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## Collective Imaginaries and National Identities:

### *The Encyclopedia of Romanian Imaginaries*

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**Abstract:** This paper presents how *The Encyclopaedia of Romanian Imaginaries. Historical Patrimony and Cultural-Linguistic Identities* (Polirom Editing House, 2020) reflects the Romanian cultural identity. The five volumes provide a synoptic perspective on the cultural inheritance and spiritual identities of Romania. Guided by the powerful and innovative concept of social and cultural imaginaries, it uses multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary methodologies in order to highlight the main domains of Romanian collective representations. The scientific key concepts, which ensure the originality of the approach, are imagination studies (“*recherches sur l’imaginaire*”), semantic basins, linguistic fields, image constellations, and fractal identity.

**Keywords:** Social Imaginaries; Collective Representations; Romanian Language; Romanian Literature; Romanian Religions; Romanian Historiography; Romanian Arts.

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Humans relate to the outside world not only through senses and ideas, but also through images and representations. Their comprehension of the world and their ensuing reactions depend on these subjective images. Rather than a dimension at the margins of the material and physical order of the world (both visible and invisible), “the imaginary” is deeply intertwined with it, over-determining the way we feel, read and represent (through artistic, literary, scientific, historical, religious or mythical discourses) both the reality enveloping us and the way we interact with it and transform it. In order to understand human behaviour, anthropologists have to tackle the complex system of representations that underlies mental activity.

As an anthropological concept, “the imaginary” pervades all human practices. It applies to a vast range of domains, from sociology and religion to literature and the arts. Social imaginaries comprise narratives, mythical events, historical characters, collective symbols which serve to make sense of history, to organise cultural memory and to configure the

future. Scholars such as Pierre Nora, Régis Debray, Paul Ricœur, Elémire Zolla, Eduardo Lourenço, José Gil, etc., have highlighted the psycho-sociological function of symbolical, narrative and iconic mediators. Lately, the concept has undergone important and interesting developments, especially in the English-speaking world. Following innovative works written in the fields of literary studies (Said) and political science (Anderson), it has become customary to refer to social and political imaginaries for analysing the institutionalisation of modern societies. Charles Taylor defines “social imaginaries” as follows: “By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (p. 23). Images of the self and of the other (the “other” being conceived as an individual or as a collectivity), worldviews and images of nature, universe or God, representations of geography, history, society and culture, literary and fine arts fantasy, theatre and cinema, music and dance, advertising and media, etc. are all products and instruments of the imagining function. Even the most common and current attitudes of everyday life bear the imprint of collective habits and representations.

In the construction of cultural identities, a major role is played by images that the different groups hold about themselves and about the others: self-images and

hetero-images. From Romanticism until the first half of the 20th century, ideologists and philosophers attempted to identify what they thought to be the essence of a people, of a nation or of a race. This approach has been thoroughly criticised, especially after the nationalistic ideologies led to catastrophes such as the Holocaust and the Second World War. In our post-modern era, we know that the idea and the image of a people is a problem of collective representations. Each group and nation has a specific, sometimes incoherent and polemical image of itself. Each of these images encloses a very complex constellation of conscious and unconscious reasons and motives that would impose the need for a subtle psychoanalytical approach to collective mentalities. In order to better understand themselves and maybe to improve their civic and political behaviour, groups and peoples should bring to light the unspoken motivations of their self-representations. Together with the image of the self, the image of the others is also an important element in the construction of individual and group identities. People relate to one another not only in a direct way, by interpersonal contact, but also through common representations, stereotypes and prejudices. All people from Europe hold complex collective images about other European peoples (neighbours, North vs. South, West vs. East, inside vs. outside Europe) and about minority groups in their own societies (religious, sexual, ethnic, immigrant, etc.).

Using multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and comparative methodologies, *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România/ The Encyclopaedia or Romanian Imaginaries*, published by Polirom Editing House in 2020, endeavours to explore the collective

representations of the Romanians. The five volumes of the Encyclopedia are the result of a teamwork sponsored by a grant of UEFISCDI, the Romanian Ministry of Research and Innovation (CCCDI – UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.2-PCCDI-2017-0326 /49 PCCDI, within PNCDI III”) during 4 years (2018–2021). About one hundred researchers from Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, several Institutes of the Romanian Academy and the National University of Arts in Bucharest contributed to this mapping of Romanian collective constellations of images and symbols, from five perspectives: literary representations (volume 1), linguistic patrimony (volume 2), historical imaginaries (volume 3), religious imaginaries (volume 4) and artistic imaginaries and patrimonies (volume 5). The five volumes were individually edited by Corin Braga, Elena Platon, Sorin Mitu, Ioan Chirilă and Liviu Malița.

To start with, emphasis should be laid on the fact that this approach goes beyond the discipline known as imagology. While the construction of images of the self and of the other is a cultural process, the editors of the *Encyclopaedia of Romanian Imaginaries* do not imply that “national characters” have an objective existence (that they are somehow genetically inbuilt in peoples or races); on the contrary, they have only a cultural and mental existence, they are collective representations. As such, they could and should be analysed and deconstructed in order to discharge their potential aggressiveness and violent tendencies.

The main instruments of construction and analysis come from the French domain of “*recherches sur l’imaginaire*” (imagination

studies), shaped by philosophers and anthropologists such as Gaston Bachelard, Gilbert Durand, Henry Corbin, Claude-Gilbert Dubois, Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, Joël Thomas, Philippe Walter and so on. Such concepts are “the imaginary”, social and cultural imaginaries, fictional worlds, constellations of images and symbols, semantic pools, etc. *The Encyclopaedia* uses them in order to map the material and immaterial patrimony of Romanian heritage, shedding light on the specificity of each of the domains tackled by the five volumes.



The first volume, dedicated to literary imagination, aims to offer a cartography of the main constellations of images and symbols of Romanian literature, of the recurrent fictional settings, landscapes and

backgrounds which inform and permeate the visions of different writers and literary currents. This undertaking does not seek to produce a new (yet another) history of Romanian literature, organised by epoch and periods, movements and currents, writers and works; even if it does not eschew chronology and the main social-historical landmarks and references, its organisational criterion is Gilbert Durand’s concept of semantic pool. Consequently, the *Encyclopaedia* offers a panoramic view of literary “contents” and not of “forms”, of macrostructures and not of superstructures, of the semantics and not of the semiology of literature. It reconstructs the main visions of the world (*Weltanschauungen*) and

fictional representations that dominated Romanian culture throughout its history.

In his seminal work *Introduction to Mythodology* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1996), Durand defined the semantic pools at the historical scale of what Fernand Braudel calls medium periods, which refer to civilisations and cultures. From such a relatively large perspective, all Romanian literature could be envisaged as a unique semantic pool, albeit not a very homogenous one, with frequent changes and turns. However, the approach does not impart exclusively a bird's-eye view, as it deploys the hermeneutical instrument in order to focus on more minute landscapes. Continuing to use Durand's fluvial metaphor, we could say that if Romanian culture (literature, language, arts, etc.) could be seen as a large river such as the Danube, all smaller rivers that feed it, such as the Mureş-Tisa, the Olt, the Prut, the Siret etc. can be analysed in their turn as lesser semantic pools, which have, each, its specificity, its evolution, its "river beds" which criss-cross each other, permeate and fuse and contribute, all, to the constitution of the global semantic pool of our culture.

Using such a gradual focus, the volumes parse out Romanian culture into several imaginary pools. To start with, the first volume comprises twenty studies which map the landscape of Romanian literature. The articles are dedicated, in an order which follows the genesis and the evolution of paradigms of imagination, to several successive themes, starting from the first historical sources: the chronotope of Romanian folklore, with the main spatial and temporal patterns it later endowed high literature; the literature inspired by religion, starting from first Romanian catechists such as Dosoftei up to modern

mystic writers such as Maniu, Voiculescu, Arghezi or Ioan Alexandru; literature inspired by history and by historiography, which, feeding on the writings of the early chroniclers, led to the production of historical novels and dramas, authored by writers from Negruzzi and Sadoveanu to Eugen Uricaru and Doina Ruşti. Another series of entries reflects the importation and adaptation to Romanian literature of several foreign currents, with their typologies, characters and imaginary landscapes: the semantic pools of (neo)Classicism and the Enlightenment; of Orientalism, Byzantinism and Balkanism; of Romanticism (both social-militant, and metaphysical); of Decadence (including symbolism and naturalism). The topic of Revolution, with its Romanian avatars (1848, 1947, 1989), nourished different ideals and utopias (or dystopias) of a social imaginary reflected in literature. The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are dominated, within the paradigm of Realism, by the imaginary constellations of a literature set on a rural, traditional background, and of a literature using a complementary modernist cityscape. However, besides these chronotopes, new literary conventions and settings emerged in interwar literature: psychological literature (from psychological analysis to the stream of consciousness), inspired by William James, Henri Bergson, psychoanalysis and phenomenology, and authenticity literature, writings of life experience and vitalism, inspired by *Lebensphilosophie* and existentialism – both of them having a rich legacy that survives into contemporary literature. An entry is dedicated to the challenges that Vanguard addressed to tradition, with all the breaches and revolutions it engendered in

literary representations and conventions. The semantic pool of Romanian emigration comprehends the works of authors who constitute a “metaspora”, writers who chose or were obliged to leave the bed of their native language and fit in the patterns of other cultures. The Hungarian and German writers from Romania form in their turn two important tributary streams for the global semantic pool, contributing to it with specific constellations of images and symbols reflecting their collective individuality. The entry “Literature as history and as truth (1965-1989)” deals with the confrontation between the political and ideological communist system and the ethos of Romanian neomodernism. Textualism and postmodernism, endorsed by the generation of the ‘80s, launched a new paradigm in Romanian literature, while the Revolution of 1989 opened the path to sometimes contradictory turns and trends, such as trauma memoirs, or the minimalist fiction of new Romanian cinema. Last, but not least, the final entry covers some of the genres which can be deemed to be part of popular culture, such as science-fiction, fantasy, utopia and dystopia, etc.



The second volume, edited by Elena Platon, is devoted to the Romanian linguistic patrimony and imaginary. As the title suggests, it deals with two complementary dimensions of the language: the patrimonial aspect, the inherited language shaped by tradition, and the creative aspect, the

imaginative and innovative aspect of live speech. In its case, Durand’s concept of semantic pools is adapted and transferred into concepts such as ethno-linguistic pools and socio-linguistic pools. As the Romanian language is a palimpsest, resulting from the superpositioning and melting of languages spoken by different ethnic populations, a series of studies deal successively with the Thracian-Dacian substratum, with the Latin stratum, the Slavic adstratum, and then with the Turkish, Greek, Hungarian, German, Italian, French superstrata, ending with the English-American linguistic colonisation. On the other hand, another series of entries explore different socio-linguistic pools, from folklore and religious writing to ideological discourse, argots or IT and media language.

Of course, such mappings are in no way complete and exhaustive; to the semantic pools highlighted in these volumes there could be added other “sources”, “rivers” or “confluences”: for instance, the Romanian literary Baroque or memoirist and confessional literature, for the first volume, and dialect variants of the Romanian language or various professional jargons, for the second. However, the *Encyclopaedia* aims at covering the main clusters of linguistic and literary constellations of words and images, which interfere in an osmotic way. As already shown above, the linguistic and the semantic pools should be understood as dynamic floods, not as stills captured at precise moments of national history. They evolve in time, interact, compete with each other, exchange material, modify each other, coalesce or melt together, separate, vanish and disappear. These pools go beyond the ethnic and linguistic collectivities, literary currents and modes, social

institutions which created, imposed or persecuted them.



The third volume, edited by Sorin Mitu, is dedicated to historical imaginaries. It is possible to envisage both a history of imaginary representations and a study of the imaginary representations of history. For a long

period, historiography has been conceived as a panorama of successive political, social, economic and cultural events, i.e. as an inventory of “objective” data. However, while it is certainly true that individuals and groups respond to external processes and facts, the historical science of the last decades has shown that these processes and facts are always perceived as subjective and internal images. This means that historical representations are modelled by the categories and the values of the imagination. Consequently, several analysts of the historical imaginary have been able to expose the myths, the phantasms and the collective images that governed the crucial moments of international history, from the French Revolution and Napoleon to the fascist and communist totalitarian regimes. Collective memory and imaginary representations are indissolubly intertwined, forming a major axis of collective identities. They manifest themselves not only through linguistic, cultural and spiritual values, but also through material tangible values. For example, history can invest places, creating *lieux de la mémoire*, as Pierre Nora put it. From monuments

and buildings to museums and concentration camps, these places carry symbolic values that go beyond their geographical or economic importance. In Romania, the study of the historical imagination, introduced by Lucian Boia, has already generated a school and a methodology of analysing collective representations and myths. The entries in this volume produce a map of the main archetypal images that shaped the Romanians’ vision of history: the Dacians, the Romans, race, ethnicity, origins, social body, nation, the providential leader, the hero, revolution, time, death, the stranger, minorities, etc.



Heading for the fourth volume, edited by Ioan Chirilă and targeting the religious imaginaries of the Romanians, a preliminary observation is that political institutions and social practices in Europe rely on an

important theological-political factor, i.e. the legitimacy conferred by authority (be it good or evil). Representations of power heavily depend on the religious apprehension of the sacred and on religious myths of sovereignty. In European political civilisation, there have coexisted different forms of government: royalty, the republic, authoritarian states, democratic states, etc. Democratic states are a form of rational secularisation of theocratic monarchies, which created their own foundation myths (see the French Revolution). In its history, Europe has experienced diverse forms of revolutions and reforms, projects and

utopias largely fed by messianic and chiliastic religious movements. Recently, the totalitarian experiences of Communism and Fascism have also involved propaganda mechanisms of destroying ancient political myths and creating new ones, which could lead the masses. These collective social imaginaries have evolved in strong correlation with different other factors, such as ethnic composition or the polarities between Orthodox and Catholic Christianity.

Long before the positivistic and atheistic conception of the world became dominant, different human civilisations and cultures had apprehended the world through various religious visions. Even today, many people who pretend to be unbelievers continue to use magical and religious categories of thinking and representing the world. Analysts have proved that even contemporary scientism is a diverted and disguised form of religious behaviour. Moreover, postmodern relativism has taught us the modesty of not judging and rejecting the religious visions of different people of the globe as archaic, obsolete, primitive, etc. Contemporary anthropologists tend to regard religions as self-sufficient and autonomous cognitive systems which engender a complete and functional comprehension of the world, adapted to the conditions of life of the communities that share them. They are alternative models of explaining the universe, which constitute a reservoir of suggestions and solutions that are very useful, especially in periods of epistemological crisis.

So, the religious imaginaries also constitute intermingling semantic pools. The entries of the volume start from the first Neolithic evidences of a cult and ritual

practices directed to a Great Goddess, then present the somewhat elusive religion of the Dacians, the polytheistic syncretism during the Roman Empire, the dawns of Christianity from a multiplicity of mystery and gnostic cults. As Orthodoxy has become the main religion of the Romanians, a series of entries deal with the different forms and “media” used by the Church: the architecture of the first churches, mural paintings, icons on wood and glass, crucifixions and statues, but also religious books and liturgical music. Although Orthodoxy is the religion of the majority population, other Christian confessions practised on the territory of Romania are presented: Catholic, Greek-Catholic, Protestant, etc., not forgetting different sects and New Age groups. The analysis of religious beliefs is not only necessary for conserving cultural diversity, but it also serves as a kind of anthropological practice for people who want to remain open to multiple points of view. The contemporary era of globalisation challenges people with multiple perspectives on the world. Anthropology, ethnology and the history of religions could be used as instruments for training contemporary people as “multiple subjects”.



The fifth volume of the *Encyclopaedia*, edited by Liviu Malița, targets the Artistic Imaginaries and Patrimony. As the forms of artistic expression differ greatly, the volume regroups the entries into five chapters: Theatre, Film, Music, Architecture and

Visual Arts. However, although they use different material supports and expressive media, all arts can be also regarded from the point of view of common paradigms of imaginary representations. Gilbert Durand has shown that arts cluster around powerful cultural archetypes (*Beaux-Arts et archetypes*, 1989). Therefore, the articles aim to reconstruct the complex system of influences and transmissions that permeate and irrigate the Romanian cultural space throughout its history. The chapter dedicated to Romanian dramaturgy and theatre starts from the functions of ritual and mask in archaic and folk cultures, presents the creation of a national theatre in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, analyses modern drama in the interwar period and then theatre during communism, and finishes with an analysis of the contemporary forms of experimental theatre. As an art with a shorter biography, cinema is mapped through the semantic pools of rural, historical and quotidian films, up to the New Cinema of the 2000s. The chapters about music and architecture are interested mainly by the relationship

between folk, Byzantine and modernist traditions. Similarly, the chapter on visual arts starts from archaic and folk forms, through modern painting or sculpture, up to new media, digital and technological arts.

As a whole, the *Encyclopaedia* is a sum (evoking the medieval *summae*) of the main constellations of Romanian collective representations generated by cultural, linguistic, literary, historical, religious and arts imaginaries. As elaborate as it may be, it is more than an academic-oriented work. It targets larger objectives than those of a scholarly approach. As mentioned above, collective imaginaries are an important element of group identity and of patrimonial inheritance. In order to understand ourselves we should go further than drawing maps of natural geography and of political divisions between states and populations, we need synopses of the social and cultural imaginaries of peoples and individuals. In order to secure the future, it is not enough to protect the natural environment and social relationships, we should also respect an ecology of mental representations.

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