



# THE PRESSURE OF EUROCHRONOLOGY AND THE ROMANIAN RURAL PROSE

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**Abstract:** The paper looks at the Romanian relationship between modernism and rural imagination in the Romanian 20th century debates. As in other cases of semi-peripheral or emergent literatures (the general framework builds on contributions from Frederic Jameson, Pascale Casanova and Wai Chee Dimock), the hegemonical pressure of the Eurochronology has put an embargo on rural prose, excluding it from the projects of modernist literature. The study asserts that far from being a collateral symptom of modernity, rural imaginary is essential for understanding its contradictory mechanisms.

**Keywords:** Romanian rural prose, World Republic of Letters, Eurochronology, emergent literatures, New Modernist Studies.

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Until recently, the power structures undergirding concepts of periodization have been disregarded in most literary studies. If the traditional territorial metaphors have been denounced as ways of building barriers between the inhabitants of the so-called civilized world and those living across its borders (and perhaps Edward Said's *Orientalism*<sup>1</sup> is one of the first convincing examples in this respect), the concepts drawn from temporal semantics seem to have been presumed more neutral in their implicit violence. Even though Immanuel Wallerstein had signalled the political biases lying at the core of the distribution of disciplines within social sciences – with anthropology as a field of studying what we call remote civilizations<sup>2</sup> –, in the field of literary studies the acknowledgement of the fact that temporal concepts carry with them presumptions that reproduce a hierarchical disposition of cultures have been inconsistent. Only recently, with the works of Wai Chee Dimock<sup>3</sup>, Pascale Casanova<sup>4</sup> or Emily Apter<sup>5</sup>, the recognition that there has always been, across the XXth century, an Euro or American zone where periodizations were developed has become a point largely agreed upon. As Emily Apter put it in her famous *Against World Literature*, "literary history needs to open up to radical re-sequencing, through anachronic timelines, non-Eurochronic descriptions of duration, and a proliferation of names for periods as yet unnamed, or which become discernible only as untranslatables of periodicity"<sup>6</sup>.

Until these untranslatables of periodicity will develop into temporal frameworks capable of setting aside the hegemonical

terminology of Eurochronology (a bold enterprise, one of the boldest of recent literary theory), there is a lot of work to do in excavating the divergent, multilayered experiences of literary time unregistered by its official metanarrative. My presentation looks at the relationship between modernism and ruralism in the Romanian culture of the XXth century, while putting forward the idea that peripheral or semi-peripheral cultures can become privileged sites of reflection upon the ideological assumptions embedded in time concepts. I will argue that, far from being a neutral or descriptive term, in Romanian literature "modernism" represents a point of turmoil and anguish that delineates the pressures of the developmental project inscribed in the Eurochronology. The largely debated problem of rural imaginary, considered incompatible with modern literature, is seen as a case in point that whatever feature does not fit the urgency of adjusting to the Eurozone "mechanical clock,"<sup>7</sup> as Wai Chee Dimock coins it, is either sublimated or expelled from the confines of the accepted literature. Of course, the use of the distinction core-periphery in our essay should not be mistakenly understood as a stand for a rigid, hierarchical map of literary cultures. The positions are interchangeable, the world literary map is constantly redrawn. However, I consider these distinctions still necessary as they signal "the unequal distribution of economic power and authority across the globe."<sup>8</sup> The relationship between cultures was, until recently, imagined as a utopian space, in which nations are invited to share their products on the world literary market. This idealistic stance obliterated

the problem of uneven development, that made cultures with important economic and literary capital constantly increase their power and visibility on worldwide scale, to the detriment of nations or regions where economic, linguistic or cultural possibilities stood in the way of global recognition. In David Damrosch's terms (but the process has been acknowledged by an important number of critics), the world literary system roughly replicates the capitalist economy, where "the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer."<sup>9</sup>

As I will try to show in the following lines, these inequalities have not only affected the world canon, where the peripheral or semi-peripheral cultures are rather absent, but have exerted pressures on their internal dynamics as well. The expansion of the world market of ideas, already initiated in Europe's 18<sup>th</sup> century, has produced towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century an unprecedented standardization of literary values. Such important was the pressure of alignment of less fortunate cultures to the values of evolution or progress, that their internal literary systems tried to replicate by a 1:1 scale the systems of powerful cultures. In have tried to describe, in a series of studies<sup>10</sup>, the process of 'structural correspondences', by which in semi-peripheral cultures all the currents, movements, techniques or even distribution of writers within national canons had to replicate their counterparts in more endowed cultures.

In Romanian literature, the anguish of underdevelopment or belatedness has been constant since its institutional birth, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, the problem of setting the internal clock to the time coordinates of Western Europe has been a main concern in all its modernizing projects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, even the term "modernism", perhaps one of the most debated concepts in literary history, has not only high temporal resonances, but also hints at a politics of incongruous temporalities. One of the first to have noticed its strong identity bias is Frederic Jameson, who advanced in his 2002 book *A Singular Modernity* the rather curious and counterintuitive idea that theories about modernism "tend to emerge from the peripheral regions of modernity" and that "modernism is essentially a by-product of incomplete modernization"<sup>11</sup>. Although this statement cannot pass as a law of literary dynamics, the Romanian case seems to fit Jameson's hypothesis. The pressure of putting Romania on the Greenwich meridian of literary values – to use Pascale Casanova's terms – has materialized in a strong concept of modernism and in recurrent projects of synchronization.

These powerful projects of alignment to Western European values have shaped literature's physiognomy in the peripheral or semi-peripheral contexts. A closer look at the issue of rural literature is revelatory for understanding the pressures felt by national systems in this race for catching up on presumed standards of literary contemporaneity. In the Romanian context, the interwar period – a time of rapid change at all levels of society – saw the emergence of the modernist project of the critic Eugen Lovinescu<sup>12</sup>. He tried to reshape Romanian literature under the guidelines of the synchronizing principle, which overtly postulated the need of rethinking the whole

field of autochthonous theories and to orient production according to Western principles. An important section of this project referred to the emancipation of prose writing from the rural imagination, which Lovinescu saw as the cornerstone for developing a modernist view of literature. In his account, as long as the novel places its subject in rural setting, it is doomed to preserve the almost epistemological distance from the European standards. The rural character's predisposition for the world of instincts, Lovinescu claims, his primitive thinking, alienates Romanian literature from psychologically refined experiments. On the other hand, it is interesting to notice that the critic is capable of partially leaving aside this discriminatory judgement when confronted to works of great value. In his *History of Romanian Contemporary Literature*, Lovinescu admits that Rebreanu's novel *Ion* is such a work but explains its importance by insisting on its literary techniques: the distant, objective gaze of the narrator makes the novel an important piece of modernist literature. Thus, Rebreanu's *Ion* is a masterpiece in spite of its rural imaginary. The expulsion of the rural from the modernist literary framework was professed by most of the critics or writers preoccupied with the legitimacy of Romanian literature on an international scale. Mihail Ralea's famous 1927 article *De ce nu avem roman*<sup>13</sup>, while not overtly addressing rural imagination, builds on the interdependence between modern novel and the urban bourgeoisie. In the same vein, Camil Petrescu's high end theory of the novel excludes from the outset the idea that its technical evolution could find resources to revive the anachronistic realist novel<sup>14</sup>. Even those who make a case for defending ruralism in literature, like G. Călinescu, reads *Ion* as the work of an epic poet, not as a realistic novel that reflects the conflicts of the early 20th century peasantry<sup>15</sup>. The sublimation of the rural imaginary has been excellently pointed out recently by Cosmin Borza<sup>16</sup>, who writes that the critics tend to overwhelm exceptional rural characters with noble titles: for Paleologu, the peasants of Sadoveanu's *Baltagul* are *princes-paysans*, while for Manolescu Vitoria Lipan is an outstanding figure inasmuch as she is a representative of the bourgeoisie – thus, exceeding her class limits.

The postwar contexts of Romanian literature, while not so lively committed to debates on the urban-rural trajectories of writing, have partially reduced this antagonism. Under the socialist realist poetics, the rural setting was emancipated under the harsh propaganda of the Stalinist regime. The avalanche of rural works produced after 1948, even if it responded to the state mission of the collectivization of agriculture, seemed to have shattered the contradiction between ruralism and modernism, but only with the price of the latter. It is still debatable whether the poetics of socialist realism can be defined in opposition or as a symptom of global modernisms – and it's not the concern of our paper.

Instead, perhaps it is more interesting to investigate what happened to ruralism in the post 1965 era, when Romanian literature regained its relative autonomy from political power.<sup>17</sup> When looking at the most important novels or short stories of the period, it is easy to observe that rural imaginary



was rendered some of the most experimental expressions of postwar literature. Ștefan Bănuțescu's *Iarna Bărbaților*, D. R. Popescu's *F* cycle, Sorin Titel's 'Banat Series' are all products of a formalist poetics, ranging from the joycean compression of time narrative to the Faulknerian estrangement of narrator voices or even to Nouveau Roman's reified narrative gaze. In Eugen Negrici's terms, Titel's novels build on an impossible mission: that of rendering an archaic world in an ultramodern expression<sup>18</sup>. These works seemed to be a demonstration on "how rural areas could be the sites and sources of innovation and experimentation rather than just expressing social tragedies."<sup>19</sup> Perhaps William Faulkner has been the most fertile model of these writers, as his work perfectly engendered the contradiction between a so-called traditional subject matter and innovative formal approaches. In Jay Watson's account, "What Faulkner offers to disadvantaged writers along the rural peripheries of the world republic of letters is above all access, via formal inventiveness, to total, literary and aesthetic autonomy for their works". I would only add that this obstinate choice for up-to-date literary devices bespeaks of internalizing the belatedness complex of rural literature in Romanian context. In order to surpass the prejudice of practicing a type of literature condemned to remain outside global modernity, these writers have used literary form as a global ID card that could make them citizens of contemporary literary republic.

Yet, it would be an overstatement to claim that the modernist potential of rural imagination has been disconsidered only in semiperipheral cultures. The recent new modernist studies, committed to dismantle the univocal definitions of modernity by historicizing its divergent projects, has already signaled what Jolene Hubbs diagnoses as "the city-centric master narrative of global modernism"<sup>20</sup>. This line of inquiry has convincingly proved that "rural areas cannot be viewed only as retreats from modernity, but must also be seen as modern spaces inviting us to consider the diverse effects of new ways of moving, communicating, producing and perceiving"<sup>21</sup>. On closer inspection, most rural works of the 20th century, Glen Cavaliero has pointed out, do not deal with the contemplating

of a static society, but with actors involved in changing it<sup>22</sup>. Romanian literature is not to be excluded from this reframing of modernist studies under more democratic assumptions: most of the Romanian novels that critics refrain from labeling as modernist deal with exposing some of the major contradictions derived from the conflict of the new world with the dying tradition. In Dominic Head's words, these modernist rural works represent a "telling response to modernity (...), all the more powerful because of its obliquity."<sup>23</sup>

Consequently, rural literature does not disconnect cultures from an international dialogue, being mere depositaries of local tradition, nor they represent anachronistic forms incompatible with modernism, but are constitutive parts of it. Neither is the experience of modernity in peripheral or semi-peripheral contexts reducible to its response to the values consecrated by core cultures. The syntagm of 'alternate modernities,' very frequented in the last decades, is itself problematic in the sense that it implicitly claims the derivative nature of local phenomena. Building on Harry Harootian's syntagm of 'coeval modernities'<sup>24</sup>, Neil Lazarus observes that the notion of a European origin inevitably presupposes the fact that modernity elsewhere is "belated" or imitative: "the specific modes of appearance of modernity in different times and places—St. Petersburg in the 1870s, say, Dublin in 1904, Cairo in the 1950s, a village on a bend in the Nile in the Sudan in the 1960s—ought to be thought about not as 'alternative' but as 'coeval...modernities (...)' in which all societies shared a common reference provided by global capital and its requirements"<sup>25</sup>. I think the experience of 'peripheral modernities' should finally benefit from non-hierarchical approaches, capable of restoring the plurality of local experiences and of encompassing heterogeneous notions of time.

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## Notes:

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
2. Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis. An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
3. Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).
4. Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, translated by M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
5. Emily Apter, *Against World Literature. On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London and New York: Verso, 2013).
6. *Ibid.*, 56.
7. Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), 2.
8. Mark Wollaeger, "Introduction," in Mark Wollaeger, Matt Eatough, *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 8.
9. David Damrosch, "World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age," in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Johns Hopkins U.P., 2006), 43-53.
10. See Alex Goldiș, "Strategies of Globalisation in Romanian Literary Histories", *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 1, no. 1 (2015): 71-79; Alex Goldiș, "Beyond Nation Building: Literary History as Transnational Geolocation", in *Romanian Literature as World*

- Literature*, eds. Mircea Martin, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 95-115.
11. Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity. Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London-New York: Verso, 2002), 103.
  12. E. Lovinescu, *Scieri 4. Istoria literaturii române contemporane*, ed. Eugen Simion (Bucharest: Minerva, 1973).
  13. Mihai D. Ralea, "De ce nu avem roman," *Viața românească* XIX, no. 4 (1927): 82
  14. Camil Petrescu, *Teze și antiteze*, ed. Aurel Petrescu (Bucharest: Minerva, 1971).
  15. G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*, 2nd edition, ed. Al. Piru (Bucharest: Minerva, 1982).
  16. Cosmin Borza, "Literatura rurală," in *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România*, vol. I. Imaginar literar, ed. Corin Braga (Iași: Polirom, 2020), 191-211, 197.
  17. See also Ștefan Baghiu, Vlad Pojoga, and Maria Sass (eds.), *Ruralism and Literature in Romania* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019).
  18. Eugen Negrici, *Literatura română sub comunism. Proza* (Bucharest: Editura Fundației Pro, 2006), 324.
  19. Kristin Bluemel and Michael McCluskey, "Introduction," in *Rural Modernity in Britain. A Critical Intervention*, eds. Kristin Bluemel and Michael McCluskey (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 1-19, 8.
  20. Jolene Hubbs, "William Faulkner's Rural Modernism," *Mississippi Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2008): 461-475.
  21. Bluemel and McCluskey, "Introduction", 15.
  22. Glen Cavaliero, *The Rural Tradition in the English Novel 1900-1939* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1977).
  23. Dominic Head, *Modernity and the English Rural Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 2.
  24. Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 62-63.
  25. Neil Lazarus, "Modernism and African Literature," in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, eds. Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 228-245, 233.

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