

BOOKS

Sorin Mitu (ed.), *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România III. Imaginar istoric*. General editor: Corin Braga. Iași, Polirom, 2020, 407 p.

The course of history that epitomizes a nation's cultural anatomy can be conscientiously revised and reiterated through the perceptive lens of the historian. In their task to impart timeless knowledge, historians perform careful surgeries on the body of history, investigating the abundant forms that gain shape in its configuration. Being invariably prone to move unhindered through the realm of the imaginary, they are amassing fragments of wisdom from both history and historiography. The sphere of the historical imaginary encapsulates at the same time the past events that took place in the nation, taken as factual substance, and the scholarship that postdates these occurrences, with its explanations and interpretations. It is in the third volume of *Enciclopedia Imaginariilor din România* [*The Encyclopaedia of Romanian Imaginaries*] that these incursions into the historical imaginary of the nation are analyzed under the aegis of the collective

effort of no less than twenty scholars, gathered from various disciplines and fields of inquiry. From anthropology and ethnology, to archeology and research on

national identity and memory, the authors that we encounter in this volume manage to cooperatively build a cartography of the past that places Romanian history in the spotlight of our cultural heritage.

Divided into five sections (or constellations) that are preceded by an introduction, the volume edited by Sorin Mitu carefully unveils "architectonic structures" (13) that are configured in a universe accessible to the exploration of

the imaginary. Starting from a delineation of the specificity of the Romanian historical imaginary, we are led to embark on an odyssey that takes us through the cosmogeny of the nation's foundational myths, with deviations meant to encompass the most relevant and necessary points of discussion in the development of contemporary historiography. Throughout



the volume, we find some visual incursions that exhibit portraits, photographs and paintings of some of the most influential figures in Romanian culture. The first of such constellations iterates a return to origins, with the intent of exploring both the Dacian and Roman lineages while paying close attention to the advent of protochronism in Romanian culture. Furthermore, following on a variety of legends and myths, the particularities of our origins are found to “always express the conscience of an ethnic identity”, and while “adhering” to such narratives, in true Joycean fashion, “the better part of the nation gazes at itself as through a mirror.” (103).

The constellation of imagined communities pays close attention to the various roles of social constructions in shaping a common perspective about the limitations of our country’s frame of mind. As such, opening with a discussion on the function of the Church as a prime mover in the creation of a discourse of identity, the consciousness of the state is massively impacted by the collaboration with the religious institution. Moving forward, the social body raises questions regarding the theological implications in the transitional allure of a socio-political entity, with the figure of Inochentie Micu acting as a metaphor for this necessary shift in the Romanian mentality. Simona Nicoară’s incursion into the national imaginary traces the development of “the idea of nation” and of the “national consciousness” (151). Since the nation represents, among other dimensions, a “historical mentality” (150), its study allows for a deep dive into the idea of unity as a founding aspiration for the much-needed restoration of national values. The entire system that emerges has the power to

represent our national identity and because of this, we conclude that “the state unity is the cradle of the nation” (153). She ends the chapter with a call for attentiveness in the face of the ever-changing “spirit of time” (159), after carefully laying out the most important ideas that helped crystallize the idea of nation in Romania. The constellation culminates with a discussion about racism and its surfacing in our country: from anti-Semitism to the “ideological vector” (167) of eugenics, the entire history of discrimination is carefully exposed in the chapter written by Constantin Bărbulescu.

When analyzing the significance of our national identity, a most important consideration is to be given to the presence and influence of alterity. The self-image of the Romanians is explored through the identification of four phases of development: genesis, speculative, national-communist and postcommunist. Luminița Ignat-Coman intends to make sure that the “non-unitary and fragmentary character” (194) of the national self-image is taken into account in the forging of a myth of national identity. As a “culture that thought of itself in terms of survival” (195), ours is seen to be constantly in need of returning to a past that should manage to delineate a more or less definitive singularity. The inclusion of two chapters on the history of German and Hungarian communities, along with a third chapter that gathers opinions on the figure of the “stranger” (meaning the ethnical representations of the Other that has gotten in contact with the Romanian), are representatives of a cultural blooming that is to be cherished in the context of this “identity-alterity relation” (250). After all, such stereotypes, accompanied by marginalization or, on the contrary,

celebration, helped consolidate the figure of the Romanian as a pluralistic entity.

The fourth constellation starts by examining the need of preserving the cult of the hero with the aid of imagination, regardless of the interests at hand. We are also provided with an argument that has at its core the figure of the artisan, building a case for the conservation of symbolical items with the help of the institution of the museum. In the chapter dedicated to the revolution and the figure of the revolutionary, the historical and political constellation is analyzed thoroughly through the lens of the imaginary. Placed at the “intersection between the historical imaginary and the historiographical imaginary” (289), Mihai Chiper identifies other more precise types such as: the revolutionary imaginary, the imaginary of conspiracy and ploy, the imaginary of violence, the redistributive imaginary, the national regeneration imaginary or the political imaginary of the besieged fortress. In making use of this lens, the impact of the various facets of the revolution is made to be scrutinized. Sorin Mitu, the editor of this volume of studies, delves into the figure of the providential leader, defined as a “political myth” (311). He pinpoints four typologies of such a figure (savior, martyr, vigilante and founder/constructor), examining the particularities of each character and emphasizing, towards his conclusion, the instability of any sovereign authority in the Romanian territory.

The final constellation is directed towards evasion. The journey is seen to have cultivated a truly necessary supplement for the collective mentality of the nation. At the same time the landscape, split into five categories (metaphor, gaze, heritage, physiocratic and utopian), manages to become a “possible component in the relation of human-nature-history” (359). To take an example, the physiocratic landscape intends to emphasize the significance of nature’s economic value and consequently, to create a cartography that would help catalogue our nation’s riches. Ultimately, the history of death is explored as a “fundamental dimension of humanity” (376), therefore it would be unthinkable to deviate from the thanatological enticement of our cultural ancestry, even though it is said to be “less fertile” (376) than in other cultures.

In trying to keep away from the post-truth era, in which the imaginary “seems to be a successful business” (13), the volume carries out with impressive force an exploration of the weight of history in the definition of the Romanian national identity. Along with the other four volumes in the collection, the realm of the imaginary is exhaustively examined, questioned and evaluated, making such an endeavor a compelling accomplishment. Through the profusely various subjects embraced, we can conclude that *Enciclopedia Imaginariilor din România* succeeds in displaying the necessity of such a project for Romanian culture.

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