Sea Fiction in Contemporary Romanian Literature

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Abstract: The present article aims to analyze the process of recovering marine imagery in some contemporary Romanian fictional works. The study will proceed with our study from two distinct perspectives: from the point of view of a narrator who gained experience on board ships and from the point of view of an imaginary narrator-traveler. For the case studies, a few postmodern fictions have been considered. The limits between reality and fiction are to identify the literary exotism of those texts, concluding that the idea of "recycling" the marine themes in the present Romanian literary space contributes to the detachment of those works from the body of nautical fiction which many literary critics considered as minor literature.
Keywords: marine imagery, sea voyage, travel, logbook, nautical fiction.

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Introduction

For almost any writer, the ocean is often an extremely rich and practically inexhaustible source of inspiration. To this day, more than half a millennium after Christopher Columbus's epic expeditions, marine themes remain relevant for world literature. And even if is only about a few Romanian authors and few of their literary works, they can be easily included in the nautical literary genre, representing a veritable splash of color in current Romanian literature, reminding us of the few writers of maritime novels from the twentieth century.

Travel and adventure have always attracted humans, fascinating their inquisitive spirit. While exploring unknown or imaginary territories, man lives through travel the experience of discovering other worlds, and even assuming new identities. Journey is a worldwide theme that occurs across literature from its beginnings until the present days. It has been exploited for the completeness of the implied motifs, for the rich symbolism, and the wide-area of signification. A definition of journey could be that of an existential experience, revealing to man the entire beauty of the terrestrial or marine spaces, on the one hand, and the cosmic boundlessness, on the other hand.[1] At the same time, a journey means initiation, it can turn into a spiritual path, but it can also mean acquiring knowledge by taking risks and challenging the unknown.

Journey often plays the role of a narrative pretext, giving the writer the opportunity to imagine unknown worlds in the literary texts, and to create unique characters and spectacular adventures.[2] It acquires numerous values at the level of human consciousness, being realized either from the thirst for adventure or from the desire to satisfy its longing for exploration and initiation. Usually, journey has two different meanings: as a road in a specific setting, with unexpected adventures along the way and specific characters living a certain type of experiences, but also an inner adventure, a spiritual transformation generated by the journey itself.[3] Thus, it symbolizes not only the discovery of new spaces but also an inner discovery, a spiritual evolution.

Journey, first of all, represents an experience itself. An adventure.[4] The one who travels is always caught in the core of his very own traveling condition, in the core of an existential experience he cannot escape. Everyone experiences their own journey in a different way. Whether it is a trip to a city or to a market, whether it is a journey around the world, it is an individual experience

and a form of acquiring knowledge of what is not yet familiar to us, but strange and unknown. It is also, as with several other fundamental human experiences, a paradigm of authentic and direct experience. It means acquiring experiences that are attained through the quests to which the traveler is subjected to.

Voyage may be also considered from viewpoint of its anthropological roots. From birth to death, the journey is for each of us as well as for all of humanity a familiar experience and represents one of the most fundamental tools for gaining knowledge and experience. It means mobility, change of place, therefore moving from one place to another represents a common space for metaphors of human experiences, usually indicating the transition from one stage to another.

Journey may be considered the ground for generalizing global metaphors and a group of symbols through which the human imagination can express transitions and transformations of any kind. Almost any transitional experience can make use of the metaphor of the journey. Starting with mythical cultures to modern and postmodern cultures, the experience of human mobility has always been used to express either the meaning of death, or the global structure of life, or to encode changes from one social or existential condition to another by using the rites of passage. Just because of its roots in the anthropological levels of the human being, the journey represents the experience of change not at all common to all people. Through its universal character, the journey becomes a tool for exploring the unknown through the known and provides such a specific space for the birth of metaphors of different human experiences.[5]

This unique experience, which is represented by journey, carries along with risks and dangers, and that is why a good part of travel narratives may also be regarded as adventure fiction. There are, obviously, other genres of travel literature (travel diary, lyrical prose), which do not fit into those mentioned above. For a piece of maritime fiction to be possible and as real as it can be, even in its minimalistic formulas, nautical vocabulary should reach outside its limits and move towards a major standard imposed by the literary language. Therefore, the story of a ship, of a sailor or the narrative of a sea voyage cannot be written without making use of this particular vocabulary.

The sea stories from the sea contain many technical terms, and their meaning and use are obviously best known to a sailor, and their majority is connected to sailing because most of these narratives are placed before steam or Diesel propulsion came into use on board ships. But this literature cannot only be limited by the specificity of the technical terms, but it is about a certain environment and a totally different way of life, which for most of the readers represents a gateway to the unknown, and unbelievable adventures.

Sea and sailors, pirates, and fishers occupy an important place in adventure literature, such as the cases of: Homer's *Odyssey*, *The Lusíads* by Luís Vaz de Camões, *The Pilot* and *The Red Rover* by James Fenimore Cooper, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Captain Singleton* by Daniel Defoe, Victor Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea*, Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, *Redburn* or *Moby-Dick*, *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson or Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo* and *Typhoon*. This is quite natural because in the old times, during the age of sails and before the great expeditions for exploring the world, a sea voyage was considered an adventure in itself, but also due to the fact that sailors were endowed with rich imagination, a trait of character rooted in the long ocean passages that lasted for months when all crew was isolated and far away from everything that was familiar to them, and when the vastness of the ocean unfolded before their eyes, their imagination found the favorable grounds to give birth to fantastic creatures and events, some of those later being turned into myths and legends which survived until the day.

When talking about nautical literature, one might only take into account the literature that centers itself on nautical themes that refer strictly to fishing, piracy, shipwrecking, exploratory voyages, emigration, commercial transportation, or warships. In order to better grasp maritime fiction, it is necessary to take into consideration the history of this literary genre and its connection to the maritime world. John Peck's definition of the sea narrative would mark a very useful starting point:

> "three elements compete for attention in sea stories: there is the individual sailor, who more often than not will display distinctively masculine qualities; the sea and the other shore as places of danger, where challenges have to be met; and thirdly, the social, economic and political dimension, that the ship is a product of technology, that it has been built for a purpose, and that there is a practical aspect to every sea voyage."[6]

Nowadays, in terms of this narrow definition, nautical literature is either anachronistic or barely exists for the simple fact that most of these maritime activities have changed radically over time. The idea of a voyage aboard a ship has come to mean a luxury cruise or some recreational activities of the rich people, such as sport fishing, yachting, the smuggling of prohibited substances and goods, or the illegal transportation of stowaways. During the last decades, maritime trade has become a global business, and human manpower has drastically been reduced due to the use of specialized ships and the development of technologies across the maritime industry. The strengthening of air trade, and the decrease in costs for air transportation involving both the transport of people and goods, has resulted in a shift in man's attitude towards the sea or the ocean, especially affecting the mentalities of people in urban areas or in industrialized regions. Therefore, for many of us seas and oceans of our days seem to have value

only in the case of recreational and touristic activities, being seen as a source of food or it is used as a place for dumping unwanted and harmful substances.

Such a radical change of attitude does not necessarily mean that there is no longer a place for seas and oceans in today's literature and culture. On the contrary, precisely because of these fundamental changes in the roles and relationships between marine space and human society, there is a greater need for literary studies to investigate the past and demonstrate what nautical literature meant in different periods of time, what it means at present and what could represent for our future.

By celebrating the practical skills of ocean adventurers, nautical fiction explores aspects of modern consciousness as a constituent part of all those being away from home. These aspects constitute a capacity, a modern distinctive form of practical reason, which defines and distinguishes people based on their intelligence or skills proved in action.

Characters of nautical fiction take full advantage of this practical reason, challenging their skills in order to overcome the boundaries of the unknown, of a world that is sometimes violent, chaotic, and occasionally wonderful. They fight against storms that endanger their lives, discover reef barriers, get sick with scurvy, get shipwrecked on dangerous or desert islands, hunt sharks or whales, organize mutinies, start combats at sea or meet pirates. M. Bakhtin came up with a *theory* of adventure in one of his essays entitled *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel* contained in his book *The Dialogic Imagination,* in which he argued that adventures fiction subjects its protagonists to various dangers in order to test them and thus they assert their own identities, which represent the constituent values of a culture.[7]

Imaginary voyages have as a plot either an expedition, a sea adventure, or a sea voyage. Many of these imaginary voyages are motivated by the quest for a magical relic. The difficult journey to the land where this object is located and the journey back home is often one that involves the transition from childhood or adolescence to adulthood by struggling to get that object and to ensure the safe return home, which represents a metaphor for human development. The imaginary journey offers the readership the experience of the voyage at sea, however, sparing it from the months spent at sea in an environment full of unforeseen events, being able this way to travel imaginatively to distant lands that one can only dream of.

Travel stories are among the oldest narrative forms. The adventures that led to the great discoveries of the world play an important role in folklore, mythology, and medieval romantic stories, and the metaphors of the journey of human evolution remain central for modern epic forms as well. The imaginary voyage is focused not only on fictional sea voyage narratives but also on those literary forms that are centered on true sea accounts that happened during historical voyages. Authors of fictional works based on imaginary journeys developed sophisticated literary forms that allowed readers to access a virtual world by means of imagination, simulating the rhetorical techniques used in the stories recounting authentic voyages. These fictional narratives seemed so compelling sometimes that they were on many occasions considered original documents that were accounting for historical events in connection to geographical discoveries.

The main texts considered for our case studies are: *Pascal desenează corăbii* [Pascal is drawing sailing ships] by Radu Niciporuc, *Mort în Patagonia* [Dead in Patagonia] by Daniel Vighi and *Evanghelia după Araña* [The Gospel of Araña] by Nicolae Strâmbeanu, but we also stopped on some lesser-known novels with a lower literary value, such as: *Oglan. Navigând spre Labrador* [Oglan. Sailing to Labrador] by Ion Teleianu, *Singur împotriva oceanului* [Alone Against the Ocean] by Constantin Costache and *Somalia, mon amour* [Somalia, my love] by Bogdan Hrib.

The Maritime Imagery in the Contemporary Romanian Literature

The nautical literature in the Romanian literary space does not allow validation of its existence as a literary species in its own rights, but rather as a subgenre of travel literature or children's literature, both these inclusions doing nothing but diminishing its importance, even if it were a short list of works when it comes to it.[8] The marine imaginary has only a few reference data in Romanian literature. We find some references to the Russian-Turkish political and military problems in chronicles such as those belonging Neculce and Greceanu[9] and later in Ion Ghica's biography. More prominently, the imaginary and its constituent elements appear for the first time in the works of Jean Bart, who is known in the history of Romanian literature for three texts: *Jurnal de bord* (1896) [A Logbook], *Schiţe marine* (1901, 1928) [Marine Sketches] and *Europolis* (1933). It is then worth mentioning Matila Ghyka who attended the Naval School in Brest and who wrote countless pages of memoirs about the first voyage he made "as an aspiring officer on board a frigate that roamed across the Atlantic Ocean, calling ports where he enjoyed crazy innocent adventures."[10] Panait Istrati is another author who made a name for himself in the Romanian literary space, being best known for his marine literary sketches. He embarked on his first voyage on a ship with the help of a stoker who got impressed by the excitement that Istrati displayed when he said that he wanted to reach Alexandria in Egypt. Adrian Zografi, the character of his novels, who functions as an alter ego for Panait Istrati, proves to us his love for the Mediterranean. Mihai Tican Rumano (1893-1967) is another adventurer who wrote a book named *Icoane dunărene* (1933) [*Danubian Icons*], where he recounts his travels to various cities along the Danube River.[11]

Perhaps the most successful work of the kind in the Romanian literature is *Toate pânzele sus!* (1954) [*All the Sails Up!*] by Radu Tudoran.[12] His passion for travels and his interest in landscape descriptions are two specific traits that go hand in hand in this novel, making of it not only an attractive adventure novel, but also a key reference in youth literature. Though this work suffered from being marginalized in its critical reception, it remains in the history of Romanian literature as one of the most enjoyable books in the whole communist period and one of the first examples of literary escapism.[13] Beyond the spectacular adventures of the crew of the schooner *Speranța*, the author transforms the journey into a metaphor for life, giving birth to one of the most successful stories about freedom in the Romanian socialist era, having played an important role in the evolution of the Romanian literature.[14] A masterpiece of a minor genre, Tudoran's novel lacks the seriousness of high literature, not being able to qualify in the canon of Romanian literature. But no matter how this novel is regarded by the readers or critics – adventure novel, teenage novel, or escapist literature – it proposes an extraordinary fictional refugee and an escape through imagination outside the area of influence of communism.

The voyage theme in *Toate pânzele sus!* Presents a full spectrum of meanings, affecting all the essential dimensions of life. For Radu Tudoran, the journey does not represent just a simple route to a given destination, but it is rather a complex quest where the destination appears along the way, and the transformation of the traveler takes place regardless of its trajectory through space. This journey is the result of an obsession with escaping and it becomes a journey into the depths of human beings rather than a geographical route.

Works such as those belonging to Radu Theodoru (*Corsarul*, 1984), Radu Valentin (*Jean Bart*, 1967), Vasile Nedelcu (*Drum spre puntea de comandă*, 1986), Mircea Novac (*Povestiri din Atlanticul de Sud*, 1990), Bogdan Hrib (*Somalia, mon amour*, 2009) or Monica Ramirez (*Kit Black*, 2011) represents a few titles of novels lacking aesthetic consistency and literary value, which did not have the means to remain alive in the collective consciousness of the readership. Yet, an entirely different perspective of the maritime imagery emerges from more recent works such as *Mort în Patagonia*, *Evanghelia după Araña* and *Pascal desenează corăbii*.

When the Storyteller Is a Sea Wolf

In the Romanian literary space, there are too few examples of writers who experienced life at sea and who actually worked on board ships and later they used their experiences as the primary source for their novels. Worthy of being reminded are Panait Istrati with Méditerranée. Lever du soleil (1934) and Méditerranée. Coucher du soleil (1935), who worked as a stoker on board the ships of the Romanian Maritime Service (Serviciul Maritim Român) and reached this way various ports in the Mediterranean Sea.

Eugeniu P. Botez, known under his pseudonym as Jean Bart, borrowed his name from the famous Flemish corsair of the seventeenth century, represents an authentic figure in Romanian literature by making use for the first time of the logbooks and the marine sketches as literary forms, being also the first one to sustain the nautical novel as a genre itself (Jurnal de bord, Peste ocean, Pe drumuri de apă, Europolis). Less known authors worth to be mentioned are Ion Teleianu and Constantin Costache. The first one published two autobiographical volumes (Oglan and Oglan. Navigând spre Labrador) inspired by life aboard the ships on which he worked as a cook. Constantin Costache (May Day, Urme pe oglinda apei, Singur împotriva oceanului), gained his experience as captain on board several vessels and writes adventure novels inspired by his life at sea, his texts proved to be captivating through their cinematic characters and because they present real events from seafarers' lives. However, the most circulated name remains that of Radu Niciporuc, who published in 2016 at Cartea Românească publishing house the volume of short stories Pascal desenează corăbii.

Using Julio Cortázar's model, whose plots from All Fires The Fire are all parallel and symbolic, Niciporuc uses the exoticism of life at sea and the postmodernist technique of narrative telescoping, striving to bring them to a common ground, by constructing complex texts with several narrative plans, using the unique topics that life on board offered him where he worked as an electrical engineer, but sometimes his short stories lose their charm due to their textualist complications to which the author appears to resort too often.15

On the other hand, his stories are extraordinary, even though he willfully deprives his readers of enjoying the unusual places and events that he experienced. He narrates fragments of true events from the life of contemporary sailors, but he is more concerned with the textuality of his works and proves himself suspicious about any basic form of storytelling. So, his eight short stories only superficially explore and dig into modern sailors' life at sea, the social aspects aboard the ships are barely outlined, and the exoticism of life at sea and of traveling to various ports of the world is barely sketched out. His texts talk about dreamy sailors on deck, the boredom that gets installed on board during port stays, the quarrels and fights on board ships, about the international contacts that some crew members establish in various ports, about the routine of some activities on board the ship and about the cynical attitude of a captain who is already fed up with the inspections carried out by port authorities that he already knows are coming to look for problems so that they will be entitled to ask for "gifts". This is how the reader learns about the corruption of port authorities in various ports of the

world, about the many African stowaways who are trying to board ships to reach the Western world, about how the world economic crisis from 2008 affected the maritime industry or about the stories of how sailors made illicit income before 1989.

Although the material he had in hand is unique and inaccessible to most writers, Niciporuc chose to narrate his stories in an allusive manner only, being more fascinated by the narrative techniques than by the exoticism of some places and events to which only he had access and which he could have exploited more so that his readers could have enjoyed it. It can be said that Niciporuc tried not to turn his stories into some kind of adventure fiction. He managed to use a refined style with long phrases, sometimes perhaps too precious, but some fragments if they are taken separately can constitute real cinematic cutouts.

Two of the short stories in his volume prove to be the centerpieces of his work, one of which even gives the title of the book – Pascal desenează corăbii. In this story, the character who also narrates the events is an alter ego of the author. He's a loner, a contemplator, who often finds refuge in his cabin to read South American novels. He stays away from the small plots on board the ship and thus he becomes a discreet critic of the ridiculousness of the show that sometimes life at sea proves to be, subtly exploring human nature. This story depicts the French captain Pascal, an incurable melancholic, but also a skilled sailor who enjoys telling stories about ships and wines. So, the story acquires a touch of romance by revealing Pascal's passion for Odille, with whom he had fallen in love just by hearing her voice on the ship's radio station.16

The other story – Marinarul din Șumen [The Sailor of Shumen] – is the story of a Bulgarian ship captain, who is in love with a Caribbean prostitute, who needs to solve the problems caused by his crew members in different ports. The narrator tells Avva, after many delays, about various events that took place during his sea voyages. The love story between the Bulgarian captain Pencov and Señorita, a woman that works in a brothel in one of the Caribbean ports, unfolds softly. This story is also spiced up with tragi-comic moments such as the incident with the poisonous shrimp when Pencov got to the hospital after dinner with Señorita, the narrator-character and the brothel's owner María, or the story when they receive mango pies, sent by María, after a night when she had confessed to the on-board electrician. The Sailor of Shumen ends with this second story, which is told at a faster pace because Avva became very impatient to hear the end of it.

The stories recounted in the volume are fragments of the author's life at sea, a rich experience that offered him the opportunity to meet different people all over the world and to live exquisite moments. His texts are influenced by his readings during the long periods of solitude at sea and are centered on various characters belonging to the maritime trade, some of them being memorable, others just ethereal beings barely outlined. But Niciporuc brings them all back to life along with the sketching of the entire world to which they belong to.

His volume is infused with marine scents extracted from the author's seafaring experience but the advantage of the book lies with its existentialist form, Niciporuc's stories being inspired by his adventurous sea experience. He tried to delineate his writing in the postmodernism area, by combining the moral manner of Joseph Conrad's writings with Julio Cortázar's objective and structured style.17

Constantin Costache is another sea novel writer, a man who knows the sea from his working experience and for whom the land becomes the object of his desires and dreams.18 From the author's perspective, the sea signifies both adventures and dangers, but the greatest certainty for the sailor is the separation from family, from the places to which he belongs, the life of the sailor means an interruption of a way of life with a very different one. His nostalgia for his life back home with his family, and longing for his wife or children, who grew up in the absence of their father fill the gaps in the soul of the sailor when on board the ship. No matter how much the maritime technology has advanced, no matter how much new equipment is getting installed on board, no matter how many safety and security measures are taken on board the ship and no matter how much one tries to improve sailors' lives, the sea still remains a space full of dangers, unpredictable events, full of outstanding adventures. This can be seen in full from the very beginning of the volume Mayday. The title of the book is extremely significant for any sailor. This is the emergency call that a ship sends when it is in a situation of immediate danger such as fire on board or danger of sinking. Sailors such as Stanciu, Matei, Mircea, Rișcan, Mitofan, and Paul have embarked on board a ship registered under the Romanian flag. At some point, they need to face a storm at sea. Their vessel receives an emergency call through the radio station from another vessel transmitting its geographical coordinates and requiring assistance. The Romanian ship changes course in order to reach the vessel in distress. Arriving at the designated position, they will find out that a yacht is in distress. Search and rescue operations prove to be extremely difficult during a storm. Attempts are made to establish direct communication with the crew of the yacht through the radio station, but no response is received. As the master of the Romanian ship cannot make a decision because he does not want to put his own ship and crew in danger, a few crew members decide to start search and rescue operations on their own. It takes courage to accomplish the mission.19

The entire novel revolves around the idea of the modern man's struggle when confronting nature. The

author brings into discussion new aspects of life at sea, emphasizing that technology cannot neutralize the unforeseen dangers at sea. What is remarkable about Costache is the manner in which he intertwines technical information, suspense, and dialogue. He proves that he knows how to build tensioned moments as well as he demonstrates that he is able to portray his characters only through their reactions, or some spoken words in various extreme moments. So, a sailor's life is unfolded under the reader's eyes, from daily routine to moments of crisis.

The two novels belonging to Ion Teleianu do not live up to the standards set up by the two authors earlier discussed. They do not display Niciporuc's textualism, and neither the realism and the spirit of adventure of Constantin Costache's prose. They can be considered autofiction written in a simple language, without any esthetic prestige, but they are defined by a light and simple humorous style. The author, a former cook on ocean fishing vessels, chooses to recount funny episodes of the life of sailors. It is certain that the stories are inspired by his experiences on board fishing vessels, but it is equally obvious that he knowingly chose only episodes relevant for their comic core. He does not insist on the dangerous moments that can appear at any time at sea, proving that his intention was to create two texts full of situational comic.

Therefore, we can conclude that we have three authors who were former sailors, having different styles, who approach maritime topics very differently one from each other, which is being determined by their different approach of life at sea. While there is a high chance that none of them to make it in the literary canon of contemporary Romanian literature, we must emphasize that their works represent a colorful splash in our literary space.

Fictional travels and travelers at sea

Marine tropes are present in the oral and written literature of many nations, so that we find out about paradisiacal islands, floating islands, or islands inhabited by monsters or hiding fascinating treasures, such as in the following cases: Homer's *Odyssey*, the Icelandic *Saga of Eric the Red*, Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *The Lusíads* by Camões, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, Golding's sea trilogy *To the Ends of the Earth*, Eugène Sue's *Atar-Gull*, or Akira Yoshimura's *Shipwrecks*. Romanian literature does not abound in authentic sea adventure novels; therefore, two postmodernist works – *Mort în Patagonia* and *Evanghelia după Araña* – represent two exotic appearances in the current Romanian space.

Nicolae Strâmbeanu's *Evanghelia după Araña* constitutes a pastiche of the picaresque novel[20], its narrative formula combines elements of the historical novel, and features of neomodernist baroque, and postmodern intertextuality, having as hypertext Cervantes' masterpiece – *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. The novel is set in the sixteenth century, the era of the great oceanic crossings and the amazing geographical discoveries undertaken by the most powerful European nations, but the events recounted in the novel somehow stand in the shadow of the greatest names in the history of maritime navigation: Magellan, Columbus, Quijada, Pinzón, Cortés, Núñez, Da Gama, and El Cano.

The Castilian Joaquin Araña is the hero and also the narrative voice of the novel. He is a kind of a minstrel, very talented at getting entangled in various dangerous situations, and who allows himself to be carried away around the world by his destiny. Being a novel written in a postmodernist manner, it is quite difficult to summarize the plot of the novel, and the techniques the author is making use of letting us understand that narrative itself represents the main topic of the book. Undoubtfully, his merit lies with establishing the narrative formula, so the reader gets easily impressed by the many odd events that are happening along with the story. It all begins in Spain when Joaquin Araña is forced to flee to Portugal. From there he will start his voyage Oceanic Sea (Marea Oceanică) following the routes of the priceless spices to the Indies and China, he will take part in some mutinies, he would resort to betrayal and he would be betrayed by others in return, he would commit criminal deeds, he would come to know luxury and power, and then he would know misery and decay. Step by step he pretends to be a navigator, a warrior, a spy, he is imprisoned, he becomes a merchant, or high-ranked commander on an island, then he is shipwrecked for several years on a desert island, he develops relationships with different kings and pirates, with some monks, he gets involved with some relentless warriors, with exotic women with various social backgrounds, from enslaved women to princesses.[21]

The pace of the narrative is alert, and Araña's adventures does not let the reader have any peaceful moments, the whole plot stretching like a web, just like the one on Araña's chest. Like any postmodern novel, this one also does not lack its humor. The narrator is sometimes ironic, sometimes sarcastic, other times pathetic. The story is imbued with exoticism, it acquires sometimes medieval or grotesque traits, describing various atrocities, erotic moments and indecent vocabulary is used all across the novel, while heroism is a feature defining many of its characters. Strâmbeanu's hero is a postmodern rogue in a continuous search for meaningful experiences. He describes his own evolution through his journey around the world. The apocalyptic dimensions of his adventures do not have a clear purpose, and moreover, most of the time he ends up by failing his tasks. One might conclude that the only meaning that the writer pursues is the epic construction itself, which is the only one finding its meaning in the novel.

The Romanian fiction centered on maritime imagery reaches another dimension thanks to Daniel Vighi and his novel *Mort în Patagonia*, published in 2017. The travelogue as a literary subspecies, is poorly represented in our literary space compared to Western literature. Romanian people are defined neither by an adventurous spirit nor it did not have the colonizing power of other European nations, therefore the travel adventures failed to produce literary works strong enough to make it up to the national literary canon. Mostly due to the fact that Vighi rigorously and skillfully deploys the postmodern literary techniques, due to his deep knowledge of the Romanian language, by engaging literary forms and assuming an adequate maritime vocabulary, his novel acquires a special position in the rather short list of Romanian sea fictions.

The novel represents an imaginary journey, credited as a postmodern fictional work, focusing on describing a world on the verge of being obliterated. It might serve as a parable for the genocide of the Ona population in Patagonia, of the Selknam natives, and even for the terrible death of the settlers disembarked in 1555 on the inhospitable shores of Tierra del Fuego. But it just as well may be all about the dissolution of the traditional society of Radna (Lipova) as the author knew it since his childhood. It can also signify the death of literature and reading as processes to acquire knowledge and ways of exploring unknown and unreachable worlds, which the author tries to bring to the attention of his students during the literature seminars he held in classroom 201 of Faculty of Letters in Timișoara.

Making use of the magical act of imagination, Vighi gets together some people from Banat whom he projects in the sixteenth century. This group has Ahabu as its captain, who is accompanied by dead or dying people, former prisoners and several other acquaintances of the author whom he includes in his novel as characters. The book is full hilarious moments from beginning to the end, and the lexical savory is a result of mixing argotic words from Banat region with maritime vocabulary or Spanish idioms.

The novel has three major landmarks: Herman Melville's famous novel *Moby-Dick*, *Toate pânzele sus!* by Radu Tudoran and the great "galleon" of world literature, led by Miguel de Cervantes – *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha*. Starting from these three literary sources, Vighi imagines the "Eugen Todoran" Central Library of the University with its reading room of Faculty of Letters, and the teaching room 201, inviting everyone on board the schooner *Speranța* for an extraordinary adventure based on imagination. In addition to the author's humorous style so specific to people from Banat county, the book is infused with dramatism which gives chills to the readers, signaling the disappearance of postmodern readership who could live through imagination all the events in the book.

The novel is built on several layers: a hybridized cultural layer where Vighi gathers his characters originated in his childhood spent in Radna, some of them being already dead, others still alive, but all crossing the barrier imposed by temporality and spatiality. The language used by the author is full of argot from Banat and Hispanic vocabulary, so that the ludic aspect is not only present on the level of characters' construction, but also present at the level of language. All these characters do not take into account spatiality, moving freely from the courtyard of an old lady named Chițorana to classroom 201 or to the Central Library of the University, but also to remote places from South America.[22] On a different layer Vighi addresses the literary metaphor of the journey. In his novel, this represents an imaginary process that can be achieved through reading, and knowledge too, therefore he includes in the text reading recommendations for his students.

Mort în Patagonia seems to have two major stakes: a cultural one, for the legacy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Central European models go hand in hand with the exploration of South America and the annihilation of Ona and Selknam native populations, which disappeared after the genocide triggered by the European colonizers; and a strictly literary stake attained through reading, the pleasure of the text and the discovery of new worlds by means of imagination.

In *Mort în Patagonia*, Daniel Vighi makes use of various elements belonging to marine imagery in order to build the whole universe of a journey through the world of books for his students from the Faculty of Letters. The reader-wanderer[23] (cititorul-vândraș) sails on board the schooner *Speranța* under the command of Captain Ahabu, and along with the helmsman Ishmael-Macek, the harpooner Henteș Paia, the watchkeeper Isăilă, the boatswain Păntălie, the stores' keeper Mermelegu, but also together with historical figures such as Magellan, Columbus, and Pedro de Gamboa.

The marine lexicon, the navigational routes used by the conquistadors and the countless types of sailing vessels that Vighi uses in his literary journey are just a few elements of the marine imagery which forms in his novel a universe in itself, but also gives a more technical configuration to the text, making it very often difficult for reading:

> "In order for things to get on the right navigational course at hand for all readers-wanderers-navigators, the boatswain Păntălie and the stores keeper Mermelegu have their speech as usual in such moments during our seminars, whether they find themselves on the quarterdeck of the schooner *Speranța*, which they will sail to Patagonia, or in classroom 201 from the second floor, which is, after all, the same place, or topos, as all philologists-seamen-craftsmen used to say."[24]

The military caravel, the frigate, the galleon, the catamaran, or the schooner sailing boats belong to the marine imagery, which Vighi uses as bibliographic references for his students, but at the same time they are

part of the narrative discourse.

Vighi's novel is a true technical dictionary of maritime terms, many of them being explained directly in the text by "Miss Somogyi Aladárné, deceased, having a private crypt in the Catholic Cemetery of Radna, which can be found at the entrance to the right, who is a textualist, etymologist and lexicographer."[25] Other times the explanations are placed as footnotes. Anyways, *Mort în Patagonia* can be seen reading adventure, as Vighi is trying to guide his students to a careful and profound reading, but also as a postmodern rewriting of the adventures that took place on board the schooner *Speranța*. The fundamental elements of the marine imagery are easy to be identified also in Nicolae Strâmbeanu's novel *Evanghelia după Araña*. The sea, the beach, various types of sailing ships, pirates, conquistadors, sea battles, shipwrecks, they all find their place in this novel. Piracy imagery is best represented in this novel, being shaped by episodes describing pirate attacks or by recounting historical figures of some well-known pirates:

> "We shouldn't count the frequent confrontations with the pirates of the Inner Sea. At least *Barba Roja*, a Christian sold to Muhammad's sectarians, as they said, built a name for himself because of his fierceness. I sit and think about whether or not, at the time of my flight, the year had passed since he had proved so unearthly that, so that he *had stolen goods from ships belonging to the Holy Pope right in the port of Ostia*, or anywhere else."[26]

Sailing vessels of all sorts make their appearance in various episodes across the novel, so we can read about Genoese galleys, caravels, or schooners: "A Genoese galley just arrived in the port and those soulless soldiers took them as hostages in order to tie them to the oars"[27]; "*São Miguel* was a caravel of only a hundred *short tons*"[28]; or "The captain of the galley was Pier-Paolo Mocenigo, good brother of *Giovanni Mocenigo*, who was the doge of Venice at that time."[29]

Conquistadors or other great navigators who are already historical figures find their place between the pages of Strâmbeanu's novel, so that his postmodern picaresque hero experiences various adventures while meeting some of them such as: Giacomo Ricco, Cristóbal Colón, Martin Alonso Pinzón, Ludovico di Varthema, Diego Lopes de Sequeira, Bartolomeu Dias, Vicente Pegado, Pedro Álvares Cabral, Vasco da Gama or Fernando Magellan.

Conclusions

Sea or oceans, ships, sailing boats, pirates, explorers or conquistadores are just some of the closely interconnected symbolic elements that are an integral part of the paradigm which is represented by the maritime imagery. Historical and factual reality represents one of the forms of the imaginary that fed the collective memory. Furthermore, the foundation of this entire concept is based on myths and legends, phantasmas and reveries. This phenomenon became more obvious in the Anglo-American cultural space since the seventeenth century, but there are variations of maritime imagery in Portuguese, Spanish, French, Italian or Greek literatures due to the influences of those nations in the maritime history over several centuries.

The evolution of maritime imagery helped the readership gain knowledge of freedom or to discover exotic lands and exquisite treasures through various adventure stories. If for the world literature, works such as those belonging to James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad, Jack London or Ernest Hemingway, centered on topics related to maritime world, are placed in important canonical positions due to their influences in the development of the novel as a literary genre, there is no major contribution in the Romanian literary space of any sea novel. Yet, we should not overlook Jean Bart who is considered being the first author to write a sea voyage logbook as new literary form with certain recognized literary success to the readers. In the current literary climate, novels such as *Mort în Patagonia*, *Evanghelia după Araña,* or *Pascal deseneaz*ă *corăbii* bring to the attention of Romanian readership fresh and reamarkable scenes from the adventurous life at sea. This constitutes a recovery process of the maritime imagery, having a real chance of development even in our national literature, not overlooking the influence of the maritime imagery of other nations and cultures that profoundly marked the literature related to the maritime industry. These works not only duplicate the old marine themes from the novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but also manipulate the boundaries between reality and fiction taking into account the needs of the public that seems to be largely influenced by the great industrialization and the phenomenon of globalization felt even at the level of literature.

Notes:

1. Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing (The New Critical Idiom)* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 9.
2. Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 16.
3. Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 209.
4. Lionel Casson, Travel in the Ancient World (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974), 39.
5. Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 35-36.

6. John Peck, *Maritime Fiction: Sailors and the Sea in British and American Novels. 1719 – 1917* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 14.
7. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 111-129.
8. Odile Gannier, *Le roman maritime. Émergence d'un genre en Occident* (Paris: Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 2011), 531-535.
9. Adrian G. Romilă, *Piraţi şi corăbii: incursiune într-un posibil imaginar al mării* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2015), 129.
10. Mircea Anghelescu, *Lâna de aur: călătorii şi călătoriile în literatura română* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2015), 247.
11. Anghelescu, *Lâna de aur*, 251-254.
12. Romilă, *Piraţi şi corăbii,* 117.
13. Ibid., 117.
14. Eugen Negrici, *Literatura română sub comunism. Proza* (Bucharest: Editura Fundaţiei Pro, 2003), 144.
15. Doris Mironescu, „Cortázar pe vapor". In *Cultura*, III (10), 9 March 2017, http://revistacultura.ro/pdf/Cultura_566.pdfș
16. Adina Dinițoiu, « Când povestitorul este un „om al mării" ». In *Observator cultural*, no. 820-821, 29 April 2018, https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/cînd-povestitorul-este-un-om-al-marilor/.
17. Bogdan-Alexandru Stănescu, „Vegetarian într-o lume de canibali". In *Observator cultural*, no. 817, 7 April 2016, https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/vegetarian-intr-o-lume-de-canibali/.
18. Angelo Mitchievici, „O altă viziune a mării – Mayday", https://www.lapunkt.ro/2015/04/o-alta-viziune-a-marii-mayday/.
19. Ibid.
20. Marius Chivu, „Odiseea saltimbancului". In *România literară*, no. 49/2004, 14 December 2004, http://www.romlit.ro/index.pl/odiseea_saltimbancului/.
21. Adrian. G. Romilă: „Un păienjeniș narativ". In *Literatura de azi*, 20 October 2017, https://www.literaturadeazi.ro/rubrici/apocrife/un-paienjenis-narativ-30302/.
22. Alexandru Oraviţan, „Patagonia din sala 201". In *Orizont*, no. 10/2017, http://www.revistaorizont.ro/arhiva/octombrie2017.pdf/.
23. Daniel Vighi, *Mort în Patagonia* (Iași: Polirom, 2017), 12.
24. *Idem*.
25. Vighi, *Mort în Patagonia*, 24.
26. Nicolae Strâmbeanu, *Evanghelia după Araña* (Iași: Polirom, 2017), 27-28.
27. Ibid., 41.
28. Ibid., 59.
29 Ibid., 51.

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