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Latent Crusaders: Narrative Strategies of Survival in Early Modern Danubian Principalities, 1550-1750

Caius Dobrescu and Sorin Adam Matei¹

Abstract

The essay concentrates on a master narrative strategy presiding over the early emergence of modernity in the area in which contemporary Romania is situated. This narrative strategy richly illustrates the neo-Byzantine survival strategies of the Greek elites who ruled the Danubian Principalities (Moldova and Valahia) during the earlier stages of Romanian modernization (18th century). Early modern Romanian political and intellectual elites borrowed from the post-Byzantine political theology a set of Gnostic-inflected narrative strategies to explain their subordination to alien powers (Turkish, Ottoman, Russian, Austrian, or Hungarian). These strategies operated a reversal of “real” and “unreal” or of “essential” and “fleeting” attributes of social-historical situations. The aim of these strategies was to construct the local elites as the agents of a political ideology of national redemption that will ultimately put them above their temporary masters. The paper focuses mainly on the so-called Phanariot period (17th to 18th Centuries).

At the middle of the 16th century the Ottoman Empire reached its zenith spanning three continents under the rule of its most famous Sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566) (Inalcik, 2001). Only a few years before (1512) and after several decades of resistance and negotiations, the Romanian Principality of Moldova, a buffer state between the Ottomans, Poland, and Hungary finally accepted the Sultan as its sovereign lord (Georgescu, 1991). The process of submission was neither simple nor swift. Ștefan the Great was the first Moldovan ruler to pay tribute to the Turks in 1483, while his son Bogdan III officially and permanently submitted to the Sultan in 1512 (Georgescu, 1991). This was not, however, the end of Moldova's resistance to Turkish rules. Several wars of attrition under various princes stretched Moldova's resistance to Ottoman dominance for

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a few more decades. One of the last episodes of active opposition took place under Prince Petru Rareș who occupied Moldova's throne twice, between 1527-1538 and 1541-1546 (Simanschi, 1978). Although officially an Ottoman vassal, Rareș opposed Ottoman expansionism by all means possible, from diplomacy to warfare. After losing a major battle in 1538 and three years of negotiations as a vagrant prince he bought his crown back from the Turks and became a much more, although not always, reliable ally of the Ottomans (Simanschi, 1978).

The contradictory spirit of Petru Rareș's reigns is captured by the frescoes on the outer walls of several Moldavian monasteries (Probotă, Moldovița, Humor) that the Moldavian Prince commissioned (Drăguț, 1984; Dumitrescu, 2001; Mândru, 1995). The murals, which could be seen even by the occasional pilgrim, display a significant anachronism. They depict in great and vivid detail a rather obscure episode of Byzantine history. In 626 the Persians sieged both by land and by sea the Byzantine capital, Constantinople (Howard-Johnston, 2006). The attackers were, however, repulsed by Emperor Heraklius I (610-641) in a gigantic amphibious battle. At the time, the episode was interpreted as an example of divine intervention in human affairs. According to legend, Constantinople was saved by the intercession of the Virgin Mary, who showed her powers in the form of a storm that sunk the enemy fleet (Gambero, 1999).

The Moldovan frescoes presented the protagonists in a different light. The attackers appear dressed in the garb and use weapons of a different battle, which took place under the same walls, but over 800 years later and with a different outcome. The besiegers wear turbans and fire cannons (Mândru, 1995). These are the Ottomans who ultimately took Constantinople, putting an end to the Eastern Orthodox Christian Empire of Byzantium in 1453 (Runciman, 1990), just a few decades before the frescos were finished. The murals dramatically reinterpret the entire history of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, turning a recent defeat into a long past victory. Furthermore, other contemporary Moldovan church frescoes (e.g., Voroneț) show the recent conquerors of Constantinople at the head of a line of infidels who at Doomsday will be converted to Christianity by Moses himself (Musicescu & Ulea, 1969; Ulea, 1963).

The theological message of the Moldavian frescoes and their crusading mood seems totally misplaced given the political and military reality of the time. Are these messages, as some scholars suggest (Ulea, 1963), of belligerence and active resistance? Are they signs of a resurgent crusading spirit in Moldova? While the answer could be "yes," an important caveat is necessary. A 16th century Russian theologian and traveler who lived for a while at Petru Rareș's court, Ivan Peresvetov, assigns to the Moldavian prince the belief that the fall of Constantinople was not a sign of defeat, but one of salvation (Dumitrescu, 2001). The Russian traveler relates in a letter dedicated to Ivan the Terrible, the Russian Tsar, that Rareș believed that God himself delivered Constantinople to the Turks to teach Christians a lesson of humility (Cazacu, 1983). The Ottoman Sultan was in his view an instrument of Christian justice and redemption:

This is what Petru Rareș has to say about the Turkish Emperor, Mohammed: [After] the Greek [emperors and noblemen] scoffed at the Holy Cross, betrayed their people and robbed them by unjust judgments making themselves rich with treasures wrung from Christian tears and blood [...] the infidel Sultan Mohamed knew God's might [and restored justice], conquering Constantinople and restoring God-

loved justice; he besotted God with his heartfelt deeds and God helped him take possession of many other realms. (Dumitrescu, 2001, p. 78)

Since Peresvetov's opuscul is a political and moral tract (Ciobanu, 1945) belonging to the *specula principum* or *Fürstenspiegel* genre, whose goal is to instruct by parable (Nederman, 1998), not by exact historical example, the words quoted above might (Cazacu, 1983), or might not (Schneck, 2005), reflect Petru Rareș's personal opinion. As an interpretation of Ottoman success, written at the middle of the 16th century after extensive travels throughout Eastern Europe, the book might yet very well reflect an opinion that was quite common at the Eastern Orthodox courts of that time. The Ottomans seemed, at their zenith, unstoppable. Even highly aggressive European military monarchies, such as Hungary, were wiped out by the Turks. What other power could guide their actions than Divine Providence? Rareș, the clerics who supervised the building of these monasteries, and the artists who painted their walls might have very well subscribed to the idea that Providence was sending Eastern Christianity a message. Given the aim of Peresvetov's book to instruct the Russian Tsar and regenerate the defensive spirit of Eastern Christianity, which had sunken to its lowest point, the submission of Moldova and the defensive position of Eastern Christianity could have been interpreted very plausibly as a sign of divine intervention and even secret redemption.

According to Ciobanu (2002), the anachronism found in the mural dedicated to the "pagan siege of Constantinople" could then be interpreted not as a celebration of anti-Turkish sentiment, but as a sign of God's power to deliver his people even when they don't deserve or recognize it. The Moldovan frescos and the manner in which they contradict political realities could be the earliest expression of an ideology of salvation in submission. This reflects, in our view, not only some important neo-Byzantine narrative strategies (Georgescu, 1991; Iorga, 2000; Mango, 2005; Runciman, 1999), but also a Gnostic-like pattern of thought, which we propose as a possible source for that strand of modern Romanian national ideology according to which national submission and oppression is in fact a form of election.

Gnostic-like Narrative Strategies: Definitions and Operationalization

The role of Gnosticism in European and Middle Eastern political and religious history has been largely investigated and documented (Culianu, 1992, 2006; Jonas, 1963; Löwith, 1957; Taubes, 1947; Voegelin, 2004). The focus of previous investigations was directed at demonstrating how core modern ideologies, such as existentialism or socialism, bear the marks of Gnosticism, especially under its dualistic guise (Voegelin, 2004). From a broader perspective, such inquiries emphasize that a dualist, Gnostic vision of the world, which need not be directly or overtly religious, has constantly preoccupied, when not directly informed, the modern mind. Significantly, this research tradition emphasizes the heuristic meaning of the term, making a clear distinction between Gnosticism, seen as a specific religion, and the Gnostic mind set, which is often seen as a secular and philosophical approach to explaining the world and history.

In the paper we employ "Gnosticism" in the later sense of the term. It refers to a type of thought pattern and narrative strategy that emerges in times of crisis and not always as a direct historical descendent of the first Gnosticism. It typically takes the shape of intel-

lectual responses formulated as explicative narrative themes or explanatory frameworks that aimed to offer solutions to crisis and transition situations (Jonas, 1963).

It is important to note that these beliefs are eclectic not only in their origins, themes, or motives, but also because of their sophisticated combination of various mystical and philosophical “mythems” (i.e., mythological patterns of thinking). In fact, its syncretism makes it more of a philosophical than religious enterprise (Taubes, 1947). Gnosticism should probably be seen as a meta-theoretical explanatory framework, a metahistorical narrative (White, 1973), or as what Benedict (1934) calls a “pattern of culture,” whose re-emergence can be triggered not only by direct diffusion and contagion of religious and philosophical ideas, but also by equivalent social and historical challenges.

“Narrative strategies” signify “procedures followed or narrative devices used to achieve a specific goal” (Prince, 2003, p. 1961). The narrative strategies identified and analyzed in this paper are members of a broader class of “discourse practices” that aim to affect social change (Fairclough, 2008). The Gnostic-inflected narratives discussed below are thus significant in this context not only for their formal rhetorical attributes, but for their heuristic-explanatory (Fisher, 1989) and by implication life-world generative power (Gross, 2010). Narrative strategies are also seen as effective means for creating a framework for identification and action. At the national level, narrative strategies anchor and project an ethnic group onto the broader stage of inter-ethnic or international affairs (Bhabha, 1990).

In this paper we examine a specific brand of narrative strategy, which shifts the framework of reference for collective action from “apparent” to “essential” realms of reality in order to explain the current predicament or future destiny of a group. Specifically, this strategy reverses the terms of a historical situation in a manner similar to that in which Gnostic philosophy explains the world: what appear to be essential and Good is just an appearance and an expression of the corruption of Evil and vice-versa (Rudolph, 1987). Moreover, only “true knowledge” (gnosis) reserved to the “chosen ones” can offer clear understanding of the situation. Gnostic-like narrative strategies share the following features and/or advance the following themes (Culianu, 1992; Jonas, 1963; Rudolph, 1987):

- a. A cosmic dualism that transforms history into a battle between Good and Evil;
- b. A reversal of order between appearance and essence, and of the manner in which these attributes are assigned to the various realms of reality;
- c. The myth of a metaphysical accident, of a tragic fall that brought the seeds of the mystic light under the power of the dark forces of the universe;
- d. The theme of the “latent subversion,” which is a form of inner exile, of recoiling into one’s self as a survival strategy under the circumstances of a hostile cosmic-spiritual domination. This is a strategy for preserving a sense of virtue in the dim perspective of a future moment of resurrection and revenge; and

- e. An attitude of maintaining externally compliant attitudes and beliefs, while professing a secret ideology opposed to what is currently demanded by those higher up in the power structure.

Such narrative strategies need not be directly connected to an uninterrupted Gnostic liturgical or theological tradition. They could emerge in an organic way in times of crisis or transition as a survival or actional device built of specific messianic “logical bricks” and according to rules of interpretive transformation of reality (Culianu, 1992). The subordinate status of the actors that nourish a messianic religion or culture becomes through the narrative strategy of reversal not only bearable, but also a sign of election. In other words, Gnostic-like narrative strategies are interpretive transformation techniques that turn a story (narrative) of historical defeat into one of victory by changing the significance of the facts, the attributes of the actors, or the meaning of history itself.

Our argument also uses Czesław Miłosz’s “ketman” metaphor (Miłosz, 1981) for interpreting some of the Romanian intellectual elite Gnostic-like behaviors. Of course, the ketman concept refers to Miłosz’s creative interpretation and application to Communist practices of the religious survival strategy first identified by Gobineau (1865) among the non or unorthodox Muslim subjects of Islamic states. While completely agreeing with Miłosz’s warning that the ketman concept should not be read through the lens of Gobineau’s racist theory of “oriental inferiority,” we propose that ketman practices can be connected with the southeastern European spirit at a point in time that precedes by several centuries the Communist period. In fact, as Gobineau suggests, ketman and neo-Byzantine Gnostic-like narrative strategies are directly related historically:

Around Trebizond and Erezoum [note: also known as the last areas of Byzantine resistance to Muslim occupation] there are religious communities which externally pledge full allegiance to Sunni Islam. In their villages they have mosques which they visit every Friday; they sponsor Mullahs for reading them the Korân and who comment for them the prophetic traditions. “Nevertheless,” will they whisper to your ear, “we are not Muslims; we go to churches, attend the mass, confess the divinity of Jesus Christ and worship the images of the saints.” (Gobineau, 1865, p. 16)

Ketman practices and Gnostic-like neo-Byzantine strategies thus share an important characteristic. They both attempt to hide religious, ideological, or philosophical knowledge and allegiance from the prying eyes of the Muslim rulers. Furthermore, Gobineau directly links ketman attitudes to the religious mysteries and initiation rituals of the Middle East that fueled in great measure the Gnostic spiritual project. We believe that by connection to initiation cults, ketman and Gnostic-like attitudes inherit a similar narrative strategy of survival. The cunning involved in deceiving the rulers of the day about one’s true faith is seen as a source of secret power. Furthermore, the success of the deceit, as both Gobineau and Miłosz observed, is interpreted by ketman practitioners as a sign of spiritual superiority:

One [i.e., the ketman practitioner] makes all the protestations of faith that can please him, one performs all the rites one recognizes to be the most vain, one falsifies one's own books, one exhausts all possible means of deceit. Thus one acquires the multiple satisfactions and merits of having place oneself and one's relative under cover, of not having exposed a venerable faith to the horrible contact of the infidel, and finally of having, in cheating the latter and confirming him in his error, imposed on him the shame and spiritual misery that he deserves....Ketman fills the man who practices it with pride. Thanks to it, a believer raises himself to a permanent state of superiority over the man he deceives, be he a minister of state or a powerful king; to him who uses Ketman, the other is a miserable blind man whom one shuts off from the true path whose existence he does not suspect; while you, tattered and dying of hunger, trembling externally at the feet of duped force, your eyes are filled with light, you walk in brightness before your enemies. It is an unintelligent being that you make sport of; it is a dangerous beast that you disarm. What a wealth of pleasures! (Gobineau, 1865, cited in Miłosz, 1981, p. 58)

The ketman structure of thought described in this passage can be just as easily applied to the neo-Byzantine Gnostic-like "pattern of thought" discussed at the beginning of this essay. It could be said that Moldavian church painting reveled in the superiority of confounding the adversary with one's secret knowledge and religious practices.

Several other scholars have discussed ketman practices in the literature dedicated to Romanian political culture, especially disguising dissent in the garb of orthodoxy and deriving feelings of superiority from successfully hiding one's "true" beliefs (Jowitt, 1993; Kligman, 1998; Kotkin & Gross, 2010; Shafir, 1983). These studies, along with Miłosz's work, suggest that the ketman concept should be considered more than just a vague and suggestive metaphor, and that it can be applied to various historical eras. We employ his idea as a heuristic ideal-type to elucidate a number of social responses that have characterized several Romanian intellectual generations, starting with the neo-Byzantine latent crusader trope identified above.

Yet, in doing so, we do not suggest that the ketman attitudinal and behavioral model was the same for all times. Rather, the ketman orientation to the world is a type of response modulated by a set of similar, albeit not unchanging, contexts. The ketman concept is particularly relevant ideologically and sociologically in Romania because it can explain attitudes and behaviors derived from specific ideologically-inflected values in certain contexts. In broader terms, our essay proposes that the Romanian intellectual Gnostic ketman-like attitude, especially its fascination with "secret knowledge" and the sophistic reversal of the "real" and "unreal," of "essential" and "fleeting" (Culianu, 1992), have emerged from a history of submission of Romanian upper (and educated) classes to an alien power (Muslim, Western, or later Soviet). Although seen as fundamentally unholy, this submission was interpreted in prophetic and redemptive terms. It was God's final test before the ultimate redemption and exaltation of Orthodox Faith, Romanian Ethnicity, or Romanian culture—the only true spirit of a revived universal religious, ethnic, and cultural project (Runciman, 1999).

Gnostic-like Narrative Strategies in the Danubian Principalities

The modern Romanian state emerged in a first phase during the 18th and 19th centuries through the cultural and political convergence and ultimate merging of Moldova and Valahia, known at the time as the Danubian Principalities (Boia, 2001a; Georgescu, 1991; Hitchins, 1996). After the fall of Constantinople (1453) and their de facto incorporation into the Ottoman empire as vassal states, the Principalities became an essential hub (Pippidi, 2001) in the Christian-Ottoman intellectual network that produced the neo-Byzantine political theology and *ketman* attitude briefly presented above (Papacostea, 1983). Born in the 16th and flourishing during the 18th century, the ideology first took root among the Greek elites that survived the Turkish conquest, also known as Phanariots (Stavrianos, 2008). These were the surviving Greek merchants and civil servants who after the Turkish conquest clustered in the Ottoman capital around the Patriarchal Palace neighborhood of Phanar. In time, Phanariots became key elements of the Ottoman intellectual aristocracy and more importantly an inverted and paradoxical conspirator against it. Their ideology, labeled by Runciman (1999) as neo-Byzantine and recognized as such under slightly different labels by other authors (Iorga, 2000; Papachristou, 1992; Papacostea, 1983; Zakythinos, 1976), combined outward obedience toward Turkish rule with nourishing covert and at times grandiose dreams of reviving a new Byzantine Empire. Yet, this attitude was not unique to the Phanariots. It could also be found among the Christian princes of the northern borderlands of Moldova and Valahia. Both attitudes merged during the 17th and 18th centuries, when Phanariots became the official elites and later rulers of Moldova and Valahia (Georgescu, 1991). According to Runciman (1999, p. 363), Phanariots “impregnated themselves with memories of Byzantium. While they sought to increase their riches and through their riches to obtain influence at...the Sultan’s court, they dreamed that the influence might ultimately be used to recreate the Empire of Byzantium.” These dreams went as far as abhorring any separatist and independence movements in the Ottoman lands inhabited by Christians, the Phanariots wishing to “keep the Ottoman Empire intact until the whole could be transferred to the Greeks in Constantinople” (Runciman, 1999, p. 372).

The Phanariots’ interested loyalty was so convincing that the Sultans made them the ruling elites of the Romanian lands after 1700 (Runciman, 1999). Once in power, they replaced and exalted the older local ideology of secret salvation through suffering that we identified during the reign of Petru Rareș with a more introverted yet grandiose Gnostic-like narrative strategy of redemption and greatness (Papacostea, 1983). In fact, the 17th and 18th centuries represented a period of intensified polemics among Greeks about the world destiny of Byzantine culture and civilization (Zakythinos, 1976). Although subdued by the Turks since 1453, the reborn Byzantine Greek Phanariot elites that made fortunes and careers after the fall of Constantinople were stirred up by the monumental defeats of the Turks, especially that of 1683, when the last anti-European jihad was staved off by Vienna’s ramparts and by the Polish king Jan Sobieski’s resolute intervention (Wheatcroft, 2010). Furthermore, by 1700 the Ottoman troops also lost Hungary and Transylvania to the Habsburgs. It was the first major territorial loss for the Turkish Empire after three centuries of continuous expansion. The Greek-Byzantine elites living in the Ottoman Empire, including the Greek-Valahian prince Șerban Cantacuzino, promptly understood that the House of Othman was declining and hope of a resurgence of the

Byzantine world was rekindled among Greeks everywhere (Papacostea, 1983). To this end, the Phanariots spared no effort or expense to strengthen and expand their new operational base in the marginal, yet autonomous Christian lands of the Romanians north of the Danube. These plans resonated very well among the local elites, who had their own secret dream of reviving Byzantine power (Iorga, 2000). According to Papacostea (1983), even a rather insignificant prince, like Mihnea III (1658-1659), nourished the imperial dream of restoring the Byzantine Empire.

Greek influence on Valahia and Moldova was in fact quite significant by 1683. Greek merchants, clergy, and noblemen had moved to the two principalities with Turkish assent since the 16th century, soon after Petru Rareș realized that resistance against the Turks was futile and that a more compliant policy was needed. The first Greek Prince of Moldova, Ioan Iacob Heraclid Despot (1561-63) was confirmed on the throne by the Turks soon after Petru Rareș's death (Pop, Bolovan, & Andea, 2006). His rule was only an overture, which was followed by the rise of two powerful Phanariot-Romanian families, the Ghicas (of mixed Greek-Albanian origin) and the Cantacuzinos (of Greek and allegedly imperial origin), who ruled Moldova and Valahia at the end of the 1600s (Lecca, 2000). The Cantacuzinos pursued an active policy of autonomy tinged with imperial ambitions. According to Papacostea (1983), the Valahian Prince Șerban Cantacuzino (1678-1688) personally witnessed as a nominal vassal and ally of the Turks the Ottoman rout under the walls of Vienna in 1683. This gave him the courage to set as one of his goals in the aftermath of the Turkish defeat to restore his family to the Byzantine throne. A timely illness, which some chroniclers believed to be the consequence of poisoning perpetrated by local conspirators who hearing of his plans feared the wrath of the Turks (Del Chiaro, 1929; Mazilu, 2004), suspended the Valahian neo-Byzantine dreams for a while.

Given the unsettled nature of the northern borders of the Ottoman Empire after 1700, the Ottomans needed to increase their grip over these gateway provinces. Starting with Nicolae Mavrocordat, who ruled both Moldova (1709-1710 and 1711-1716) and Valahia (1716 and 1719-1730), they nominated to the thrones of the two countries' Phanariot Greeks closely connected with the Ottoman foreign service, which the Sultan thought to be more trustworthy than the local princes (Runciman, 1999; Zakythinos, 1976). Thus, in one of those ironies of history, after 1700 the Phanariots' dreams of grandeur and unspoken subversion met with their rulers' need to control their increasingly unsafe Christian borders. As consummate players of Byzantine politics as the Ottomans were, they used the Phanariots just as much as the latter thought they were using their masters' apparent weaknesses (Papachristou, 1992; Runciman, 1999). Staffing the local administration with Phanariots, the Ottomans rightly counted on the fact that as foreigners they would depend on Turkish military and political support to stay in power. This was a reasonable plan, after all, since the Phanariots were already integrated in the Turkish foreign service, in which they often occupied leading positions, especially those of Grand Dragomans (chief foreign negotiators) (Zakythinos, 1976). Their extended families, family interests, Ottoman careers, and estates spanned several continents and in case of war with the European powers, they would be less likely to defect than the local elites.

With the arrival of the Phanariot rulers, the neo-Byzantine revival laid strong roots in the Danubian Principalities. These new Greek-Christian political outposts became active foci in the Greek debate surrounding the Hellenic revival (Papachristou, 1992;

Roudometof, 2001). This debate included proponents of truly radical positions. For example, there was the vision promoted by Rhigas Velestinlis, who served for a while in the Greek administration of the Danubian Principalities and who proposed a Greek Republic modeled in the image of the French revolutionary state, which would unite Greeks, other Christians, and Turks through the civic bonds of a post-Ottoman Human Rights Declaration (Clogg, 1976). For the obvious reasons, the Phanariots preferred their own version of intellectual and political ideology, which, in the neo-Byzantine lineage, predictably rejected republicanism and excessive modernism.

The ideology favored by the Danubian elites, Greeks or Hellenized Romanians, was that of overtly accepting and even promoting the Ottoman rule, while covertly favoring a slow, gradual, and hopefully non-violent economic and cultural subversion of the Ottoman power. In a way, they believed that time alone would bring about the restoration of the Christian empire (Zakythinis, 1976). Citing Wilkinson's early 1800s account of Moldova and Valahia under Phanariot rule (Wilkinson, 1971), Runciman (1999) makes the very astute observation that only the adoption of a neo-Byzantine long-term political project could justify the expenses and personal risks involved in buying access to the princely throne of Moldova or Valahia. Furthermore, mighty houses, such as that of the Mavrocordats, ruined themselves in the process of ruling the Principalities (Wilkinson, 1971). According to Runciman, it was the pursuit of the imperial idea, the rebirth of Byzantium, that motivated what only appears to be irrational behavior:

Under Phanariot princes a neo-Byzantine culture could find a home in the Principalities. A Greek-born nobility could root itself in lands there; Greek academies could educate citizens for the new Byzantium. There, far better than in the shadowy palaces round the Phanar, with Turkish police at the door, Byzantine ambition could be kept alive. In Roumania, in Rum beyond the Danube, the revival of New Rome could be planned. (Runciman, 1999, p. 376)

This ideology of rebirth is reflected not only in the implicit political strategy of the Phanariots, but also in the narratives they discreetly sponsored materially or intellectually. Phanariot princes openly supported the dissemination of popular prophecies and revivalist Greek literature. They financed their printing or copying and facilitated their circulation throughout the Ottoman Empire. Roudometof (2001) lists a long litany of prophecies that circulated in manuscript and published form throughout the Turkish empire and Danubian Principalities, which promised deliverance of Constantinople from the Turkish yoke at precise, yet ever-moving dates: 1492, 1595, 1603, 1653, 1766, 1767, or 1773 (Roudometof, 2001, p. 352). Such prophecies, probably inspired by the myth of the savior Emperor (Guran, 2007), were typically coached in common Christian narratives, yet their ambitions were political. A well-known Bible or Gospel story was usually resignified with political and revolutionary meanings. Robert Walsh, an eye witness of the Greek revival at a later period (1820), remarked:

The Greeks, who now began to read the Scriptures among other books made accessible to them, applied its passages, as many have done, to suit their own particular views. They affirmed that "the seven moun-

tains" mentioned in the Apocalypse, and "the many waters," are the seven hills and seas of Constantinople, and the person "arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones," is the Sultan in his splendid oriental attire; and the saints with whose "blood he was drunk" are the many martyrs of the Greek Church whom the Turks put to death. With these passages of Sacred Writ they combined their own apocryphal absurdities. (Walsh, 1836, p. 179)

Political prophecies were particularly popular narrative strategies among the Greek elites of the Danubian Principalities, who saw themselves as the chosen heralds and possible instruments of any possible second coming of the great Byzantine Empire (Papachristou, 1992). A fragment of Leo the Wise's ancient oracle written in the 10th century, which prophesied the fall and redemption of Constantinople, mentions a mythical emperor John as the ultimate savior, whose ascent will be presaged by a bellowing bull. This was interpreted by Danubian Phanariots as a sign of their divine calling. They saw in the bull the bison head on Moldova's crest, and in the liberating Emperor hero a Danubian prince, since the ceremonial name of every Moldovan and Valahian prince included by default the Christian name John (Papachristou, 1992). Furthermore, a very popular prophetic pamphlet "Vision of Agathangelos" believed to be authored by Theoklitos Polyeides, a Greek cleric who took refuge in the Habsburg Empire (Nicolopoulos, 1985), was dedicated in one of its versions to Grigorie Ghica (Papachristou, 1992), Prince of Moldova (1764-1767, 1774-1777). The prophecies, which justified the fall of Constantinople under Ottoman rule as "God's will," announced that the time when Christ's victorious banner will fly again over Byzantium is at hand and that with the help of Russian and other allegorical Orthodox Princes "the Orthodox faith will be raised high and will spread from East to West..." (Nicolopoulos, 1985, p. 46). The fact that prince Ghica sponsored such a writing should come as no surprise. He represented a typical neo-Byzantine ketman attitude. While professing loyalty to the Turkish rulers he opposed some of their policies with much guile and nourished grandiose political schemes for which he was ultimately executed in 1777 (Papachristou, 1992).

Such prophetic narratives (Clogg, 1976) were a particular effective narrative strategy, aiming to mobilize and maintain the coherence of the Christian and Greek communities in the empire. They were the distilled product of expectations of several generations of Greek intellectuals (Zakythinis, 1976) and of local latent crusader visions descended from those identified during the reign of Petru Rareș. A significant characteristic of this Greek-Byzantine-Danubian political mythology, rewritten in a hermetic and millennial key, was its "elective affinity" with Gnosticism. Like Gnosticism, neo-Byzantine ideology places its actors at the heart of a fallen world, whose total and hopeless submission to the forces of evil is in fact a sign of election and salvation. As indicated above, this affinity is not the product of direct contact with Gnostic texts, but of a similar challenge, that of the passing of a world, the Ottoman Empire, and the birth of another, that of nationalities. Like the ancient wisdom of the "elected few," neo-Byzantine political ideology and the narrative strategies that it generated emphasized a dualist vision of the world (Good vs. Evil), combined, due to the constraints of the time, with a ketman attitude. While they rejected Ottoman rule as a symbol of Satan, some Greek elites, especially those vested in the Ottoman regime, deployed narrative strategies that tried to justify the existence of

Ottoman rule and their participation in it as part of a cosmic plan that would result in the ultimate victory of Christianity and the consecration of Greek nationality as its most authentic champion.

This narrative strategy is clearly expressed at the end of the 18th century by Athanasius of Paros, who perfectly illustrates the ketman opinions of many Christian, including Romanian-Greek elite members living in the Ottoman Empire (Papacostea, 1983). The argument for Greek-Orthodox superiority and salvation is constructed in such a deft narrative that even the Ottoman Sultan could not but welcome:

[God] raised up from nothing this strong Empire of the Ottomans in the place of our Roman Empire, which had begun in some respects to halt in the doctrines of the Orthodox Faith, and He exalted this Empire of the Ottomans above all others, that He might show beyond doubt that this had come to pass by God's will and not through the power of men....He put into the heart of the Emperor of these Ottomans to keep our Orthodox Faith in liberty and to give it exceeding authority, so that at times it might instruct even Christians who had turned out of the way to have the fear of god ever before their eyes. (Zakythinos, 1976, p. 173)

This narrative strategy was quite prevalent among the Greek leaders, being embraced even by Patriarch Anthimos of Jerusalem, who in 1798 issued a "paternal exhortation" in which the Ottomans were presented as the true instrument of salvation:

[God] raised up the empire of the Ottomans higher than any other kingdom so as to show without doubt that it came about by divine will, and not by the power of man, and to assure all the faithful that in this way He deigned to bring about a great mystery, namely salvation to his chosen people. (cited in Clogg, 1976, p. 59)

Moreover, in 1821 the Greek elites in Constantinople, including the Patriarch, rejected in true ketman style the Greek movement of liberation that ultimately led to the birth of the modern Greek state. An anathema decree was issued by the Greek Patriarchate, in which the Sultan was bestowed with all praises reserved to traditional Byzantine Emperors (Clogg, 1976). Unfortunately, the ketman stratagem did not work. Scared by the intensity of the rebellion initiated in Valahia by a scion of a Danubian princely family (Alexandros Ypsilanti), the Patriarch was promptly hanged, his body left dangling from the Patriarchal main door for three days, unhooked by a mob on the fourth day, dragged through the offal of a nearby market, and thrown in the Bosphorus (Clogg, 1976).

The Greek ketman attitudes and the narrative strategies they entailed resonated strongly among the Greek-Romanian political and intellectual elites in the decades immediately preceding the Greek insurrection. Dimitrie Fotino, a Greek historian and educator who moved to Valahia at the end of the 18th century, deplored the fall of Constantinople within the framework of a narrative strategy reminiscing of Peresvetov's cosmic plans for Orthodox Christianity: "Oh, Sun, shiver, oh, Earth, sigh, for the total abandonment of the Greek nation for its sins by God, the just judge" (Papacostea, 1983, p. 462).

In other words, Turkish rule is justified by Greek sins and is a possible sign for a future revival. An even more interesting narrative strategy is that advanced by Dimitris Katarzis (Catargiu), grand logothete of Valahia. While promoting the most ardent Hellenism and extolling the virtue of Greek culture and its civilizing power, Catargiu proposed that the Ottoman empire can also be seen as a vehicle for realizing the civilizing call of Greek culture. He claimed that the Greeks of Byzantine stock are actively present in the political life of the Ottoman empire, with rights and privileges that qualify them as citizens: "There are many of our race (Greek) who hold offices, namely patriarchs, high prelates, and administrators with imperial berates (patents)...[which] fall under Aristotle's definition of a citizen" (Papachristou, 1992, p. 25). In the subtext, as Papachristou (1992) suggests, Catargiu's discourse signaled to the Greek community that "in fact, Greek influences could emerge from within and change radically the empire to their favor" (p. 15). Zakyntinos summarizes the overall parameters of this narrative strategy in these terms:

[T]he leading class of the Church hierarchy and the administrative aristocracy, who had grown up under the rule of the Sultan in Constantinople or in Wallachia or Moldavia, were all inspired by the universalist ideal of Byzantium which they invoked to justify both their blacker and their more commendable actions. Fluctuating between contradictory schools of thought, they framed an early version of the "Great Idea" which one might call neo-Byzantine. According to this theory, Greek influences, attacking from within, would emerge as the dominant force at the heart of the Turkish Empire, and the Greeks would become co-rulers of the "mighty Monarchy" and would transform this into a multi-racial state, thus realizing their own liberating, political dream through the Turkish Empire which would be transfigured as an "Ottoman State of the Greek Nation" (Zakyntinos, 1976, p. 148)

The significance of this narrative strategy goes beyond the narrow political interests of the Danubian Principalities and their 18th century Phanariot rulers. This is as much a cultural as a political (Henderson, 1970) narrative strategy, which infused the educational environment created by the Phanariots north of the Danube and in which the future generations of modern Romanian intellectuals will grow. The two higher learning institutions the Greek rulers established in Romania, one in Bucharest and the other in Iași, promoted with ardor Greek-Orthodox and Byzantine ideals of a civilizing and world renewing Hellenic culture (Camariano-Cioran, 1971). Furthermore, these cultural institutions have created several generations of thinkers in a spirit of cultural messianism dominated by Gnostic-like narrative strategies. Among them one can count a central figure of Romanian cultural 19th century rebirth, Ion Helide Rădulescu, who was not only a student but during the 1830s and 1840s also one of the principals of the old Valahian Greek-founded school (Angelescu, 2001; Cornea, 1972). We will find him among the 1848 revolutionaries, a living link between the old and new Gnostic-like cultural response to the decline and fall of the Ottoman Empire.

In the political realm, the conservative and messianic ideology of the Phanariots was thoroughly absorbed by the local elites. As Vlad Georgescu points out in his treatise on the emergence of modern political ideas in the Danubian Principalities, Romanian elites

expressed their ideological and political needs through a “complex structure of culture and civilization, theoretically based on the conservative, traditional, Orthodox elements, on neo-Greek culture and clothed in oriental garb due to historical circumstances.” (Georgescu, 1972, p. 195). The dominant attitude of the Romanian political and intellectual elites during the last decades of the 18th and the first decades of the 19th century was one of strategic expectation. Significantly enough, the 1821 Greek insurrection against Turkish rule was started in Valahia by Alexandros Ypsilanti, the grandson and son of local Greek princes (both representatives of the neo-Byzantine ethos discussed by Zakynthinos), yet it was not entirely supported by the Romanian establishment (Georgescu, 1991). Furthermore, a local revolutionary movement led by Tudor Vladimirescu soon distanced itself from the Greek insurrection ending in open conflict with the Greeks. Although Vladimirescu was assassinated by Ypsilanti, the Greeks were themselves defeated by the Turks and the Greek rule of the Principalities ended (Georgescu, 1991). The local elites, believing in a future redemption of those who so secretly professed the true hope and teachings of the Faith, realigned themselves with the official Turkish rule, hoping to influence things from within. At times, they aligned themselves with the Russians, but Turkish rule continued in the Romanian lands until 1878 (Hitchins, 1996).

Meanwhile, the local elites continued their mythopoetic activity. They generated new narratives on the canvass of the same general Gnostic-like strategy, which placed them in a new “imagined community” of thought and hope (Anderson, 1983). This community was an entity much bigger than the actual political body of which it was a part. It was a community of spiritual splendor and imperial greatness related to the ancient glory of Rome and traditional European values, which were identified as the true source of Romanian identity. This radical virtualization of power and glory was an answer to the continued dominance not only of Turkish, but after 1829 Russian and later, and after 1856 Austrian, powers over the Romanian lands.

With this rebirth of hope, the narrative strategy of messianic exaltation survived the late Ottoman empire era and become a recyclable intellectual resource. The covert Gnostic mythology nourished by a minuscule 17th to 18th century intellectual and political elite grew over the following centuries into an overt official ideology supported by a modern propaganda machine. The penchant of Romanian intelligentsia to invent a national mythology in which past defeats and humiliations are interpreted as tests for a future messianic fate has been amply documented by Boia (2001b). Nineteenth century intellectual mythemes such as “Romanians saved Christian civilization by guarding the Levantine gates of Europe” or “Romanians are the true inheritors of Orthodoxy (or Latinity)” are strikingly similar to those peddled by the Neo-Byzantine elites of the 18th century. Although we do not have the time to explore the connection between the two strands of thought here, this is a very promising area for further research, that could open new avenues for understanding Romanian modernization. In what follows we will limit our discussion to the possible articulation points of a future theory of Romanian modernization, which could use the insight that Gnostic-like narrative strategies could be one of the constitutive building blocks for Romanian early modern consciousness.

Gnostic-like Narrative Strategies and Ideological Reversibility

Following Gnostic thought patterns and narrative strategies through a variety of contexts and events, we have identified an ideological-mythological topos that is activated by

specific historical challenges, especially those that are associated with early modernity, ethnic conflict, and national subordination to a Muslim imperial order. This topos is determined by at least three coordinates: a) a *religious dimension* expressed by a yearning for ultimate moral values and for a sacred order of the universe and encapsulated into sophisticated eschatological hermeneutics; b) an *ideological* capacity for organizing inherited and modern *representations* of the world and society into a rational narrative strategy, which turns these representations into coherent systems of ideas that could be used for political legitimation and/or collective identity building; c) the *emotional and narrative* logic of a *mythological vision* of symbolic self-enfranchisement and empowerment.

In fact, Gnostic-like narrative strategies are the ultimate hybrid, a creation of the murky and ambiguous transition from a rather peculiar “traditional” society (neither Oriental, nor fully Western feudal) to an ever more contradictory and insufficiently specified post-Ottoman modernity. As hybrids, they inevitably emerge in the process of “peripheral” modernization, in which local and global cultural forms, fashions, and concepts mix and cross-pollinate, producing unexpected results. Furthermore, these hybrids are intermediary stages on the road to complete and functional secularization and modernization, both seen as ideal types, not as Western templates (Dobrescu, 2003; Matei, 2004).

It is also possible that such an interpretation is too teleological, explaining *away*, rather than simple *explicating* a far more complex reality. The ambiguities built into the Gnostic-like thought patterns and narrative strategies, which freely mix emotional and expressive needs with political theology and modern-style ideological rationalization, might ultimately fail to transform pre-modern into modern cultural and narrative strategies. On the contrary, ambiguity might very well become a permanent state and function as a semantic glue that generates a stable or at least constantly recurrent configuration of choices and preferences. In other words, thought patterns and narrative strategies, together with the superstructures that they make possible (political ideologies, cultural values, common sense, etc.), become chronically ambiguous or, with a term already consecrated in Romanian cultural analysis, “paramodern” (Matei, 2004). This ambiguity should not necessarily be identified at the finest level of analysis. It might very well be that any given cultural entity could function quite consistently within its own universe. That is, esthetic symbols could direct some aspects of cultural and political thought, doctrines or theological-eschatological concepts can direct others, while rationalistic ideologies and thought paradigms can innervate yet other cultural realms. Yet, their recycling without any necessary succession and in a rather opportunistic manner, depending on context, might lead to very unclear and incomplete separation of religion, ideology, and aesthetics (Matei & Momescu, 2010).

A closer inspection of the historical case surveyed in the present essay can provide a conversation starter about the ambiguous but stable alliance between symbolical-imaginative and conceptual-procedural thinking that can be identified in Gnostic-like narrative strategies. Gnostic narrative strategies create a cognitive-symbolical apparatus so unstable that it can be used not only to convert a latent crusading spirit into actual radicalism, but also vice-versa. This reversibility principle is relevant for understanding processes significantly larger than Romanian modernization *per se*. It could, for instance provide new insights into the recent history of the Balkans, with its unexpected upsurge during the 1990s of a crusader anti-Islamic spirit in the midst of what appeared to be

during the 1980s a stable, pluralistic, and decidedly secular Yugoslavia. It could also help us reevaluate the political culture of the late Ottoman empire from which emerged not only the elites of modern Greece, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, but also those of Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, or Iraq. Proposing a common political cultural heritage for these disparate cultures would be legitimate because both the Christian-Orthodox and the Islamic inheritors of the former Ottoman Empire might have preserved the moral obligation of perpetuating the memory of a "holy war" against their religious Other, complete with a range of ideological-symbolic strategies of indefinitely suspending such a war, and of justifying if not glorifying the social and political status quo.

To conclude, we hope that our contributions helps the scholarly community interested in elucidating the modernization process in Eastern Europe to appreciate the role played by Gnostic-like narrative strategies as cradles of the local modernization ideologies. Much can and needs to be done to completely validate this line of research, but we are determined that it provides a very fertile ground for further theoretical and historical inquiry.

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