

## A TOPOGRAPHY OF CONTRASTS: ROMANIA IN 1877 THROUGH THE EYES OF AN ENGLISH JOURNALIST

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**Abstract.** *Frederick Boyle was an English newspaper correspondent in the Russo-Turkish War, who witnessed the entry of the Russian army in Romania in 1877 and provided exhaustive accounts of this country, of its society, lifestyle, politics, and economy. The traveller's professional background influences his cognitive cartography shaped by a scrutinizing view, hungry for unusual details. The writer tends to generalize, to establish stereotypes, to use superlative structures, to exaggerate, and to highlight the contradictions in order to entertain the readers and to enhance the sensationalism of his report. This article points out that the dichotomous construct of the Romanian space, with rough edges and painful antinomies, accumulates a series of contrasts which are highly augmented through the journalistic lenses.*

**Keywords:** *cognitive cartography, Romania in 1877, Frederick Boyle, dichotomous construct, journalistic lenses*

Frederick Boyle (1841–1914), the English author of several travel accounts from Asia, South Africa, and Central and South America was also a journalist: a regular contributor to various periodicals and a newspaper correspondent in the Russo-Turkish war (1877–1878). His book *The Narrative of an Expelled Correspondent* is dedicated to this event and registers not only the war scenes but also offers a comprehensive view of the visited territories, such as Romania and Bulgaria. This article emphasizes the ways his profession shapes his cognitive mapping of the Romanian space in 1877. A cognitive map represents an artificial construct, which – as Denis Cosgrove indicates – reveals an “experienced, remembered or projected” world (2). Boyle filters his travel experiences through the eye of the columnist, decomposing the visible reality into memorable fragments. My analysis draws upon spatial studies and discourse analysis in order to identify the journalistic strategies that influence Frederick Boyle’s cognitive cartography of the Romanian space and the characteristics of this topography.

The English journalist dedicates most of his writing not to the war scenes but to the depiction of the encountered space. As Corrine Fowler points out, “war correspondents’ reportage is inevitably implicated in the production of knowledge” about the respective countries (“Travel Writing and Ethics” 63). The march towards Plevna is a perfect opportunity for Boyle to provide the

reader with plenty of details about the Romanian society, about culture, and customs. The first page of his travel account begins in a journalistic style, with the announcement of some important news: the Cossacks' arrival in Bucharest on 12 May 1877. Boyle focuses eagerly on the urban lifestyle, and his comments seem to belong to a gossip columnist as he offers details about the fashionable gathering at the *Chaussée* on this special occasion: “pretty women, chattering gaily from carriage to carriage across the avenue, whilst gentlemen filled the side-paths, making innumerable cigarettes, and gossiping in the shade” (Boyle 2). The skilful choice of verbs conveys the impatience of waiting as well as a dynamic portrait of the inhabitants.

The perspective angle narrows gradually to highlight various aspects, such as the style of clothing and the temporal and spatial background: “they are wearing low dresses of muslin” (Boyle 3), “the brilliant summer toilettes,” “white necks outstretched in pretty impatience to behold the coming sight, chequers of hot sunshine falling upon eager faces through the pale limes above, and the shrubberies on either side all pink with blossom” (Boyle 2). The result is a picturesque mapping with a strong visual impact, with subtle innuendos in a gossip columnist style: “the indolent beauties of Roumania” (3), “languidly bemoaning the heat” (2). The “charming sight” which Boyle depicts is thus sprinkled with details suggesting sensuality and lethargy.

Boyle reiterates the idea that these elements seem to define the Bucharest lifestyle: “The handsome carriages in mad haste to get nowhere fill the street as usual. Julia or Faustina, dressed in exquisite robes from Paris, reclines therein, and eyes the pavement with classic langour. The innumerable restaurants are crammed with idlers” (Boyle 15). The use of the names of two Roman empresses – Julia and Faustina, Roman social archetypes – conveys not only the Latin lineage of the Romanian ladies, but also the opulence and subjugating, seductive power of the beauties of high society. On the other hand, this reference suggests a sense of continuity of the indolence and frivolity often attributed to the Roman aristocracy.

The British writer has a tendency to generalize and to establish stereotypes: “The Roumanian coquette is amongst the most dangerous of her order (...) she reaches a proficiency not to be excelled” (Boyle 37). The use of superlative direct and indirect structures (“the most dangerous of her order”, “not to be excelled”) is a journalistic strategy meant to draw the reader's attention by creating the illusion of presenting unique, unparalleled facts. The dramatic superlative constructions create sensationalism, a feature of the infotainment role of journalism, which applies story-telling techniques to entertain the public and to evoke emotion (Mellado, Vos 119). The same method is applied not only to sketch a certain category of individuals, but also to describe a general lifestyle: “gentle love is still the lord of all in Bucharest” (Boyle 15). The idea of a hedonistic purpose of life is extended from the capital

city to the whole Romanian nation, at all social strata: “Not the rich people only thus behave. In every class, at every age, and at all hours, love is the one thought” (Boyle 34). The gradual generalization has as a final result the depiction of an “upside-down world,” which “makes the pleasures and the trifles the business of life, and leaves work to Jews and gipsies” (Boyle 34). Laziness and pleasure-seeking are thus applied as national Romanian labels.

The Romanians’ exclusive interest in love issues and for the comfort of existence is reiterated more times in the text: “The Roumanian is quite happy when his love affairs go smooth, and the usurer has advanced him twenty-five per cent upon his whole revenue for next year” (Boyle 13). Moreover, the English journalist reverses reasons and consequences, in order to offer an apparently solid basis for his allegations: “The facility of divorce here, unequalled in any land, savage or civilised, is a needful consequence of the national manners” (Boyle 35). The superlative structure “unequalled in any land, savage or civilised” reinforces the idea of a peculiar and strange country with “thriftless, kindly, deplorable manners which amaze and rejoice and shock the stranger” (Boyle 9). The traveller’s cognitive mapping reunites a series of contrasts reflected at the semantic level by the juxtaposition of incongruous terms and structures. The very own purpose of his writing, in particular, and of a gossip columnist in general is embedded in the above lines: “to amaze, rejoice and shock” the reader.

The journalist emphasizes his travel experience in order to offer credibility to his statements: “Very wide travel in many lands of either hemisphere gives me confidence to say that for regularity of feature and charm of expression they are not unsurpassed only but unrivalled” (10). As Corrine Fowler notices, “travel writing by journalists (...) is subject to imperatives to transmit a degree of authority, credibility and insight” and tends to be reliant on first-hand observation and eyewitness account (*Chasing Tales* 12). In this regard, Frederick Boyle induces the idea that the simple visual observation provides solid testimony and allows categorical judgements, which can prevail over scientific evidence. Thus, in reference to the issue of the Roman lineage of the Romanians, the author also applies the empirical formula: “How far the boast be true, ethnologists, physiognomists, and historians may dispute, but any educated man who passes along the street will recognise a certain justification” (Boyle 10). Boyle points out the most important physical traits that sustain this idea: “Such low, broad foreheads, full of intelligence; such superb dark eyes, rounded and shadowed; such sweeping lines of perfect feature, and sensual, pouting lips, are to be beheld nowhere else” (10). The sentences are again formulated as absolute verdicts, impossible to contradict: “this is certain, that the antique Roman type, such as we are accustomed to conceive it, is nowhere preserved as it is here” (Boyle 10). Structures such as

“this is certain”, “are to be beheld nowhere else”, “nowhere preserved as it is here” strengthen the trustworthiness of his accounts.

The positive aspects are, however, constantly counterbalanced by negative characteristics: “These people are children, gentle, kindly, and sweet-tempered as could be, but ignorant of real life, and unconscious of moral duties, as the best children must be” (Boyle 13). The adjectives related to the childhood sphere induce the impression of a nation with an infantile behaviour. The author connects antithetic terms in a single structure in order to enhance the idea of a “strange population” (Boyle 9). The oppositions are built at the syntactic level by the recurrent use of the adversative conjunction “but”: “But if one leave aside the perfection of classic form and a few plastered ruins, a few broken columns, there is nothing to remind us of old Rome in Bucharest” (Boyle 12). The dichotomous view shifts from the physical profile of the inhabitants to the mapping of the urban space of the capital city.

The sentences preserve the same dichotomous structure: “But the capital attempts to vie with Paris itself in luxury, and in some respects it succeeds” (Boyle 12). The opposing images are introduced gradually: “narrow, ill-built, ill-paved” streets display shops with luxurious supplies, and the private houses, very large and with a nice design are opposed to the “abundant squares of waste, fenced by broken palings, where pariah dogs sleep and roam” (Boyle 12). The traveller also draws attention upon the lack of interest for the preservation of the “charming little palaces” where “the tasteful stucco ornaments have tumbled down” (Boyle 13). The British correspondent suggests that the mix of contrasts configures a marginal space, on the border of different civilizations: “one is continually reminded that Asia begins at the Austrian frontier” (Boyle 13). Further developing this idea, Frederick Boyle considers that: “It is the cruellest stroke of destiny that such a people should be set in this corner of Europe, between the Russian hammer and the Turkish anvil” (15). The liminal geographical condition and the historical adversities are not, however, widely explained, but rather recorded as another drawback of this nation.

The British correspondent’s remarks also regard the weather forecast, which integrate practical aspects: “we have a heat more than tropical to expect henceforward, which will last probably till the middle of October” (Boyle 3); “lately we had six feet of snow and a deluge; in ten days we shall have heat super-tropical” (20). Providing helpful details is a feature of the service role of journalism, focused on the everyday life (Mellado, Vos 111). However, Boyle combines factual information with a poetic perspective – “a parched, breathless downpouring of sunshine, under which green dries into yellow and disappears, dust lies six inches thick for yards along the road-side, and the muddiest water has its value” (Boyle 3). The determinants and the chromatic particulars create a strong synaesthetic effect, enriching the topography of the Romanian space

with lyrical nuances, meant to enhance the readers' sensibility. Thus, a romantic mapping of the vegetation of the Romanian land is configured: "swaths of yellow colza bar it, and acres of wild strawberry in full blossom, belts of iris round a march, break the eternal green" (Boyle 31). The traveller's interest in botanical aspects materialized in his later life in several books about orchids.

The thorough inventory of the endemic flora represents a special facet of Boyle's cartography of the Romanian space. The amateur botanist registers plants such as monkshood, cornflower, Canterbury bell, bedstraw, iris, hollyhocks, gladiolus, wild flax, gentian, anemones, asparagus, and acacias (Boyle 50, 67). The description is enriched with comparisons referring to his travel experience. The voyager highlights, for instance, the contrasts between Romania and other places – notices that it is not as rich in flowers as Servia – or matches the colour effects of the garlands of dog-rose with those created by the pink lotus in the Far East (Boyle 50). The intertextual references, which associate vegetal elements with literary characters – "that red spike of blossom which Ophelia calls, I think, 'love in idleness'" (Boyle 50) –, produce a multi-layered structure of his construct of the local topography.

Sometimes the depiction of the vegetation gains dysphoric notes: "for miles, a pale-green sheet of maize; and then, for leagues, a desert of burnt grass, weeds, and thistles" (Boyle 66). The wide steppe landscape along the Danube generates a certain state of loneliness. The comparisons with other lands are used in this case to highly intensify this feeling: "I have crossed the Grand Sahara (...), but for downright loneliness and miserable solitude I will back Roumania against any spot in the world" (Boyle 66). The result is a rhetoric of desolation and misery, which is extended then to the whole rural territory. The dysphoric mapping and the notes of discomfort, misery, and despondency mirror what Robert T. Tally Jr. calls *topophrenia*, a concept which refers to an "uneasy 'placemindedness' that characterizes a subject's interactions with his or her environment" (9). The traveller's sense of displacement is enhanced by the monotony of the Danubian landscape.

The view of the poor huts in the Danube field reminds the traveller of the South African ones, but the comparison is to the detriment of the former: "Now and again one sees a Roumanian village, looking, I must admit, much like a Kaffir kraal, only not so clean" (Boyle 49). The idea is reinforced after a few pages: "The same reed roofs, grey-brown of colour, the same fences of thorn, well set in mud, the same broken look of the ground, channelled and cut by rain" (Boyle 67). The journalist introduces first the similarities, then he demonstrates further that the kraal of Hottentots or Kaffirs is superior to the Romanian village: "one reluctantly admits that the Kaffir must not be insulted by comparisons (...) seeing the dirt and untidiness around" (Boyle 67). The focus is on the wilderness and idiosyncrasies, which stir the reader's interest.

Thus, Boyle transforms the description of the most unfortunate shelters into the label of the Romanian village: “The walls are thick with fungi, vermin innumerable share the abode with every insect of the field. Such is the average dwelling of a Roumanian peasant” (68). He also insists upon the attributes which configure the paradigm of a barbaric land: “children, half naked”, men stare “at us with savage wonder” (Boyle 49). The author makes a concession and admits that there are also positive parts in the appearance of these people, only to cancel the impression immediately by using the adversative conjunction “but”: “For an artist these people have many beauties both of feature and expression, even of costume, but all so masked by dirt that unaesthetic persons turn from them with disgust” (Boyle 50). Such rural peculiarities are then opposed to the richness of the capital city: “This is the lining of that silken existence we see at Bucharest – and a horrid, filthy lining it is” (Boyle 68). The association of two extremes configures thus a topography of contrasts, highlighted in order to arouse the curiosity of the potential readers.

As regards the urban landscapes, the British traveller offers plenty of information about Bucharest, especially about the amusements, which are quite varied and include “the crowded opera, a French *opéra comique*, a Roumanian theatre, and several café concerts ‘starred’ from Paris, Italy, and sometimes Austria” (Boyle 16). The correspondent’s critical eye also identifies some contrasts, this time between the National Theatre – which is “a pretty building, tastefully decorated, and well designed” – and “the Roumanian theatre of operettas,” which is “not worthy of the town,” as the building is “very like a barn, much dilapidated” (Boyle 16). The journalist seems to be attracted by the urban space of the capital, which he depicts as full of energy and amusements. With benevolence, he admires “the astonishing life and gaiety” of “this delightful town” (Boyle 16) and even compares the most important promenade place in Bucharest, the *Chaussée*, with the famous Hyde Park, this time the comparison tilting the balance in favour of the local realities: “This is our Hyde Park (...) but wilder, if not prettier. At this time of the year the foliage of its lime avenues is exquisitely tender, and the hedges, of a small leaved shrub, are pink with flower” (Boyle 19). The cognitive mapping is drawn up with notes of tenderness and nostalgia, and with intertextual references which substitute the image of the couples in love with the Shakespearean Romeo and Juliet.

In picturing the topography of another town, Ploiești, Boyle, however, sounds less enthusiastic. The comparison with the capital highlights the negative aspects: Ploiești “is a little Bucharest – less wealthy, of course, dirtier, possibly more idle” (Boyle 33). The traveller records the degradation state of the stucco houses, “the break-neck pavement,” and the deeper holes, constantly filled with mud. In contrast, he also adds some positive aspects, such as certain pretty houses, perceived as “little gems of beauty and comfort” (Boyle 36). As

regards yet another town, Alexandria, he appreciates the fact that the shops have a wide variety of merchandise, but despises the Oriental influence: “in other respects just like the stalls in a Turkish bazaar – little unglazed rooms, under a colonnade” (Boyle 69). The same type of mapping structured on positive–negative contradictions is applied in the case of the rural territory, where Boyle criticizes the rudimentary techniques of working the land, but praises the fertility of the soil, which can “madden with despair our scientific agriculturist at home” (30). Urban and rural spaces seem thus to combine a plethora of apparently irreconcilable contrasts.

As regards the fate of Romania after the independence war, even if the British correspondent praises enthusiastically the bravery of the Romanian soldiers, he predicts that “the Roumanian people will be ruined utterly, perhaps eternally” as “this country, having missed its chance in years gone by, is now doomed to fall further and further behind” (Boyle 81). According to Frederick Boyle, the reason for the lack of economic development and social progress is represented by the untrustworthy politicians: “For years past a small knot of politicians (...) have been driving the country to its ruin” (424). This observation, still valid nowadays, is yet incomplete, as he does not take into account other causes that had hindered the prosperity of this land, such as the geographical position at the crossroads of the great powers and the constant foreign oppression and exploitation which had impoverished and discouraged the people. His advice for the Romanians is to capitalize the abundance of talent of the nation and to give up the state of “apathetic listlessness” (Boyle 424), the lethargy which can endanger the future of the state.

Boyle’s cognitive mapping highlights the contradictions which convey the general impression of a strange and anachronistic space: “The more one sees of this country, the more distinctly does it prove to be a monstrous and delightful anachronism” (Boyle 30). The author suggests that the Romanian civilisation is out of time, trapped in the past, in a state of barbarism and wilderness. Ironically, the adjectives “monstrous” and “delightful” enhance exactly the characteristics of a journalistic piece of writing, which should stress the odd and unusual facts in order to thrill its audience. The author’s writing also incorporates several layers of contrasts: marked at the syntactic level by the adversative conjunction “but,” at the semantic level by the juxtaposition of incongruous terms, at the stylistic level by the combination of the objective and subjective perspective.

The traveller’s profession has a strong impact on his cognitive cartography, which reveals rough edges and painful antinomies. His accounts have not only an informative purpose, but also an infotainment role: the correspondent uses a gossip columnist style when he describes the elite lifestyle of Bucharest, when he inserts subtle innuendos about the frivolous character of the ladies or when he insists upon the hedonistic purpose of life of

the Romanians. The superlative structures, the exaggerations, and the focus on unusual details and on contradictions are meant to amaze and entertain the reader, but they distort the reality which is framed by stereotypes. The result is a dichotomous construct of the Romanian space, which reunites a series of light and shadow contrasts amplified to the extreme through the journalistic lenses.

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