The Regenerative Void: Avatars of a Foundational Metaphor in Romanian Identity Construction

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There is an ultimate "paradox of Romania" (such a frequent phrase) which has to do with how the Romanians have constructed their personality by refusing to construct their personality. The palpitating core of this paradox is probably one of the most recurrent and meaningful tropes used by Romanians in speaking about themselves, that of the *void*.

In the fateful December of 1989, Romania became identified with a new image, its revolutionary emblem was the old tricolor flag with a hole at its center. The gap was the result of the exuberant removal of what used to be the communist coat of arms. A photograph in "Le Nouvel Observateur" showed in its empty stead the faces of two young boys, their hands fingering a V sign: a symbol of rejuvenation, the rebirth of Romania.



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By the end of the year, the Romanian exile Andrei Codrescu, an American academic, a popular NPR personality and a surrealist poet, returned to his native country after twenty five years. The book he wrote to narrate this more than surrealist experience is called *The Hole in the Flag*. On his crossing the border between Hungary and Romania, he notes:

> [...] suddenly there, under the cold moon, there it was, the Romanian flag with the socialist emblem cut right out of the middle. It fluttered over a square brick building marking the frontier. *It's through that hole*, I thought, *that I am returning to my birthplace* (Codrescu 1991: 67).

But Codrescu's book makes it plain that the hole in the flag is more than a fleeting eye-catcher for the media. It is an "objective correlative" for something that lies deep in his frustrated soul, somethings that pops up whenever he confronts the past. On visiting the old synagogue of Budapest, Hungary, with its "deserted yard", Codrescu, a Jewish ethnic, ponders how "a once-full world [...] was now *empty, a deserted center that was also somehow at the center of my being*. Something lost, gone, irretrievable" (Codrescu 1991: 59). Nor is it a mere idiosynchrasy, evidence of early personal drama. This is the echoing of an entire tradition that places emptiness and absence at the core of Romanian identity, a tradition that starts with Codrescu's favorite writers, Blaga and Cioran, as I have shown elsewhere (Ştefănescu 2008).

This paper catalogs a number of Romanian self-images of the regenerative void – probably one of the most persistent tropes to have helped shape Romanian identity – and their variations. There is, however, an unsettled significance of this founding figure of nationalist discourse which may be caused both by its intrinsic paradoxical nature and by the host of textual and ideological strategies it has helped articulate.

I am making it my aim here to show that the empty, deserted center is not, however, just any kind of void, but rather a paradoxical one because full of meaning: a creative, (re)generative void. This is why the void is not a mere emblem; it is a central and recurring prefigurative metaphor in one type of discourse on Romanian cultural identity. The metaphor of the regenerating void may take several guises and the few images and themes with which I will be dealing in the following pages are such avatars of this one fundamental metaphor. Resting on constructivist premises, my effort is part of a category of cultural studies that operates in the framework of discourse analysis and cultural rhetoric. The premise of this study, which I have derived from Hayden White's analysis of historiographic discourse, is that accounts of our past and of our communal selves are informed by a structural trope which conditions the way in which we construct these representations and that these tropes are consistent with certain ideological and narrative patterns. The present critical effort details how different tropical structures dictate various inflections of one and the same overarching image, the void, to fabricate one of the most interesting, most versatile, and most prolific versions of Romanian national identity.

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A-voiding Trauma

The process of "inventing" a modern national identity in Romania was painful and had to run against immeasurable hardships. The feeble flower of national self-consciousness experienced few and short-lived genial seasons, and was most of the times besieged by historical cataclysms and adversities. In order to survive, it had to study the devious art of resistance, which is another form of dissimulation. In the process, the regenerative void became one of the most popular compensating strategies for the traumatic self-imaging of a marginal culture.

The obsessive recurrence of images of absence in national self-representations seems to be symptomatic for marginal cultures. Cultural historian Alexander Kiossev claims that the absence of a civilizational model plays a central part in grounding Bulgarian identity in a traumatic sense of lacking:

> Thus, in the genealogical knot of the Bulgarian national culture there exists the morbid consciousness of an absence – a total, structural, non-empirical absence. The Others – i.e. the neighbors, Europe, the civilized World, etc. possess all that we lack; they are all that we are not. The identity of this culture is initially marked, and even constituted by, the pain, the shame – and to formulate it more generally – by the trauma of this global absence. The origin of this culture arises as a painful presence of absences and its history could be narrated, in short, as centuries-old efforts to make up for and eliminate the traumatic lacks (Kiossev 1999: 114).

He explains that, whenever Bulgarians think of who or what they are, one of the most frequent answers is "*we are not* European (enough)" or "*we are not* like the Others". The image often translates as "we are neither this (identity), nor that" and in this part of the world, it means neither Eastern, nor Western. Falling in between the more secure and stable identities of Western and Eastern cultures engenders a traumatic ambiguity as Bosnian writer Ivo Andric suggested in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in 1961:

> My homeland is truly 'a small country between worlds' as one of our writers has put it, and it's a country which is trying in all fields, including culture, at the price of great sacrifices and exceptional energy to compensate rapidly for all that its unusual stormy and difficult past has denied it (Hawksworth 1984: 6).

Unsurprisingly, Romania also has an entire lineage in its traditional construction of cultural identity that seems is lodged in the archetypal image of absence. What is worthy of note, though, is how significant voices in Romanian culture invest this founding trope with duplicitous meaning and treat it both as a painful paucity and as a nurturing nook. Such treatment turns this symbolic void into an ambiguous image that indicates both the inability to construct a viable collective identity and the compensating mechanism to turn this failure into an unexpected success.

The topos has been carried over historical boundaries from interwar through communist and into postcommunist literature. In a different article to which I have previously alluded, I have submitted a brief survey and a discursive typology for this tradition that spans no less than three consecutive periods in modern Romanian culture (from pre- to post-communism). My analysis there documents a discursive affiliation between negative versions of the void in the Radical-Antithetical mode

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from Tristan Tzara, Urmuz, Eugen Ionescu, Emil Cioran, Petre Ţuţea, and Horia-Roman Patapievici. Similarly, I find positive reversals of the void by Lucian Blaga, Gh. I. Brătianu, Mircea Vulcănescu, Mircea Eliade, Constatin Noica, and Andrei Codrescu are related within the same Metaphoric-Anarchist discursive paradigm (Ştefănescu 2008: 14–19).

In the following sections of this paper, I will register some of the thematic variations of the founding trope of the void used as a compensating mechanism.

The Void of Historical Action and Diction

One of the most traumatic and debated instances of the symbolic void appears in the notorious theme of Romania's absence from history. This means that the Romanians seem incapable of making their own history, either in terms of asserting themselves through a remarkable destiny or in recording their historical exploits, although there seem to be plenty of memorable things in Romania's past.

Modern Romanian historiographers were confounded by the absence of historical records for much of the country's premodern development. This historical scandal was signaled, among others, by Petar Mutafciev in his 1932 overview, *Bulgares et Roumains dans l'histoire des pays danubiens*, who protested that Romanians are "the only European people which has no history of its own until the end of the Middle Ages" (apud Brătianu 1996: 25). The embarrassment is, however, cleverly turned into a cause for pride by some historians and cultural philosophers. It takes Gh. I. Brătianu only a few years to come up with a clever response and to see in absence the opportunity to speak of a "miracle of history". Four years later, in 1943, Mircea Eliade echoes Brătianu in his own version of the birth of a nation:

> and when the first Romanian principalities emerged during the eleventh century, the *miracle* had already taken place; the Slavs had been assimilated, and the people living in the territory of Dacia was the Romanian people, who had preserved all the characteristic features of their forefathers, the Dacians, and were speaking a Latin language: the Romanian (Eliade 1992: 19).

In his contemporary meditation on the birth of Romanian culture, Lucian Blaga acknowledges the infamous "historiographical void" and responds by projecting it on a spatial level. In the absence of historical records, Romania is left as "blank spot" on the map of the region, but this blank spot lies at the very center of the Thracian and Arian space (Blaga 1992: 32–33).

Metaphors of emptiness, waste, and the void that refer to absence from historiography are equally employed to account for an absence from history itself, that is, for the unimpressive stature of Romanian civilization in world history. In apologetic discourses, *evacuation* has been presented as the main strategy of Romanian resistance throughout its history. The Romanian military doctrine of defense, devised in the milennary confrontation with sweeping migrations and oversized empires, consisted in scorching the lands and the crops, poisoning the wells and the springs, burning our own houses and retreating into the central regions of Romania, filled with mountains and forests.

The backbone of this strategy was the mental reflex of *vacating* the external or peripheral and withdrawing towards an elusive center. With many Romanian

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writers this also meant a retreat into the spiritual core of Romanianness. Blaga spoke of Romanians "boycotting history", Eliade embraced the notion and spoke of the "terror of history" in his own mythopoeic account of the origins of the Romanian people. Interestingly, the same strategy was chosen by Romanians to withstand a more ruthless and tenacious invader: communism. For a while, the anticommunist resistance fighters used the mountainous and woody retreats to launch occasional guerilla attacks on the communist authorities. When that eventually failed, Romanian cultural personalities switched to a more sophisticated defense: "resistance through culture". They abandoned the marginal and superficial aspects of material civilization into the hands of the communist colonizer and withdrew into an ungraspable and immaterial spiritual center of their being.

The most successful and popular example of cultural resistance was performed by Constantin Noica. Noica (1909–1987) was imprisoned for 6 years, was confined to a forced domicile for another 9 years, and was denied for most of this time the right to publish. Rather than defect and live in exile abroad, Noica chose a different kind of exile. He withdrew in a remote village in the center of the country and into the world of culture.

Gabriel Liiceanu, Noica's disciple, recorded in a journal his apprenticeship at Noica's secluded abode in Paltinis, up in the mountains of central Romania, and his fascination with Noica's self-inflicted exile:

> La Câmpulung a fost găsit în cameră, îmbrăcat în palton, cu şoşoni şi cu căciulă, citind Augustin; apa din ligheanul care se afla în mijlocul camerei îngheţase. "Dumnezeul culturii", singurul în care credea şi la judecata căruia era încredinţat că va fi chemat, laolaltă cu toţi trebnicii şi netrebnicii acestei culturi, îl orbise, desigur, făcând din el nu un om, ci un mediu, care dobândise dreptul – asemenea tuturor celor ce şi-au intrigat contemporanii, împingând o comunitate înainte – de a fi măsurat cu o altă măsură [In Câmpulung he was found in his room, dressed in his overcoat, his rubber galoshes on, reading from St. Augustine; the water in the pot had frozen. "The God of culture"... had no doubt blinded him, turned him into a medium, rather than a man, and gave him the right (as with all those who intrigued their contemporaries, prompting a community forward) to be measured by different standards] (Liiceanu 1991: 263)[1].

Noica became a model for the younger generations and each of his books was a secret revolution of the Romanian mind. His books sold out immediately and circulated in clandestine photocopies at twenty times their market price. At a time when Romanians were famished by Ceausescu and butter (like almost all basic food) was an almost unattainable rarity, Noica's books were exchanged for four bars of butter. This probably indicates what type of survival Romanians cherished most.

Noica's strategy of a spiritual resistence to history was entirely cultural. He was accused of many things and some of his critics have claimed he indirectly endorsed the official totalitarian doctrine of national-communism. On the other hand, even the uncompromising opposers of communism acknowledged Noica as "the principle proof of a nucleus of live thinking in the ocean of dead thought" (Lovinescu 1994: 351 referring to Marxism-Leninism).

[1] The English translation is mine as with all other quotes from Romanian editions.

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Paraphrasing Noica (and recycling the topos inaugurated by Blaga and Eliade), Liiceanu talks of a "will to culture" that prompts

> […] a lateral, discreet and unspectacular liberation, maybe even guilty in its intellectual egotism, but which always has been the form in which the best of the Romanian spirit survived to the present day... If by history we understand the series of events happening to us, but also without and beyond us, then culture for Noica meant, no doubt, a withdrawal from history [...] (Liiceanu 1991: 271).

Noica's ideal of cultural resistance was a type of "subsistence without consistency" that lacked material substantiality. It was his way, one of many in the Romanian tradition, to turn the void of absence from history into a successful instrument of cultural survival and regeneration. Its relevance for domestic intellectual tradition is perpetuated after the fall of communism by a rising cultural personality who has joined the ranks of the Păltiniş group after the death of its founding figure and after the fall of communism. Horia-Roman Patapievici carries on the topos of the historical void in his meditations of the Romanian condition. "The void is evidence of presence, since fulness itself is an inflamation of absence", he glosses on canonical conversions of nothingness into being from Brătianu to Noica (Patapievici 1995: 118).

The Void of Personality

Absenting oneself from history results in a different kind of shortage, a lack of personality. In their self-portrayal, Romanians often resort to the topos of the personality void, either as anonymity, or as endemic modesty – something Romanians traditionally cherish.

In the 1980s, a U.S. Fulbright lecturer at the University of Bucharest liked to tell a joke that narrated his personal shock in confronting Romanian students. He claimed there was one great difference between American and Romanian students. When you walk into an American class and say "Good morning", half of the class jumps up and shouts "What do you mean by 'good'?" and the other half protests just as loudly "What do you mean by 'morning'?" When you walk into a Romanian class and say "Good morning", the whole class conscienciously makes a note of that in their books.

There is a whole tradition behind the anecdotal modesty of the Romanian student. Modesty is one of the most treasured virtues in the Romanian tradition. Many folk tales praise humbleness and moderation. Andrei Codrescu feels the greatest shock produced by the 1989 Revolution was when Romanians realized that in his baudy luxury, so indecent when compared with the famine and unimaginable hardship forced on the masses, "Ceausescu had betrayed a quality Romanian people value very highly: modesty" (Codrescu 1991: 73).

The cult of anonymity is yet another guise for the personality void. Romanian critics insist that the anonymous folk poems and ballads of the oral tradition are among the most accomplished masterpieces of Romanian literature. Many a cultivated writer in the Romanian pantheon has been concerned with preserving the wisdom of modesty. Mihai Eminescu (1850–1889), Romania's cultural Superman and a late Romantic, surprisingly cultivated in some of his texts the image of the

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modest creator that relinquishes his pride and subjectivity in order to attain artistic perfection. The reason: "Nu noi suntem stăpâni limbei, ci limba e stăpâna noastră" [we are not the masters of language, rather language is mistress of us all] (Eminescu 1993: 98 – MS 2275B). One of Eminescu's romantic heroes dares think in the middle of his cosmic vision that he may be God himself, but never gets to finish the sentence because he is struck by God's wrathful thunder. In many of his poems Eminescu resonates with the anonymous folk artists and he paraphrases or finds inspiration in folk poems and narratives.

Nurtured by nineteenth-century canonical examples, Lucian Blaga's cosmogonic philosophy conceives of the Maker as the Great Anonym. In his acceptance speech on joining the Romanian Academy in 1937, Blaga acknowledges the "anonymous powers" of his home village in shaping the stylistic determinants of his soul and repeats a thesis from *Spaţiul mioritic* that the Romanian village is exemplary in its self-sufficient boycotting of history to retain its anonymous authenticity (Blaga 1994a: 4, 11).

A few years later, Mircea Eliade would also gloss admiringly on the cult of anonymous art and claim that Romanian classical culture (especially Ion Creangă) has the unique quality of being accessible even to an uneducated peasant, which is inconceivable in the case of a Dante, Shakespeare or Racine. He does not stop there, but tops it by professing that "a significant part of modern Romanian literature developed along the lines of folk creativity" (Eliade 1995: 24–25).

The topos was carried over into communist totalitarianism, as demonstrated by poet Marin Sorescu (1936–1996), a leader of the "generation of the 1960s", who picks up the trope of the peasant's personality void and develops it in a savory postmodern parody of the myth of the flood, *It's Gonna Rain*, with God featuring as a wise yet modest peasant who is not really the initiator of the deluge:

> O să plouă/ Îşi zice Dumnezeu, căscând,/ Şi privind la cerul fără pic de nor,/ Mă cam încearcă reumatismul/ De vreo patruzeci de zile şi patruzeci de nopţi./ Ehe, se strică vremea!// Noe, mă Noe,/ Ia vino până la gard să-ţi spun o vorbă [It's gonna rain, God thought/ Yawning and looking up at the cloudless sky,/ This rheumatism of mine's been testing me/ For fourty days and fourty nights./ Well, we're in for some bad weather.// Noah—hey, Noah!/ Come over to the fence: I'll have a word with you].

Another leading poet of the same generation, Nichita Stănescu (1933-1983), though short-listed for the Nobel Prize for literature and awarded numerous distinctions, and although reputed for his highly innovative and idiosyncratic poetic style, was a champion of artistic modesty. For him, the poet was an anonymous presence, an absence of personality that engendered and made possible the self-generation of poetry.

In his acceptance speech for the Struga Prize for Poetry, he declared:

> Critica poeziei – poezia fiind socotită după părerea noastră, ca o nouă frontieră a sufletului uman – noi nu o facem din punct de vedere al vedetelor producătoare de fraze geniale, ci din punctul de vedere al moaşei de ţară, care, ajutând ţăranca pe câmp să nască, nu dă loc confuziei de merit între meseria moaşei şi miracolul naşterii. Noi credem că nu există poeţi, ci moaşe ale poeziei şi că este o tristă confuzie aceea care s-ar putea face sperând în meritul poetului iar nu în miracolul poeziei [The critique of poetry – poetry being in our view a new frontier of the human soul – is something that we

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> perform not as a star who issues brilliant pronouncements, but as a country midwife who helps the woman in the field give birth, yet never warrants a confusion between the merits of the housewifing business and the miracle of birth. We believe there are really no poets, but simply poetry midwives contrary to the sad and confused belief in the merit of poets, rather than in the miracle of poetry] (Stănescu 1981: 251–252).

He elaborates on the same theme of anonymity, or void of personality in a number of poems, such as *The Poet Like the Soldier* ("The poet like the soldier has no private life./ His private life is ashes and dust. [...]// Never believe the poet when he weeps./ His tear is never his tear./ He squeezes tears out of things./ He sheds the tear of things.") or *Self-portrait* (I am none other than/ a bloodstain/ that speaks).

It is small wonder that even modern artists share in this cult of anonymity. Though Romanian modernity helped shape the art of the 20th century, much of it stemmed from an anonymous culture. Such is the case, for instance, of Constantin Brâncusi (1876–1956), seen by many art critics as the father of modern sculpture. He was successful in his own time and, though no more than a Romanian peasant who was poor enough to have to cross Europe on foot to reach Paris, he was a very proud individual. He left the studio of his master and friend, the great Auguste Rodin, saying: "Nothing grows in the shade of great oaks" and did not hesitate to sue the U.S. Customs Office for their bureaucratic disregard of his art.

Despite all that, he preserved his peasant modesty and discreetly withdrew his subjectivity from his work in order to allow the quintessential shape of things talk for itself. His only monumental works were destined for his home town of Tirgu-Jiu, close to his birth-place village of Hobiţa[2].

The Void of Vitality

Finally, this monumental vacancy in Romanian culture seems to amount to an overall refusal of vitality. The forms of this type of generative void are mortification, symbolic suicide, abstinence, and ascesis.

The masterpieces of folk literature and the fundamental myths of the Romanians are *Mioriţa* (*The Ewe Lamb*) and *Meşterul Manole* (*Master Manole*). *Miorita* is the story of a shepherd whose life is threatened by his two envious companions plotting to kill him. Though warned by his miraculous ewe-lamb, rather than prepare his defense or flee, the shepherd launches on an allegorical description of his death as the ewe-lamb is to report it to the shepherd's mother: a cosmic wedding. The ballad was read by many as another *Jacques le fataliste*, and the Romanian anonymous creator was charged once more with defeatism. Yet, if read in the company of the *Master Manole* ballad, *Mioriţa* betrays a different significance: it is no less than a preparation for battle, an ascetic concentration to encounter one's destiny such that everything negative may be converted into spiritual victory.

The beneficial effect of death becomes apparent in *Master Manole*, the story of a master builder whose construction (a monastery) fails to stand. In a dream, he realises the need for a human sacrifice and makes an agreement with his team that whoever should visit them first is to be sacrificed. Chance has it that it is Manole's

[2] One of them is called "Table of Silence" (yet another kind of void in Romanian culture, the void of vocality – one more way in which absence becomes positive, creative).

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own wife. She is buried in the wall of the monastery, and the building is animated, it comes to life. In Mircea Eliade's interpretation, these two ballads evince a Romanian tradition of "valorizing death". He deftly connects the syndrome of cultural and historical trauma of south-east European nations with the topos of "creative death" which upturns what may seem like diminished vitality

> Românii, ca şi vecinii din sud-estul Europei, şi-au regăsit în acest mit central al „morţii creatoare" propriul lor destin. Nu este deloc întâmplător că cele două creaţii de seamă ale spiritualităţii populare româneşti – *Mioriţa* şi *Balada Meşterului Manole* – îşi au temeiul într-o valorificare a morţii. [...] Prezenţa morţii în centrul spiritualităţii populare româneşti nu înseamnă însă o viziune pesimistă a lumii, o rarefiere a debitului vital, o deficienţă psihică. Un contact direct cu viaţa ţărănească infirmă hotărât aceste supoziţii; românul în genere nu cunoaşte nici teama de viaţă, nici beţia mistagogică (de structură slavă), nici pesimismul religios, nici atracţia către asceză (de tip oriental). Şi, cu toate acestea, cele două creaţii capitale ale spiritualităţii populare româneşti poartă în miezul lor o valorificare a morţii. Dar prezenţa morţii nu este, aici, negativă. Moartea din *Mioriţa* este o calmă reîntoarcere „lângă ai săi". Moartea din *Meşterul Manole* este creatoare, ca orice moarte rituală (Eliade 2004: 124).

A popular poem by Eminescu, *Ode* (*In Ancient Metre*), reiterates the concept of fertile death:

> Nu credeam să 'nvăţ a muri vr'odată;/ Pururi tânăr, înfăşurat în manta-mi,/ Ochii mei 'nălţam visători la steaua/ Singurătăţii.// Când de-odată tu răsăreşi în cale-mi,/ Suferinţă tu, dureros de dulce .../ Pân' în fund băui voluptatea morţii/ Ne 'ndurătoare.// […] Piară-mi ochii turburători din cale,/ Vino iar în sân, nepăsare tristă/ Ca să pot muri liniştit, pe mine/ Mie redă-mă! [Never did I think I would learn to die,/ Forever young, wrapped in my cloak,/ I would raise my dreamy eyes to the star/ Of solitude.// When suddenly you rose in my way,/ Suffering, you, painfully sweet,/ To the drains I drank the voluptuousness of death/ The merciless.// […] Let the troubling eyes vanish from my path,/ Come back into my bossom, sorrowful indifference;/ That I may die with a peaceful mind, to me/ Restore myself!].

Constantin Noica has helped perhaps more than many of his peers turn this nineteenth-century topos of apathy and longing for self-annihilation into a cultural tradition which he upheld both before and after the advent of communism. Noica developed Eminescu's somber *Ode* to death as self-fulfillment into a self-standing philosophical doctrine of beneficial apathy and mortification. From his debut book *Mathesis* (1938), Noica was fascinated by the virtues of non-being and non-action. There he claims one has to abstract from progress and change, avoid all things "consummate/consumable" (Rom. *se consumă*). He explains: "Nu am nevoie, nu am ce face cu lumea care este. Nu se poate trăi decât în lumea care ar putea fi" [I have no need for the world that *is*. Life is only possible in the world that might be] (Noica 1992: 57, 67).

In the late 1970s, Noica was still elaborating an apologetic philosophy that redeemed Romanians' lack of civilizational drive. Starting from the Hegelian triad of the general, the individual and the determinations, Noica submits there are six "creative maladies" of the human spirit, of which the one whereby man refuses his worldly determinations and withdraws from the world, *ahoretia* (a term coined by

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Noica from the Greek *horoi*), appears to him as closest to the Romanian heart. In describing the Indian tradition of asceticism and passive resistance, he echoes the apologetic vocabulary of the birth and resilience of the nation typical of Romanian historiography:

> Miracolul ahoretiei, ca al oricărei maladii spirituale dealtfel, este că a obţinut pozitivul chiar în forma extremă a negativului, sau acţiunea eficace prin totală pasivitate [The miracle of ahoretia, as of any spiritual malady, is that it yields the positive in the extreme form of the negative and that it acts efficiently through total passiveness] (Noica 1978: 83).

His description of ahoretia as the waning of animal energies to be compensated by the wisdom of old age reveals, as in the case of Eliade's comments on the founding ballads of "creative death", the structural homology between the topos of the void of vitality and that of the historical void:

> [Ahoretia] este maladia […] ducând la o bruscă iluminare sau luciditate de conştiinţă, ce face pe subiect să îşi interzică participaţia, să-şi domine determinaţiile, să vadă pozitivul non-actului şi al negativului, acceptând înfrângerea, asimilând-o şi intrând în indiferenţă, iubind tot ce se desprinde de lume ca atare, de la asceză şi poezie până la matematici şi sepctacolul revoluţiei tehnico-ştiinţifice, punând viaţa şi istoria sub ordinea raţiunii, care desfiinţează noul şi proclamă rodnicia non-călătoriei [[*Ahoretia is*] conducive to a sudden illumination or lucidity of conscience which forces the subject to reject participation, to dominate his determinations, to perceive the positive in non-action and negativity, accepting defeat, assimilating it, and entering indifference, placing life and history under the order of reason, which annihilates novelty and proclaims the fruitfulness of non-travel] (Noica 1978: 103).

Noica's guidance to his disciples is no different. He encourages them "to tame their animality [...] to teach them how to pass from the individual to the larger self [...] to forget ourselves". Self-annihilation is the path to communing with the larger spirit. Relinquishing oneself is an act of ultimate rejoicing in a fulfilled love as well as in successful self-knowledge. A good student, Gabriel Liiceanu notes at the end of his *Journal*:

> În lumea spiritului, crima – dorită de ambele părţi şi prevăzută ca act obligatoriu în orice scenariu paideic – devine cea mai înaltă formă a afirmaţiei, conferind victimei un moment de supremă beatitudine şi acordându-i, prin această nouă întrupare, prilejul unei alte vieţi [In the world of the spirit, 'crime' – desired by both parties and stipulated as a compulsory act in any paidetic scenario – becomes the highest form of affirmation and confers a moment of supreme beatitude to the victim who is granted through this new embodiment the occasion of a new life] (Liiceanu 1991: 277–278).

In Noica's didactic scenario, the disciple has to finally kill his master, to assimilate and transcend him, only to realize that he has killed and transcended himself, his old self, as Cioran points out in a letter to Liiceanu:

> Par là, le Journal dépasse les limites forcément discrètes d'un texte philosophique et révèle son dessein véritable: la recherche de soi-même. Le crime qui le couronne concerne moins le Maître que le Disciple: celui que vous venez de tuer en vous... (Liiceanu 1987: 13).

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Conclusions

The tropical conversion of the void into something beneficial and revitalizing is a compensating mechanism for traumatized cultural identities. It is a species of diversionist discourse which generates unexpected power for the weak. Other researchers have been aware of the rhetoric of resistance. James C. Scott investigated certain strategies of dissent in his *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, but he is mainly interested in class relations and ideology as he lists *pragmatic and immediate* forms of "disguised popular aggression" such as anonymity and gossip, euphemisms, grumbling, oral culture, symbolic inversion, carnivals (Scott 1990: 142 passim).

But in Romanian culture the reversed symbolism of the void is both culturally *comprehensive* and historically *consistent*, it works at all levels of social life and it spans several historical periods. Unlike Scott's study object, it is a *persistent metaphysics* that constructs and preserves national identity, rather than a cautious subversive strategy of individuals or subnational groups.

A comparison of Romanian as opposed to East European (or any other anti-authoritarian) concept of anonymity should be edifying. In the Romanian tradition, the void of personality is the condition for any creation; in anti-authoritarian societies anonymity is just a hide out, a means of getting away with dissent.

Though it may be triggered by particular situations of oppression and denied alternatives, the Romanian strategy of converting voids into centers of regenerated meaning spills across historical and social boundaries to become a "tradition". This rhetorical reflex is ubiquous and it has been invoked starting with the nineteenth century as a response to the traumas caused by ethnic, national, social, political or cultural discriminations. The remarkable result of this recurring founding trope is that it tends to create a continuum between a fundamental world view and the ensuing cultural practices, between the conceptual and the formal aspects of collective identity.

The Romanian monumentalizing of vacancy is rich in symbolic and ideological possibilities. The trope of the regenerative void displays an impressive rhetorical complexity and it can be viewed as a knot of potential ideological and textual scenarios that may include anarchist metaphorizations and lyrical scripting, radically-minded heroic narratives or conservative parables and ironic fables (Ştefănescu 2008, Ştefănescu 2010).

Analyses as the one performed here may also present methodological opportunities. Such studies help uncover the *internal, discursive mechanisms of identity formation*, which are more resilient and more basic then the economic and political contexts, the social and institutional frameworks commonly investigated by nationalism scholars. Instead of the instrumental and objective concerns of constructivist approaches to nation-building, my research hopes to promote a *subjective constructivism* whose focus is cultural discourse seen as a prefigurative field for the actual policies of instantiating the nation. A better understading of traditional discursive scenarios for Romanian identity such as that of fruitful withdrawals from history and of passive resistance may help explain the apathy and reserve of Romanians when confronted with external impositions whether from menacing empires or strategic Euro-Atlantic allies.

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Abstract

This paper catalogs a number of Romanian self-images of the regenerative void as a tropical conversion of the void into something beneficial and revitalizing is a compensating mechanism for traumatized cultural identities. It aims to illustrate how in Romanian culture the reversed symbolism of the void is both culturally *comprehensive* and historically *consistent*, spanning several historical periods. Though it may be triggered by particular situations of oppression and denied alternatives, the Romanian rhetorical strategy of converting voids into centers of regenerated meaning spills across historical and social boundaries to become a "tradition". This rhetorical reflex is ubiquous and it has been invoked starting with the nineteenth century as a response to the traumas caused by ethnic, national, social, political or cultural discriminations. Resting on subjective constructivist premises, my effort is part of a category of cultural studies that operates in the framework of discourse analysis and cultural rhetoric. It documents how the *internal, discursive mechanisms of identity formation* are more resilient then the economic and political contexts or the social and institutional frameworks commonly investigated by nationalism scholars.

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