

Keith Hitchens

The Romanian Enlightenment in Transylvania

The European Enlightenment touched Romanian intellectuals in Transylvania in diverse ways in the latter decades of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. But the depth of its influence depended not so much upon the novelty and persuasiveness of the ideas being propagated by *philosophes* and *Aufklärer* in the West as upon the convergence of these ideas with the aspirations already formulated by Romanian intellectuals. To put matters another way, the reception of the Enlightenment by these Romanians was a process of selection and adaptation, rather than of imitation, and, thus, we may properly speak about an original sub-current of ideas, about a Romanian Enlightenment. It was, to be sure, a part of the European-wide movement of ideas, but it also possessed qualities of its own, which reflected the specific course of social and cultural development in Transylvania in the eighteenth century.

My aim here is twofold: first, to suggest what effects the European Enlightenment had on the Romanian intellectual elite, and, second, to identify the main features of the Romanian Enlightenment. I shall focus attention on the leading representatives of the elite, who formed a small, fairly cohesive group and whose activities spanned the period from the 1770s to about 1820. The years of their most intense creativity coincided with the reign of the Habsburg Emperor Joseph II (1780-1790) and the decade or so that followed. Joseph's reign stands out in Romanian intellectual history because it was precisely then that far-reaching reforms emanating from Vienna intersected with a new national consciousness in the making in Transylvania. Imperial reforms, respect for reason and scientific knowledge, and absorption with the idea of nation thus combined to endow the Enlightenment among the Romanians with its distinctive character. They also reinforced the synthesis of East and West that was already underway in Romanian thought and later was to become the hallmark of modern Romanian intellectual life.

I

Romanian intellectuals of the late eighteenth century came into closer communion with Western European thought than any previous generation. The majority of them were the products of Uniate (Greek Catholic) secondary schools, which flourished at Blaj, the diocesan center of the Romanian Uniate Church in Transylvania, and of Roman Catholic institutions of higher learning in Transylvania and in Vienna and Rome. Educated in the new, enlightened spirit of the times, they were unusually receptive to the ideas of the Enlightenment, especially in its Austrian incarnation. They were optimistic about the possibilities of human progress, and, conscious of their own leading role in Romanian society, they were certain that change must come from above, from the enlightened, by which, of course, they meant themselves. They were also of a practical bent and were little given to abstract speculation, for their attention was focused on the immediate problems of Romanian society, notably education and political emancipation. Their immense and varied productivity—histories of their own people, grammars of the Romanian language, theological commentaries and volumes of sermons, school textbooks, and translations of works of every kind—was aimed at improving the general welfare of the Romanians. In the final analysis, a single element gave their myriad activities cohesion and direction—the idea of nation, which they themselves did much to define in modern terms of history and language¹.

This generation of Romanian intellectuals was also the product of the church union with Rome, which the Bishop of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Transylvania and a part of his clergy had accepted in 1700. But this arrangement was a political act, not a religious conversion. In agreeing to its terms, the Orthodox clergy, who for centuries had suffered

1. Of many general works on the Romanian enlighteners, the following are especially valuable: D. Popovici, *La littérature roumaine à l'époque des lumières*, Sibiu 1945, which places the Romanian Enlightenment in Transylvania in a general Romanian context, and Dumitru Ghișe and Pompiliu Teodor, *Fragmentarium iluminist*, Cluj 1972, which contains perceptive essays on the major figures of the Romanian elite of Transylvania. The following should also be consulted: Lucian Blaga, *Gîndirea românească în Transilvania în secolul al XVIII-lea*, București 1966, pp. 62-108; Alexandru Dușu, *Coordonate ale culturii românești în secolul XVIII*, București 1968, pp. 293-327; and Ion Lungu, *Școala ardeleană*, București 1978.

discrimination from the dominant Magyar Roman Catholic and Calvinist and Saxon-German Lutheran “nations”², sought a place in society befitting their ecclesiastical status.

The church union brought few changes to Romanian religious life, for in matters of doctrine and ritual the two Romanian churches, the traditional Orthodox and the newly founded Uniate, continued to share the same Eastern heritage. But the union propelled Romanian intellectual life in new directions. By opening Roman Catholic schools in Transylvania and elsewhere in the Habsburg Empire to young Romanians, it gave impetus to the formation of a new intellectual elite, which by the middle of the eighteenth century was eager to assume a leading role in cultural life and the affairs of the Romanian community in general. In this way the church union represented the thrust of the West into traditional, largely rural Romanian society, and, as a result, the emerging Uniate clergy became the mediators between two cultural worlds, one essentially urban and cosmopolitan and turned toward the West, the other peasant and insular and facing eastward. But the new elite made no effort to detach itself from the spiritual foundations of the village, which remained staunchly Orthodox and which the elite continued to prize as distinctly Romanian³. Instead, they undertook to emancipate both Orthodox and Uniate Romanians, who, as a mainly peasant population, had been excluded from political life and burdened with taxes and forced labor by the dominant nations of Transylvania —the Magyar nobility and the Saxon-German middle class.

The major figures of the intellectual elite in the latter decades of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth were encyclopedic in their interests, didactic in their vocation, and national in their application of new knowledge and ideas. Three among them stand out as representative of the enlightened age. They came from the ranks of the gentry and were Uniate priests, and they were preoccupied above all else

2. This term was used in a legal sense to describe those groups in Transylvania, such as nobles, who enjoyed privileges and exercised political and economic power to the exclusion of the mass of the population, who were mainly peasant. “Nation” was also beginning to be used in an ethnic sense at this time.

3. On the formation and goals of the Romanian intellectual elite up to about 1760, see Zoltán I. Tóth, *Az erdélyi román nacionalizmus első százada, 1697-1792*, Budapest 1946, pp. 151-199, 227-241.

with defending the Romanian ethnic community. Their first task, as they saw it, was to define “Romanian nation” and to impress upon the imperial court in Vienna and the “nations” of Transylvania how ancient and noble the ancestry of the Romanians was. To do so they assembled the evidence of history and language. Samuil Micu (1745-1806)⁴ was the first to set down in detail the so-called theory of Daco-Roman continuity, which formed the core of the modern idea of Romanian nationhood. In such works as *Scurtă cunoștință a istorii Românilor* (A short survey of the history of the Romanians; composed in 1796) and the four-volume *Istoria și lucrurile și întâmplările Românilor* (The history, deeds, and events of the Romanians; composed 1800-1806) he argued that the Romanians were the direct descendants of the Roman legionaries and colonists who had settled in Dacia (which had encompassed much of Transylvania and the territory between the Carpathians and the Danube) in the second century and that a Romanized population had inhabited this area uninterruptedly until the arrival of the Magyars in the tenth century⁵. His younger colleagues, Gheorghe Șincai (1754-1816)⁶, who composed a three-volume *Hronica Românilor* (Chronicle of the Romanians; composed 1804-1808), and Petru Maior (1756-1821)⁷, whose *Istoria pentru începutul Românilor în Dacia* (The history of the beginnings of the Romanians in Dacia; published in Buda, 1812) was the most influential historical work of his own and the following generation, added their own refinements to the theory. All three were also pioneering linguists, who found indispensable proof of ethnicity in the Latin origins of the Romanian language, which they demonstrated in *Elementa linguae Daco-*

4. The best survey is Dumitru Ghișe and Pompiliu Teodor, “Samuil Micu și filosofia wolffiană”, in Ghișe and Teodor, *Fragmentarium iluminist*, pp. 20-100. See also: Zoltán I. Tóth, *Klein Sámuel és az erdélyi román felvilágosodás*, Kolozsvár 1947.

5. Samuil Micu, *Scurtă cunoștință a istorii Românilor*, ed. Cornel Cîmpeanu, București 1963, pp. 42-44, 58-61.

6. D. Ghișe and P. Teodor, “Gheorghe Șincai și idealul luminării”, in Ghișe and Teodor, *Fragmentarium iluminist*, pp. 101-178. The only full-length biography is Mircea Tomuș, *Gheorghe Șincai. Viața și opera*, București 1965. It must be supplemented by the introduction by Manole Neagoe to Gheorghe Șincai, *Hronica Românilor*, ed. Florea Fugariu, Vol. 1, București 1967, pp. v-cvii.

7. The fullest account of his life and career remains Maria Protase, *Petru Maior: un ctitor de conștiințe*, București 1973. A more recent evaluation of Maior’s career is the introduction by Ioan Chindriș to his edition of Petru Maior, *Istoria bisericii Românilor*, Vol. 1, București 1995, pp. 5-75.

Romanae sive Valachicae (Vienna 1780), the first scholarly published grammar of Romanian, written by Micu and Şincai, and *Lexicon Valachico-Latino-Hungarico-Germanicum* (Buda 1825), the first etymological dictionary of the Romanian language, to which Maior made substantial contributions.

Micu and his colleagues expressed their commitment to nation not only as scholars but also as activists who stood in the forefront of the effort to secure rights for the Romanians equal to those of the privileged nations of Transylvania. Among their demands were proportional representation for Romanians at all levels of government administration, an equitable sharing of the tax burden among all the nations of Transylvania, and the holding of a Romanian national congress. These claims and a long excursion into history to justify them formed the substance of an imposing petition which they submitted in 1791 to Emperor Leopold II (1790-1792) and which became known as the *Supplex Libellus Valachorum*⁸. It was the most important political document drawn up by the Romanians in the eighteenth century and became the reference point for similar declarations of nationhood down to the Revolution of 1848.

II

The Romanian elite's preoccupation with the ethnic nation coincided with Joseph II's promotion of enlightened reforms. His reign, in general, had an extraordinary effect on Romanian intellectuals. By reorganizing and centralizing his vast realm, he shook the established order in Transylvania to its foundations and convinced the Romanians that there was room for them in a structure that until then had denied them rights and benefits. Moreover, he made the elite a part of the general movement for reform by relaxing censorship and encouraging a wider discussion of change.

Joseph's reforms touched every facet of Romanian economic and social life. At the beginning of his reign, in 1781, he issued edicts proclaiming the principle of religious toleration and granting equal civil rights to Romanians living on the so-called *Fundus regius*, a large territory in

8. David Prodan, *Supplex Libellus Valachorum; din istoria formării naţiunii române*, rev. ed., Bucureşti 1984, pp. 9-20, 412-434.

southern Transylvania where the Saxons enjoyed extensive political autonomy. The first edict granted the Orthodox freedom of worship in their own homes and the right to build churches and open schools wherever in Transylvania they numbered at least a hundred families, while the second enabled the Romanians to acquire landed property and enter the guilds and thus to participate in political life in Saxon cities and towns. In the same year Joseph took steps to establish elementary school systems for both Romanian Uniates and Orthodox and to authorize the publication of bilingual (German-Romanian) textbooks for them⁹. A few years later, in 1783 and 1785, he issued decrees emancipating the serfs of Transylvania, measures which had their greatest effect among the Romanians, who formed the majority of the dependent peasantry. Henceforth, they were to have their personal freedom and under certain conditions could leave their villages and acquire and freely dispose of landed property.

All Joseph's measures won the enthusiastic praise and enduring admiration of Romanian intellectuals¹⁰. Samuil Micu and Gheorghe Șincai applauded his abolition of serfdom and other measures on behalf of the "unfortunate commonality"¹¹, and Petru Maior joined his colleagues in expressing gratitude for Joseph's work on behalf of education¹². Yet, there was a fundamental contradiction in their appraisal of what they took to be Joseph's contributions to the revival of the Romanians. Joseph's initiatives indeed seemed to be in harmony with the aspirations of Romanian intellectuals, but his goals were different from theirs. He found in the Romanians useful tools for curtailing the privileges of the entrenched orders of society, but he had no intention of overturning political and social structures in order to accommodate a peasant people he judged incapable of managing their own affairs, let alone governing a vast empire. In consolidating the heterogeneous lands he ruled into a centralized monarchy, he relied on well-tested instruments —the bureaucracy, the army, and the German language. The promotion of self-determination

9. Onisifor Ghibu, *Din istoria literaturii didactice românești*, București 1975, pp. 55-65, 178-188.

10. Prodan, *Supplex*, pp. 227-244; Angelika Schaser, *Josephinische Reformen und sozialer Wandel in Siebenbürgen*, Stuttgart 1989, pp. 35-102.

11. Micu, *Scurtă cunoștință*, p. 44; Șincai, *Hronica Românilor*, Vol. 2, București 1969, p. 184, Vol. 3, București 1969, p. 287.

12. Lungu, *Școala ardeleană*, p. 285.

among the Romanians and his other subjects was farthest from his mind. By contrast, the Romanian elite sought recognition of the separate nationalities, in the first instance, of themselves, a goal that Joseph could hardly sanction, since to do so would be to promote a state within a state. Nonetheless, Joseph's reforms showed the elite how tightly the ideals of the Enlightenment were interwoven with their own advocacy of nation. They thus perceived in his brand of absolutism striking evidence of how reason and knowledge could be harnessed to accelerate beneficial change and thus ensure the progress of the ethnic nation.

III

The Romanian elite shared many of the certainties and aims characteristic of the Enlightenment as a whole. First of all, they were fully committed to reason and knowledge as the levers of man's progress in general and of the Romanians' rise out of backwardness in particular. Like the Western *philosophes*, they also assumed a critical attitude toward existing institutions and beliefs, especially those which blocked the progress of the Romanians. They did so from the general perspective of philosophy, which they revered as both the foundation of knowledge and as a practical means of investigating the nature of man and of interpreting his role as a social being. Samuil Micu, for example, saw in philosophy the theoretical framework within which he could elaborate his ideas about the origins and identity of the Romanians, while Gheorghe Șincai used the "truths of philosophy" to combat superstition among the common people. In the absence of original Romanian works of philosophy, therefore, both were enthusiastic translators of foreign works. These translations could even claim a certain originality, since many pages were, in effect, reworkings adapted to the special circumstances of the Romanians. As such they offer precious insights into the nature of the Romanian Enlightenment.

The interpretation which the Romanian elite made of the general principles of the Enlightenment betrays their absorption with the problems of nation-building. Faith in the power of ideas to change the destinies of men together with devotion to their own ethnic community impelled them to undertake a many-sided campaign to eradicate ignorance and superstition among the mass of the rural population. As the enemies

of all that was irrational in an age of light and progress, they could have little sympathy for the culture of the folk, filled as it was with magic spells and prophecies, all of which, they thought, clouded the peasants' thinking and doomed them to a perpetual state of backwardness.

The reaction of the elite to this side of popular culture is best observed in Gheorghe Șincai's translations from German of introductory manuals of philosophy and science. He was eager to disseminate scientific knowledge, especially physics, in an accessible form among the common people. Even though he was well aware that few peasants could read, he expected the priest, the schoolteacher, and other literate persons in the villages to serve as interpreters. In any case, he was certain that if the peasants gained a proper understanding of physical phenomena, that is, if they could be made to see that the world around them operated in accordance with well-defined, natural laws, then, raised out of ignorance, they would surely be able to perfect their agricultural practices, improve their standard of living, and even expand their cultural horizons. This was the credo he presented in *Învățătura firească spre surparea superstiției norodului* (Natural science as a means of eliminating superstition among the people), a translation and adaptation he made between 1804 and 1808 of *Volks-Naturlehre* by I. H. Helmuth. Through it Șincai was able to explain the true causes of natural phenomena and to deny the existence of miracles and the supernatural, all in an effort to further rational thinking and good sense in the villages¹³. He wrote in a language that could be understood by a broad public and replaced Helmuth's examples with stories and proverbs drawn from Romanian customs and folk wisdom in Transylvania. He was by no means alone in this endeavor. Samuil Micu raised similar objections to popular customs and beliefs that he thought discouraged clear thinking and thus impeded both material and spiritual progress. Like Șincai, he praised science in *Învățătura metafizicii* (The teachings of metaphysics), which was based on a manual of philosophy by Friedrich Christian Baumeister, a disciple of Christian Wolff, and which he translated between 1787 and 1790. In it he showed how the causes of phenomena, or, as he put it, the "connection of

13. Gheorghe Șincai, *Învățătura firească spre surparea superstiției norodului*, ed. D. Ghișe and P. Teodor, București 1964, pp. 73-89, 153-154.

things", followed fixed laws operating in nature¹⁴. Micu's arguments were echoed by Petru Maior, who in his many years as a parish priest used the pulpit to denounce soothsayers and exorcists as bearers of false ideas and even as threats to physical health and good order in the villages¹⁵.

Romanian intellectuals were thus conscious of their role as enlighteners and thought it their duty to combat popular culture. But at the same time, as we have seen, they were anxious to create a national identity, and thus they found themselves obliged to turn to the very culture they disdained in order to discover evidence of their Roman-Latin heritage. Samuil Micu was at pains to prove that many of the customs and beliefs he observed among the peasants, or, as he called them, the "Romanians of Dacia", were exactly those which the "ancient Romans of Italy had had", such as elements of the marriage and funeral services, various charms and magic spells, and observances at Christmas and New Year¹⁶. He also noted that the common people were the true preservers of old Roman customs, while Romanians of higher social rank tended to imitate the habits of other peoples. Șincai, too, pointed out the connections between "Roman beliefs" and the customs preserved in Romanian villages. Yet, despite this keen interest in folklore, neither Micu nor Șincai had the least intention of promoting or collecting folk literature, which they continued to decry as the propagator of false ideas and wrong thinking.

The elite displayed the same ambivalence toward the common people themselves as they did toward their culture. On the one hand, they genuinely sympathized with the hard life of the peasantry, which they knew from their own long association with village life, and they were deeply involved in social activities designed to improve the lot of the rural population. Their pastoral ministrations, sermons, school-books, and advocacy of learning all suggest their seriousness of purpose. When they used the term "nation" they did so in an ethnic sense and meant the Romanian people as a whole, regardless of social class. Yet,

14. Samuil Micu, "Învățătura metafizicii", in S. Micu, *Scriseri filozofice*, ed. P. Teodor and D. Ghișe, București 1966, pp. 128-136.

15. Ovidiu Papadima, *Ipostaze ale iluminismului românesc*, București 1975, pp. 89-90.

16. Micu, *Scurtă cunoaștere*, pp. 84-88; Ion Mușlea, "Samuil Micu-Clain și folclorul", *Revista de folclor*, Vol. 1, No. 1-2 (1956) 249-257.

despite their compassion, they remained conscious of the immense gulf that separated the educated, themselves, from the peasantry. They could not imagine simple villagers as the masters of their own destiny or as members of the political nation. Instead, they prescribed a long period of tutelage, during which the ignorance of the peasants would gradually be eradicated and they could be trained to take part in public life.

The elite had yet another reason for keeping their distance from the "commonality". In their campaign to gain rights for the Romanian nation they emphasized its unique qualities and nobility (insistence on Roman ancestry was meant to impress Magyar nobles and Saxon burghers), and they presented themselves as its worthiest representatives. But peasant ignorance and irrationality undermined the ideal image they were so carefully cultivating. In effect, in the rigidly class-structured society of eighteenth-century Transylvania the rights that the Romanian elite sought were equality with the Magyar nobility and Saxon middle class for themselves and equality with Magyar and Saxon peasants for Romanian peasants. The notion of equality of classes did not occur to them, for they were not, after all, revolutionaries.

The massive peasant uprising in southern Transylvania led by Horea in the fall of 1784 provoked a crisis of conscience among Romanian intellectuals, which revealed all their ambivalent feelings toward the common people. On the one hand, they recognized the justice of peasant grievances, but, on the other, they condemned the destruction of lives and property as the height of irrationality. Samuil Micu's reaction was typical. In his *Istoria* he praised Joseph II for having abolished serfdom, which he likened to "a form of pagan slavery"¹⁷ but in the next breath he called Horea and his cohorts "accursed men" and denounced their killing of landlords and burning of manor houses¹⁸. Such an attitude was fully in keeping with the enlightened spirit of the times and is a revealing commentary on the aspirations of Romanian intellectuals. They had committed themselves wholly to reason and positive knowledge, which, they were certain, would regulate the society of the future, and they had assigned to themselves leadership of the struggle to create the new, enlightened era. But Horea and his followers, the "simple folk", had ignored

17. Micu, *Istoria Românilor*, Vol. 1, p. 123.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

them and had taken matters into their own hands. The peasants had, in effect, transgressed because they had failed to grasp the fundamental truth that they could not gain justice by themselves through “blind violence”, but would have to wait for the elite to secure it for them through enlightened laws and institutions.

As Romanian intellectuals pursued their campaign against irrationalism in the countryside they displayed mixed feelings toward the Church. Highly critical of institutions in general, they had, nevertheless, spared the Church the attacks which the enlightened in the West had directed against it. In the first place, Romanian intellectuals perceived no fundamental antagonism between themselves and the Church. Unlike their contemporaries in the West, they did not treat it as a bastion of obscurantism and an obstacle to progress. Instead, they recognized the vital social and, especially, national role which the Uniate and Orthodox churches had played in the past as defenders of the Romanian ethnic community. At the village level they assigned to the churches not only ordinary educational tasks but also primary responsibility for the moral upbringing of the peasantry. They entertained no illusions that their own brand of rationalism could serve any time soon as a substitute for the churches’ simplified teachings about right and wrong and sin and redemption.

Despite their recognition of the churches’ social role, Romanian intellectuals could not accept the dogmatism and creative constraints imposed by their hierarchies. They themselves were, after all, engaged in freeing the mind from narrow ways of thinking and relied on reason and observation to solve society’s problems and ensure its progress. Although Micu, Șincai, and Maior were priests and never ceased to think of themselves as Christians, they could not always reconcile the science and reason they had absorbed with church teaching and practices. Șincai and Maior revealed their state of mind by abandoning holy orders (they had been monks of the Order of St. Basil), and Micu his by attempting, unsuccessfully, to do the same. Șincai put their views succinctly in *Învățătura firească*. In describing the movement of heavenly bodies and other objects as a function of natural laws, he explained how God, as the prime mover, had designed these laws and set them in motion, but how, afterwards, he had refrained from interfering in their operation¹⁹.

19. Șincai, *Învățătura firească*, pp. 76-77, 81.

Although Șincai and his colleagues thus occasionally professed deist thoughts, they never ventured beyond them to question the existence of God Himself. Nor do they seem to have adopted the tenets of “natural religion”, that is, of a system of beliefs that rejected everything that could not be rationally demonstrated.

IV

The deaths of Samuil Micu (1806), Georghe Șincai (1816), and Petru Maior (1821) are a fitting occasion for reflection on what the Enlightenment meant for the Romanians. Most important of all perhaps, its influence was enduring, for it continued to shape Romanian social and political thought down to the Revolution of 1848. Even though the generation of 1848, that is, those intellectuals who came to maturity in the 1830s and 1840s²⁰, were mainly laymen, they shared with Samuil Micu’s generation the same eagerness to solve the vital social and political problems of the day, the same steadfast belief in the power of ideas to change men’s fortunes for the better, the same moral commitment to disseminate useful knowledge and right reason among the mass of the population, and, no less important, the same devotion to the ethnic nation. The intellectuals of the generation of 1848 were, of course, also men of their own time. Thus, they displayed a special affinity for the sentimentality and *élan* of Romanticism and they joined wholeheartedly in the common effort of Young Europe to promote the principles of economic and political liberalism. But, as they were to show during the headiest days of the Revolution of 1848, such enthusiasm was tempered by the rationalism of their enlightened heritage.

In the final analysis, the Enlightenment imposed a certain style on the process of Romanian nation-building in the latter eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth. It infused the thought of Romanian intellectuals with a distinctly Western and modern spirit, and thus it drew them out of the patriarchal world of the village and hastened their integration into Europe.

20. For profiles of this generation, see: George Marica, et al., *Ideologia generației române de la 1848 din Transilvania*, București 1968, pp. 10-49, and Ladislau Gyémánt, *Mișcarea națională a Românilor din Transilvania între anii 1790 și 1848*, București 1986, pp. 336-362.