

The Shape Shifter. The Danube in a Snapshot

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@George Nica Photography

Abstract

Although not the longest river in Europe, the Danube has always manifested her existence in a plurality of voices, forms and guises, tempting leaders due to her strategic geographic position and the promise of abundance, thus risking to become a bone of contention on political maps, while revealing herself as an enchantress of colours and shades, of sounds and wor(l)ds beautifully blended in spectacular artistic creations that bring her to the fore. Starting from black-and-white snapshots of the Danube, this paper looks into her occurrences as a Shape Shifter, an Alchemist, a Collector and an Art Muse as they are embodied within literary and/or artistic records.

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Beginnings

A powerful geographic and historic European presence, the Danube resides deep in the collective unconscious of *her peoples* whose personal *histories* are either experienced firsthand or mediated by literary or artistic texts. The stories change as the Danube washes against her banks along and across Europe's lands but what remains the same is the bulk of overwhelming feelings she constantly over-floods. Some may be of sweet nostalgia and happiness while others are of wretchedness and sadness remembering the terrible tragedy of Mogoşoaia [1], thinking of the countless families deprived of happiness for the rest of their lives, or of the men, women and children whose lives were so violently interrupted, turning them into corpses floating down the stream, turning the freezing cold waters of the Danube into an aquatic tomb.

This is why, in all likelihood, these mental mappings of the Danube will always be similar to the one in the photo above: half the Danube is frozen, cold and almost lifeless, an image that so peacefully instills the smell of Death, subconsciously overlapping the images of all those tragedies that have ever occurred on the Danube – most of them in cold late autumns and early winters; the other half is still boiling, flowing and fluid, constantly trying to evade the frozen touch that would entail its death for eternity.

And yet, perhaps not at all surprising, in a setting that is dominated by the presence of the river, the photo above successfully emphasizes her ever-changing nature and Danube's capacity to evoke a sense of wonder and contemplation, *freezing* Danube's (physical) dichotomy (brought about by a natural phenomenon that happens in cold winters); it is this duality (even bipolarity), now captured by the intrusive eye of the camera, that has always been seized and rendered by literary records or artistic representations. [2] After all, being an enlivened organism, the Danube experiences changes throughout the seasons (especially in wintertime), fluctuating water levels, and varying moods: tranquil and serene along half of its length, the Danube flows fast and turbulent along its other half the shades of the old poplars flanking it.

It flows ceaselessly, carving its path through the landscapes it passes, shaping the land and leaving its mark over time. This portrayal emphasizes the river's energy and strength, evoking a sense of awe and respect for its natural power.

Intended not as an overview of cultural representations of the Danube – that would most certainly overlook significant depictions and subjectively favour others – but sooner as a kaleidoscope of overlapping mental images of

the river, the following pages are mapping the Danube in an artistic framework. The approach can be, to a certain extent, seen as ekphrastic, since it... *writerly paints* Cultural Studies. Four categories have been envisaged to this end – they are neither exhaustive nor set in some stone that the river may unturn – but they correlate and connect to each other under the signs of everlasting flow and androgyny. The first one is the mapping of the Danube as a hypertext of sorts, a muse that inspires through constant shapeshifting. It is precisely this chain of metamorphoses that the river goes through that suggested the second mental framing – the Danube as a river of a hundred faces – and the connection to a famous literary figure – Virginia Woolf’s Orlando. And then, as Orlando travels through the ages and places, so does the Danube, which entails clustering, connection and cultural togetherness of the riverain countries. Lastly, the tableau is rounded off with the river’s actual presence in cultural artefacts, as a character, not just as a mere element of setting. While these four ‘portraits’ are presented in a succession that the practice of writing imposes, they ultimately blend into one, outlining one frame of the river banks.

The Danube, the Artful Muse

In both literature and visual arts, the Danube, a genuine symbol of connection and unity, serves as a metaphorical thread that connects different countries, regions, and cultures, weaving together a rich tapestry of European history, identity and contradictions, a rich intertext which tells stories of the beauty and complexity of the natural world, and the ways in which it unifies diverse landscapes and their inhabitants, with different languages, customs, and perspectives.

Carving her way through the heart of Europe, leaving behind valleys and cliffs as if chiselled from the very earth, the Danube is the *Shape Shifter*, at times revealing herself like a sculptor’s masterpiece, while at others she is like a breathtaking accomplishment of nature created with every bend and turn of unfurled colours.

Writers and poets alike have always used the river as a metaphor for the *human quest* for meaning and knowledge, or as a backdrop for thrilling adventures and suspenseful tales. Pertaining to her inseparable bipolarity, artists have also chosen to depict the Danube in various forms and guises, from scenic landscapes to detailed maps capturing the river’s grandeur, while photographers have used the Danube as a subject for stunning black and white images.

Perhaps it is the Danube’s beauty, her historical significance, or yet again her cultural importance to the European continent that might have to do with the reasons why the river has always been so popular, and it remains certain

that, no matter the medium, the Danube is a recurrent vivid presence whose lush greenery is only matched by her serene majesty. And when the paintbrush of the eager artist manages to seize the river's reflective surface it is only to highlight the colourful surrounding flora and fauna reflected on the water the banks of which are often lined with tall trees, rolling hills, and picturesque towns.

From scenic beauty to light and atmosphere, from historical to cultural significance, from Romanticism to Symbolism or maybe human presence, the themes recurrent in the works of art (paintings or photographs) [10] featuring the Danube are varied and changing, just like its shifting and bipolar nature. While some paintings focus on showcasing the picturesque landscapes along the Danube winding through lush green meadows, rolling hills, or majestic mountains, others emphasize the play of light and atmosphere which is skilfully captured by the interplay of sunlight and shadows on the river's surface, thus creating a sense of depth and atmosphere. Similarly, while some paintings portray the Danube through romantic and symbolic lenses, mediating her as a symbol of continuity, unity, or longing, other paintings depict people engaging with the Danube, whether it is fishermen, boaters, or local communities – which emphasizes the river's importance in the lives of those who dwell along its banks.

Nonetheless, what becomes clear regardless of the theme, style or period envisaged is that in most paintings Nature's elements recreate a perfect balance of opposites and, being such a powerful element itself, the Danube seems to be a most agile *Shape Shifter* whose duality (and bipolarity) is seen in the river's ability to adapt and transform: wide and calm along some stretches, while narrow and fast-flowing along others, or deep and majestic, while shallow and tranquil, the Danube symbolizes the cycles of birth, growth, and renewal that are inherent to all beings. Moreover, not only does the river's ever-changing nature reflect the ebb and flow of existence, the cycles of nature but she also nurtures life, a vast ecosystem of flora and fauna, supporting diverse forms of *being*, providing habitats for numerous species and serving as a *lifeline* for both wildlife and human communities along her banks.

Hence, while being a moody *Shape Shifter* herself, the Danube eventually has the power to imprint change/ *shifts* in the life forms/ *shapes* clustered around her, entailing ever-changing (non)human experiences, *her-stories* in a constant state of flux, shifting and transforming as time progresses.

The Danube, the River of a Hundred Faces

Famed for her ever-changing path due to natural processes, human intervention, and geological factors, the Danube is a genuine *Shape Shifter* meandering through different landscapes, creating new channels, and altering

her course and appearance over time: she can flood over her banks or shrink in size – just like Alice does after drinking the potion or biting from the mushroom, and, just like an entity, she has the power to grow a new limb, not yet a new body but maybe a limbo that is striving to unite her banks from season to season. But the Danube is also the *Alchemist* who has been washing away the banks of the lands it crosses, transforming them while taking with her traditions and stories and bringing others to renew what was old, to fill in empty spaces and interconnect people and stories, moving her cultural borders and making time elastic.

The Danube, the *Shape Shifter*, reunites all her shapes and all her faces into the microcosm that she is: a cultural envoy and a historical chronicle at the same time, the river still keeps within her banks the stories of the rise and fall of empires, of wars and migrations fostering cultural exchanges of art, music, and traditions since the beginning of times.

Besides being a microcosm that reveals herself in layers (of history, culture, and interconnectedness) that define Europe, the Danube seems to be shedding light on the diversity of each region she crosses, as well as on the challenges of reconciling different identities and cultural narratives of unity and division, of shared experiences, conflicts and aspirations of the people dwelling along her banks.

The River of a Hundred Faces is the *Androgynous River*. Strange as this may sound, this gender duality is reflected in the Danube's own name: it is said to have derived from Celtic, itself derived from Proto-Indo-European. Perhaps it is exactly this interlingual submergence from one culture to another that left an imprint on her name so that, while in Latin it denotes masculinity, the early Germanic name is, on the contrary, feminine. And yet, perhaps, there is no other language that the Danube manifests and embraces her androgynous nature in (moving in and out of cultures and of times) as in Romanian, where the noun "river" is masculine in the singular, but the proper name is feminine, which suggests that a feminine soul (Dunărea) is trapped in a masculine body (the river). And just like Orlando, the protagonist of Virginia Woolf's eponymous novel (1928) [3], the Danube travels across Europe and through different historical periods, thus serving as a symbol of change and continuity. Clearly, the Danube is a river that has witnessed the passing of time, in a manner very much similar to Orlando's, whose experiences indicate life metamorphoses. Transience and transformation, this is what connects the Danube to Orlando, but so is their androgynous nature due to which they can survive and thrive in an ever-changing cultural and geographic landscape. And while individuals and societies may change over time, some elements of the natural world, like the Danube River, remain constant, connecting different historical eras and identities, manifesting *the feminine* or *the masculine* within alternately.

The Danube, the Alchemist of Cultures

Given that she is flowing along and passing through multiple countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Danube's historical, geographical, and economic significance has made her a unifying element in the region. From Germany to Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, and finally Ukraine, ten are the countries which the Danube borders and naturally links and it is this geographical interconnectedness that allows for and inspires continuous cultural exchange and cooperation.

In some literary works such as *Danube: A Sentimental Journey from the Source to the Black Sea* (1986) by Claudio Magris, or *The Bridge on the Drina* (1977) by the Nobel laureate Ivo Andrić or *The Danube: A Cultural History. Landscapes of the Imagination* (2011) by Andrew Beattie [4], the Danube's role as a connector of cultures and nations is emphasized to further enhance the notion of the river as a *living being* thus allowing for a deeper appreciation of her tremendous power of adaptability. She acts as a bridge between different lands, fostering the exchange of ideas, traditions, and influences so that, while carrying out her knowledge and power to transform elements, the Danube – the *Alchemist* creates *cultural clusters* that interconnect peoples and traditions, but it also spreads *cultural promenades* where games of *quid pro quo* are engaged: it is within these spaces that the *old* willingly allows itself to be contaminated by the *new*, and the *new* acts as a gentle colonizer who embraces the *old* so that the *new* can come to life.

Clearly, such a portrayal underscores the river's ability to facilitate connections and interactions, entailing both a sense of unity and shared heritage among the communities the Danube crosses, both shaping and influencing the world around her.



(Trajan's Column – the Danube bridge - Bing images)

Looking back in history, the first known artistic interpretation of the Danube dates as far back as the Roman times and is found on Trajan's Column, a Roman triumphal monument erected to commemorate Emperor Trajan's victory in the Dacian Wars (101-102 AD and 105-106 AD) [5], in which the Roman Empire extended its control over the regions north of the Danube. Without a doubt, from a strategic point of view, the Danube was a crucial waterway in the Roman Empire, and her importance is more than obvious in the art and monuments of that era.

The Danube's earliest depiction is to be found on Trajan's Column, a bas-relief sculpture that depicts various scenes from the Dacian Wars: a significant element in these scenes, the river is represented as a personified figure with an imperial appearance, thus symbolizing the river's importance to the Roman Empire. The scenes on the relief show Roman soldiers crossing the Danube, conducting naval operations on the river, and interacting with local populations along her banks which makes this depiction of the Danube not only historically significant but also artistically momentous since it serves as one of the earliest accounts of the river, thus highlighting its role as a vital transportation and strategic route in the ancient world.

Moreover, conceptualizing the Danube not only as a *living being* but, more importantly, as a *powerful royal figure or maybe a God* can also entail a sense of mightiness and loftiness, while still entailing empathy and emotional connection: in a similar way to humans, who experience emotions, the river is endowed with human features and certain emotional qualities evoking feelings of wonder, serenity, or even melancholy, depending on the circumstances and the perspective of the observer.

And while engaging herself, her lands and (t)he(i)r people into this cultural *alchemy* the Danube has always allowed for an exchange of people, goods, and ideas, blending and sharing cultures within and outside her *space*: *people moving* means ideas inter-acting, traditions, languages, and artistic expressions fusing and so, while giving rise to a unique blend of heritage, *The Danube, the Shape Alchemist of Cultures* has both the power and the will to alter her borders on geographical maps and also in people's mental representations of her, i.e. in their collective unconscious.

The Danube, the Collector... of Memories

A symbol of freedom for the refugees who swam across her to escape an oppressive communist system or for the Jews who dreamt of a home and a life of their own [6], a ruthless reminder of the dangers that lie ahead when man's only purpose is to dominate man, the Danube is also a *collector of lost souls* metamorphosed into *memories*, the eye of a camera carefully handled by the

crafted photographer, a collector of stories about freedom, escape, adventure, and dangers which might have otherwise remained trapped in a time forgotten space.

The Danube River that ran red with Jewish blood flowed into the sea, where the blood of the Jews was added to the oceans of the planet. The earth is awash in Jewish blood - literally. Just as it is covered with Jewish ashes - literally. In the time of the Holocaust, the smoke from burning Jewish bodies bellowed into the air for a thousand days from dozens of chimneys. The winds have cast the ashes of those millions of Jewish fathers, mothers, and children over the face of the earth. From that earth we now harvest our bread, and in our bread abide the ashes of the Jewish dead. They are woven into the fabric of humanity, body and soul: the essence of the Holocaust is part of our own essence. (Ozsváth 2010: 14)

In many literary works and poetic interpretations, the Danube River is personified and depicted as an entity, possessing characteristics and qualities akin to a sentient being. This anthropomorphic portrayal highlights the vitality, power, and dynamism attributed to the river: a powerful and mighty force, the Danube is dynamic and ever-changing, not only interacting with its surroundings but also influencing the lives of those who encounter it, eventually becoming a *Collector of memories*, a string of reminiscences about growing up, falling in love, and fighting for survival. Woven into the narrative to create a vivid and dreamlike atmosphere, Mircea Cărtărescu's Danube River often evokes a symbolical and metaphorical sense of place, memory, and identity (*Orbitor*, 2007, trans. *Blinding*) [7]. It plays a similar role in Charles Farkas's novel *Vanished by the Danube. Peace, War, Revolution and Flight to the West. A Memoir* (2013) [8]

Just as in stories where heroes are constantly tried and have to prove themselves worthy of the *Holy Grail*, the Danube has the power to reveal herself differently every time, in keeping with the hearts of the fugitives longing for freedom. 'Perhaps the promise of this innocent water is deceitful, and such a universe does not exist. A visit to a concentration camp seems to ridicule all faith in the great tree of humanity imagined by Herder as one harmonious whole.' (Magris 2008: 41)

The rushing sound of the Danube's waterway is described against the roar of the water as it crashed against the rocks, the wildness of it all filling them with an exhilarating sense of possibility.

In Paul Bailey's novel *Kitty and Virgil* (2000) [9], the Danube is presented as a creature, similar to the magical mermaids whose charming songs would entice sailors and lead them to death by their magical song: to all, the Danube seems to promise a life beyond the drabness of reality; it is their escape route, their adventure.

A spirit akin to the Danube's own, Virgil Florescu, the dissident poet who swims across the Danube to escape Ceaușescu's Romania (Bailey, 2000), becomes the metonymical representation of all those who, in their yearning for freedom, abandon their lives at the mercy of the swift and dark river. Like a dangerous beast, the Danube is waiting to devour the gullible – attracted by its shimmering surface, at times stained by the reflection of the city lights dancing on it. And yet, it manages to recreate balance, in a combination of great force and dynamism, as it launches into a harmonious marriage of contrasts to the steep canyons or rocks that it ultimately breaks, with powerful and mighty force.

With the evolution of the visual arts, the ceaseless paintbrush has gradually given way to the hungry eye of the camera so that it is not long before the river's tranquil and calming qualities get under the focal point of the lenses.



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A contemporary photographer famous for his minimalist and poetic approach, George Nica [11] predominantly focuses on landscape photography, capturing serene and contemplative scenes from various locations around Galați. His artistic expression lies in the visual realm through his photographic compositions: it is through this distinctive style that Nica explores the ethereal and atmospheric qualities of the landscapes he photographs. George Nica's photographic representations of the Danube largely capture her as a peaceful and tranquil body of water, featuring her smooth surface, gentle curves, and a

sense of eternal calmness that resonates throughout the images. Many of his images depict the Danube in a timeless, almost otherworldly way.

In his photographs, George Nica often embraces simplicity and minimalism, utilizing a limited colour palette and clean compositions and perhaps it is this aesthetic approach that allows him to distill the essence of the Danube's landscapes, emphasizing their tranquility and timeless beauty. Characterized by a rather limited tonal range, his black-and-white photography encompasses subtle gradations of light and shadow, a technique that enhances the texture and mood of the Danube's surroundings, thus emphasizing the river's serene and contemplative nature.

Watched from an unreal stillness, the Danube is captured in motion, which creates a sense of smoothness and fluidity in Nica's photographs while, by using extended shutter speeds, he can depict the Danube as a flowing, dynamic force, emphasizing its vitality and energy.

George Nica's photographs often convey a sense of symbolism and metaphor since, even though the Danube herself may not be explicitly referenced in titles or captions, his images evoke a broader contemplation of nature, time, and the human connection to the environment. Overall, his photography of the Danube encapsulates a sense of harmony, serenity, and timelessness: through his distinct artistic style and minimalistic approach, he captures the essence of the river's landscapes, evoking a contemplative and meditative experience for the viewer.

Conclusions

Not merely a river, but a fountain of life that keeps us enchanted, the Danube's fluid melody speaks of unity and separation, of the happiness of love and the sadness of loss, of the grace of falling and rising again, of the savagery and brutality she has washed away from the eastern shores of the poverty-stricken police states. This is the *Shape Shifting Danube*, this is the *River of a Hundred Faces*, this is the *Alchemist of Cultures* and the *Collector of Memories* and secrets, of powerful feelings and lingering emotions – all of which are embedded within this mirror-like *Artful Muse* which is seen reflecting the heart and soul of the lands it touches: each and every one of these *identities* at once turn the Danube into a *Grecian Urn*, a vessel bearing on the outside the marks of the time elapsed, while the empty inside is yet to be filled in with the times to come.



<https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/galati/naufragii-cumplete-pe/dunare/secretele>

Notes

[1] Mogoșoaia, Rostok and Transylvania are just a few of the ships that the Danube has claimed *tribute* over the years. Hundreds of people have died and priceless heritage values have gone to the bottom of the river.

The most famous, but also the most tragic shipwreck on the Danube is that of the Mogoșoaia. On 10.09.1989, around 8.20 in the morning, while making the Galați-Grindu trip, the passenger ship Mogoșoaia collided, because of thick fog, with a convoy of barges propelled by the Bulgarian flagged pusher Petar Karamnichev. (MOGOSOAIĂ | marinarii.ro)

Initially, the departure had been postponed because of the fog on the Danube, but the ship eventually headed for Grindu-Pisica. The collision resulted in the overturning and rapid sinking of Mogoșoaia, the passenger ship, and with it, many innocent lives were suddenly and violently cut short. It took less than three minutes to irrevocably change everything for everyone. (Pleșa, 2006) There were no less than 255 passengers on board. 239 people died and only 16 survived. Some of the passengers were workers who had come off their shift from the shipyard and were going home to Grindu-Pisica. Others (whole families) were going to visit their relatives at the end of the week. While most of the passengers stayed in their cabins because it was cold, the rest were on deck. Some of them managed to step, most probably out of reflex, onto the Bulgarian vessel soon after the collision. Others, those who were on deck, jumped into the water and swam to safety. Those who were inside the ship were pushed to the surface by the pressure created when the ship sank. Such was the pressure that not only did all the glass shatter, but even the benches were pulled out of the bolts in which they were fastened. Cristian Cristea, one of the survivors, was 12 years old in 1989. The pressure pushed him to the surface. He swam to the Tulcea shore but his parents and sister were not that lucky. They died. Five days after the accident, Mogoșoaia was taken out and dragged further down the Danube. It was full of bodies, former human beings whose existence had suddenly got trapped in a timeless photo. (Pleșa 2006)

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Despite the never-ending suffering imbued in the waters of the Danube, people seem to have felt the need to give it a palpable body and turn it into a filmic adaptation *The ball of destiny* directed by Dir. Maximilian Popescu, (original title *Ghemul destinelor*), and write it into the story of *Mogoșoaia, the history of a tragedy* by Petre Rău (original title *Mogoșoaia, istoria unei tragedii*, 2009)

[2] A short explanation pertaining to my final choice of a feminine pronoun form to refer to the Danube is called forth, especially since I refer to her androgynous nature later on in the text, equally embracing femininity and masculinity. My final decision has been very much influenced by the fact that the way people use language has a profound influence on how we see the world. On the one hand, the fact that English does not allocate gender to words leads to subjectivity and relativity that come to play in the feminine or masculine associations we ascribe to nouns, all the more since there are no grammatical rules to make something either male or female. That is why, most likely, the Mississippi is characterized in America as male, while the Indians refer to the Ganges as female, clearly because the Ganges is a well-known feminine sacred symbol of Indian culture in addition to being the main source of survival. On the other hand, given the fertility of the Danube's instantiations as a River with a Hundred Faces (and personalities I should say) as they are recurrent throughout Europe as well as the fact that what I look into is rather the soul (Dunărea) and not the body (the river) of the Danube, my final decision has been very much influenced by the idea of *fertility of all sorts* as a backdrop. Likewise, perceiving the Danube not as a body of water but as a *body of life* has led me to see her as an anthropomorphic entity whose duality (even bipolarity) is visible in the traces that she leaves on the land she waters and in people's hearts: like a magnet, she manifests, at some times, her *positivity* (joviality and happiness) imprinting it on people's lives, being a source of nourishment meant to quench their *thirst* and satiate their *hunger* (physical, emotional, psychological, and cultural). At other times she manifests her *negativity* (violence and anger) when she turns into a murderess demanding for her human sacrifice to be made. A Shape Shifter and a Mood Shifter, yin and yang, serene and turbulent, happy and sad, the Danube seems to be taking her force and vitality exactly from the duality of her physical nature and from the bipolarity of her psychological nature.

[3] For further reading see Woolf, V. (1928) *Orlando*, UK: Hogarth Press;

[4] For further reading, see:

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[9] For further reading, see:

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[10] See the works of Albrecht Altdorfer (a German Renaissance painter), Károly Markó the Elder, Károly Ferenczy, Bela Ivanyi-Grünwald, Károly Lotz (Hungarian artists) and Oskar Laske (an Austrian painter).

[11] @ George Nica photography

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*** (2020) "Mogoșoaia" <https://marinarii.ro/nava-de-pasageri-mogosoia/>