the *grand bazaar Romania* (FERMOR, 1986; ORMSBY, 2008; SÂSÂIAC, 2015a).

1. INTRODUCTION

It is our belief that Romania could conveniently be placed into Anholt's third category of countries, that of *planetary suburbs*, *i.e.* places generally ignored by the public, but which sometimes generate interest (as opposed to the *downtown areas* – the major Western democracies and the *ghettos* – conflict zones and countries which oppose the Western model of development) (ANHOLT, 2010). The interest which the Romanian territories did generate, starting with the 16th century, among travellers (most often, at the same time, diplomats, military men, politicians, traders and journalists) began as a series of clichés related to the Latin origin of the Romanian language, Christian Orthodox faith and, later, exotic, mystical, idyllic sceneries and

2. NATION BRANDING THROUGH TRAVEL WRITING, A FOCUS ON ROMANIA

Although, nation branding represents a new term, it is not a new concept. Countries have always branded themselves in one way or another. It can be described as an exciting, complex and controversial phenomenon. The area is not very much dealt with by the existing marketing literature but there is a huge amount of real world activity. This makes nation branding very exciting. Its complexity stems from the fact that it encompasses multiple disciplines beyond the limited realm of conventional brand strategy. One could perceive it as controversial due to the fact that it involves an extremely politicized activity which generates passionately held and frequently contrasting opinions or judgements.

Each country's tourism governing body has always market its place as a destination to tourists. As years gone by, the concept developed further into place marketing or place branding, and eventually nation brands, and nation branding. It is natural to deduce that the terminology of nation branding derived from concepts such as "destination branding" and "place branding."

Destination branding is a term used for tourism promotion. Tourism organisations from all over the world use brand management in order to promote their destination, articulating the wonders of their country, and how hospitable they could be (ANHOLT, 2007). Country branding or nation branding refers to the branding of a country and it involves the people of the country or the nation in order to develop and build the brand. Nation branding adds more dimension to the destination attributes, it encompasses the intangible brand value to build brand equity onto the brand identity. Place branding is an umbrella term for "branding nations, regions, cities, towns and villages." (ANHOLT, 2007)

It is important to mention from the beginning that travel writing (texts that are often placed at the crossroads between literature and journalism) is an intercultural narrative *par excellence* and has the feature of disseminating ethnic and national images. Travelogues are also instances of what is understood by *cultural translation*, i.e. making the foreign, distant, exotic culture accessible to the domestic readership. Moreover, had Romania not featured this exoticism, or, as Deletant puts it, this *mystic of the unknown*, it would have not drawn the attention of the many travel writers who covered the Romanian territories in the last five centuries (DELETANT, 2007).

The relation between the media and travel writing has been shown in a previous article, and their main common feature is that of disseminating ethnic and national images (SÂSÂIAC, 2015b). The media play a very important role in this respect, being nowadays the main provider of clichés and stereotypes. Ethnic groups are often 'otherized' and stereotyped on the grounds of popular media images, widely available today on the Internet, on television, radio and in the press, where the specific shows or articles

describe people from all over the planet. Images can be manipulated in the media through advertising in commercial or political purposes. We should note that the media reach much larger audiences than any books and often influence both the travel writers' choice and expectations concerning their destination and the readers' interest and horizon of expectation. As explained in the above-mentioned article, both Murphy and Hoffman, according to their own statements, had been exposed to extensive (often negative) media coverage on Romania (MURPHY, 1993). Moreover, Dunlop confesses that her prolonged stay in Romania had resulted from her father's reading of an article about Ceaușescu's execution in the Glasgow Herald (HOFFMAN, 1999). She adds that orphan stories and 'images of shorn heads and neglect' (DUNLOP, 2012) were also widely available.

In the case of travel writing, there has been a great deal of controversy whether these texts are literary or journalistic, if they represent a literary genre or not. According to Youngs, debate on travel writing includes "discussion of works that some may regard as genres in their own right, such as ethnographies, maritime narratives, memoirs, road and aviation literature, travel journalism and war reporting"; moreover, "The genres from which travel narratives borrow, or of which they are composed, stand in their own right: the scientific report, the diary, autobiography, correspondence, the novel, journalism and so on" (YOUNGS, 2013). It is true that, at first, one could speak of travel accounts, memoirs or even reportages. The resonance of these terms is rather journalistic. The position of travel accounts on the frontier between literature and journalism is confirmed by the Romanian media scholar Preda: "of all non-fictional texts, travel accounts seem to be the closest to journalism. In their structure one notices all the qualities of a good reporter: curiosity, evocation, information and a little humour. Even when written with *obvious literary intentions* [italics ours], travel accounts become testimonies and episodes of actual experience, as every great feature report requires" [translation ours]. According to Preda, travel writers undoubtedly act like journalists: "animated by his/her own curiosity, the travel writer, amazed of what he/she sees, gathers information and

always seems to be convinced of his/her mission as a mediator between the static reader and the outside world. Travel includes descriptions of landscapes and personal opinions regarding local customs, imperfections or lifestyle". Preda admits that travel writing is always expressive and sometimes surpasses the documentary function (PREDA, 2006).

In what concerns nation branding, besides the media, travel writing can be similarly useful, for, as Youngs notices, "of all literary *genres*, travel writing, which deals with encounter and observation, is best placed to transmit cultural values under the guise of straightforward report or individual impression" (YOUNGS, 2013).

Boia tackles other stereotypes commonly found in travelogues on Romania, such as the complex of inferiority which often results into self-denigration (BOIA, 2012). Deletant also mentions the tendency towards self-denigration that Romanians manifest. Boia devotes a whole chapter to this "illness" that he "diagnoses" in the Romanian society and finds two explanations for it. On the one hand, there is the "rather modest condition, in relation not only to the West but also to their neighbours, [which] gave rise to an inferiority complex in the Romanians' modern consciousness and, logically enough, to various compensatory tactics. Thus, emphasis has been placed on the distinctive character of Romanian civilization (not inferior to others but different from them), on the victories won against more powerful opponents, and on the Romanians' role in the defence of European Christendom" (BOIA, 2001). Both fate and the complex of inferiority resulting sometimes in self-denigration are approached by Gavriluță. She mentions what she calls the "extreme left" approach, meaning that Romanians believe that all mischance comes from the fact that they were born Romanian and have a certain geographic location (GAVRILUȚĂ, 2013). The "extreme right" interpretation, which reminds of Boia's "compensatory tactics", is that everything done right in the world was discovered by Romanians, who are the most hardworking, intelligent and honest, but the 'great powers' did not feel like or had no interest in recognizing their virtues and achievements. A certain policy of applying such a tactic is visible nowadays in the media where Romania is

promoted in tourism or commercial purposes. We can take the example of a short movie called *The World Without Romania*[1], which has been in vogue on the popular online video platform YouTube. It argues that the Romanians were first to invent or discover widely used products such as the fountain pen, insulin, the jet plane or modern cybernetics, and claims that the traditional Romanian sport, *oina*, "first attested in 1364", is the "godfather of baseball". It also mentions outstanding Romanian personalities such as Eliade or Brâncuși and claims that, due to the high number of Romanian employees, their language is the second spoken language at the Microsoft corporation. Other 'arguments' in favour of Romania are the cuisine and the beautiful women. A similar tactic has been recently adopted by a chocolate brand in its advertisements on the Romanian television. Such 'arguments', which have the vocation of becoming clichés, are also used in tourism advertisements, and we believe they are also likely to impact on the position that authors adopt in both in travel writing and in the media.

A situation in which the Government commissioned a foreign journalist to frame a country around the desired motifs is represented by the visit of Andrew Evans, a journalist affiliated with the National Geographic television (and a travel writer, according to his self-description from his Twitter account), who came to Romania with the purpose of filming a documentary, and was supported by the Romanian governmental National Tourism Agency. What he released is indeed framed around such positive clichés as hospitality, unaltered landscapes or preserved natural habitats, a fact which, as explained recently (SÂSÂIAC, 2015b), reminds of Sitwell's book, *Roumanian Journey*, a journey which was facilitated by several Romanian political figures of the time (it was a personal arrangement made by the Callimachi family of noblemen, to which it is said that the Romanian Government contributed financially, with five hundred pounds) (GOLDSWORTHY, 1998; SITWELL, 1938). This reminds of the viewpoint that Anholt expressed in relation to governments which attempt at "branding" their nations in the media around a signpost (such as hospitality or genuine

nature in Sitwell's book): "it is typical for less well-known countries trying to establish an international profile that they will start with a signpost brand of this sort: it is the sharp point of their image which enables them to penetrate consumer consciousness and add their country's name to the list of candidate countries in the consumer's mind". The unaltered natural habitat reminds of the evolution of travel writing in the current century that Youngs foresees, that ethical, 'green', sustainable and eco-tourism, as well as responsible, environmentally and politically concerned leisure travel be brought into attention (YOUNGS, 2013).

The Romanian authorities seemed to relate with these considerations, as the Ministry Of Regional Development and Tourism adopted, in 2010, the slogan *Explore the Carpathian Garden!* together with a (controversial) logo featuring different shades of green and a leaf along a blue curve symbolizing a river. According to a market survey carried out by the same Romanian Ministry (quoted by the *Gândul* newspaper [2]), natural, rural, adventure, cultural and religious tourism are the main tourism products of Romania.

An example which confirms the viewpoints expressed by both Anholt and Youngs and which also relates with the Romanian governmental initiatives is Peter Hurley's *The Way of the Crosses*, a book in which the author extensively draws on the unaltered Romanian environment (HURLEY, 2013). The Romanian government, through the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, is responsible for the issue of this book in which Romania is framed around the motif of the rural lifestyle which is unaffected by the suffocating modernization, a cliché which has survived to this day and is widely used by tourism companies as well as by the friendly foreign media or statesmen (such as Prince Charles, for example).

As the title suggests, Romania is also framed around an Orthodox religious motif which has profoundly attracted the author. However, in his preface, the author brings into discussion two recurrent motifs which take the form of stereotypes. One of them is that of self-denigrating Romanians:

"Why the hell do you live in Romania? I'm asked this question almost exclusively by

Romanians (...) commenting that all they dream about is leaving this country" (2013: iii).

The other motif concerns the superficial knowledge that westerners have about Romania:

"I'm sure it must be tough now for those new Romanian emigrants. The people they meet, work with or work for, probably know very little about Romania: they may have vague memories of a dictator called Ceausescu, of a vampire called Dracula, or orphan children and Roma" (2013: iii).

Peter Hurley is an Irish marketing and publicity agent who immigrated to Romania in 1994. He claims that he made the decision of moving his advertising business into Romania after a significant youth experience in Prague, where he 'discovered' Eastern Europe (according to a personal statement published on his Facebook page). The author's attachment to Romania enabled him to use his advertising skills in order to promote the country abroad, according to the same source, and to his own statement from the preface of his book (2013: III): "sadly, I still hear bad news about how Romania and Romanians are misrepresented in the foreign media". His above mentioned travel novel seems to be both a literary work and a promotional product. A deeply religious person and an admirer of the Christian Orthodox faith himself, Hurley skilfully handled the 'market niche' of the 'exotic Romanian Orthodoxy' and framed the country, as we have already mentioned, around this motif. The journey, which was undertaken on foot, very much resembles a pilgrimage and an allegory of life in the acceptance of John Bunyan, as life itself has often been symbolized as a journey within the Christian tradition. The title of the book itself is an obvious reference to the Christian motif of *Via Crucis - The Way of the Cross*, which signifies Jesus Christ's last day on Earth as a man.

The Irish writer also cries over the imminent "death of the authentic village" under the influence of a more superficial cultural model imposed by the developing urban society. What a resemblance with the calls for the restoration of the unindustrialized natural habitats expressed

in 1986 by Fermor in *Between the Woods and the Water!* (FERMOR, 1986).

Moreover, since *a picture is worth a thousand words*, the author provided, in the middle of the book, a veritable photo album of no less than forty-two pages representing this *deep, authentic* Romania.

As previously mentioned, the book was issued by the publishing house of the governmental Romanian Peasant National Museum. V.S. Nitulescu, back then manager of the museum, prefaced Hurley's book and labelled it as a result of a journey taken in 2012 which was "the most sincere and, at the same time, most attached journals ever made in contemporary Romania by a foreigner". The author's intention is to offer an improved image of Romania and to address both English and Romanian readers, as we shall see.

Hurley's affairs with the Romanian state institutions go even further, as he was director of promotion within the Support Unit of the National Rural Development Network, a project of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development responsible, according to the bio-sketch provided at the end of the book, with encouraging rural tourism, traditional products and cooperative association amongst agricultural producers.

Hurley's efforts have been rewarded, as the Irish writer was awarded, in 2011, by the President of Romania, the National Order of Merit for Culture with the rank of Commander.

The same publishing house that released *The Way of the Crosses* immediately provided a Romanian translation of the book, which largely disseminates positive images - *Drumul crucilor*. The translation was undertaken by the students of Literary Translation MA Programme at the University of Bucharest, under the guidance of Lidia Vianu. The students of the same programme also translated from Romanian into English different literary works from the *Bucharest Tales* compilation (VIANU, 2014). Their efforts are remarkable, as they tackle the shortage of primary sources for the research of images of Romania in travel writing. Moreover, this English and Romanian editorial project seems to fit in what Cotter considered to be "the desire for both national particularity and international recognition, the pragmatic engagement with major cultures from a position of political weakness" (COTTER, 2011).

The branding of Romania around motifs such as Orthodoxy and unaltered traditions is noticeable from the book covers, where a wooden shrine and a church can be seen in the case of both the English and the Romanian version of the book.



Fig. 1. The cover of *The Way of the Crosses* and its Romanian translation

3. CONCLUSION

We notice how a governmental institution has admirably attempted to provide to the English speaking worldwide community an improved image of a less known country. Through the means of travel writing, the action is conspicuous in Peter Hurley's book. However, we can assert the same in the case of Sir Sacheverell Sitwell's travelogue, a work released no less than eighty years ago. The similarity resides not only in the institutional efforts behind the two literary works, but also in what concerns the motifs and positive clichés around which Romania was framed. *There is nothing new under the Sun!* (SITWELL, 1938)

Nowadays, both Romanian authorities and private tourism service providers strive, sometimes in joint actions, to promote these positive characteristics in the foreign media in order to attract visitors. It would probably help if, either the authorities charged with cultural matters or even private initiatives, decided to bring English travel books on Romania from the period between the two World Wars back into public attention, given their generally positive

approach, very similar to that taken by Peter Hurley in his noteworthy book, and the fact that their addressees were western readers in the first place. After all, as Deletant believes, "the mystique of the unknown and the perceived authenticity are likely to continue to lure foreigners". Efforts in improving the foreign public's perception of Romania are necessary not only because of the sustained recent media assaults related to the free movement within the EU, but also given the general European and global framework in which a well-crafted image often favours investments, tourism and service provision (DELETANT, 2007).

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