



# THE PRESSURE OF DE-RURALIZATION IN MARIN PREDA'S POST-THAW NOVELS

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**Abstract:** The paper looks at the tension between ruralism and urbanism and between foreign models and autochthonous engagement in Marin Preda's literary evolution. Although Preda is seen as the most representative rural novelist of the post-war Romanian literature, the aim of the paper is to demonstrate that, starting with the 1962 *Risipitorii*, his career can be described as a systematic attempt to de-emphasize this framing. The study also tries to pinpoint some of the ideological or cultural aspects responsible for the writer's growing internalization of the skepticism toward rural literature.

**Keywords:** Romanian rural prose, Marin Preda, postwar literature, Existentialism, intellectual prose.

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It has been widely observed that in Romania (and perhaps in other semi-peripheral contexts) the issue of rural literature can only be understood within the larger framework of the critics' projects to orientate or adjust internal production according to so-called Western norms. An overview of the debates on rural literature in the first part of the 20th century is telling for understanding the pressures felt by national literary markets to achieve the status of "European literatures" or to become "contemporary" – in other words, to arrive at the the so-called Greenwich meridian of literary standards, as Pascale Casanova<sup>1</sup> coins it.

The interwar period, a time when the debates on the chances of the Romanian literature to surpass this belatedness intensified, is characteristic of the growing skepticism toward ruralism. The most influential critic of the period, E. Lovinescu, builds his project upon the assumption that the modernity of the Romanian literature depends on writers' capacity of leaving behind rural inspiration. His *Istoria literaturii române contemporane* [History of Contemporary Romanian Literature] gives voice to the idea – very frequented by other literary critics as well – that the development of the Romanian novel is endangered by its predilection towards

archaic or "underdeveloped" social scenery. The fact that rural characters are trapped psychologically in the realm of instincts, Lovinescu posits, alienates Romanian literature from modernity<sup>2</sup>. Lovinescu's claims are just the tip of the iceberg in a cultural context where the idea of the incompatibility between ruralism and literary modernism is deeply rooted. Mihail Ralea's 1927 influential article "De ce nu avem roman" [Why Don't we Have Novels?],<sup>3</sup> although does not dismiss rural imagination, conditions the development of the modern novel on the aspirations of the urban bourgeoisie. In the same manner, Camil Petrescu's Proustian-driven poetics excludes from the outset the rural novel from the experimental devices employed by the French novelist.<sup>4</sup>

However, my paper's focus is not on the interwar tackling of the rural literature issue, but on its postwar aftermath. More to the point, I intend to look at the case of Marin Preda's literary evolution by highlighting the underlying tensions between ruralism and urbanism in the Romanian intellectual field. I will point out that, even if Preda was praised as the most important rural writer of the post-war era, his post-1950's work (and by work I understand both novels and their paratexts) displays an internalization of the

critique of ruralism.

The argument I am trying to make is perhaps althmore surprising as the first volume of *Moromeții*, published in 1955, was celebrated as one of the most important achievements of Romanian literature to that day. Preda's rural novel was seen as a piece that could solve several controversies of the Romanian literary system. Its huge popularity, both among readers and literary experts, both among those who promoted socialist realism and those who tried to undermine it, can be rendered at several levels: firstly, the novel was read as an up-to-date reaction against Romanian *Sămănătorism* or *Neosămănătorism*: while, with the exception of Rebreanu's novels, most rural imagery could be labelled as idealistic, Preda's *Moromeții* [*The Morometes*] depicts a community where class struggle and labor inequity become family issues. Secondly, the book seemed to solve one of the most pervasive debates on Romanian novel of the interwar period: while, as mentioned above, a series of writers or literary critics like E. Lovinescu, Mihail Ralea or Camil Petrescu argued that the modern novel was incompatible with rural psychology, Marin Preda's *Moromeții* became the living proof of G. Călinescu's contention that the the peasant soul could provide fertile material for speculation.<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, contrary to what the post 1970 reception of the novel maintained, the book was seen as the big hit of the socialist realism in Romania. I have already demonstrated elsewhere<sup>6</sup> that the first edition of *Moromeții* contained passages that allowed socialist realist critics to read the novel as a form of criticism against capitalist order.

### Ruralism as Ideological Hijack

However, when one looks at Marin Preda's career, the first volume of *Moromeții* seems to be the first and arguably his last rural novel. While the *Moromeții* saga continues in *Moromeții* II, in *Marele singuratic* and slightly in *Delirul*, none of these novels are preoccupied with reflecting the ruralism issue from the point of view of the peasantry *per se*. The only novel that strives to build a monography of the Romanian village is *Moromeții* II. However: while still maintaining Siliștea-Gumești as the main stage of debate, the novel restricts the peasants' voices to that of Ilie Moromete, whose role in the economy of the narrative is also diminished. Instead, the main floor belongs to Niculae Moromete, Ilie's son, sent by the authorities to implement the incipient mechanisms of collectivization. Although the author's point of view remains neutral under the pretense of Bakhtinian dialogical prose, the novel expresses the Marxization of the 1950's village as an ideological hijack: rather than being an active agent of the process, the peasantry is the object of a gang of villains, orchestrated themselves by the central authorities. By putting forward the idea that peasantry does not play any role in the Marxization of the Romanian society, Preda not only oversimplifies the reality that the novel promises to convey, but also distorts the image of the peasantry during the incipient installation of socialism: Ouăbei, Mantaroșie, Isosică and the others are presented not as representatives of the peasants, but as villains or political

activists (or both) – disguised as peasants. I will not insist on the demonstration, the satirical features of these characters have been perceived by most of Preda's critics.

If the rural nature of Preda's second volume of *Moromeții* is still open to debate, in the other novels the village is purely decorative, when not entirely absent. In *Marele singuratic*, Preda's other novel centered around Nicolae's biography – a sort of follow-up to *Moromeții* II –, rural scenes merely serve as a background for the existentialist turmoil of the character.

In fact, the 1962 *Risipitorii* already marks the complete departure from the rural novel. It is clear that the book represents a cornerstone in Preda's career if we take into consideration the fact that the novel is rewritten and published three times before 1970. Preda's confessions do not leave any doubt about the high significance of *Risipitorii*, as the book is presented to the public not as another novel, but as a major career shift. Usually self contained in making remarks about his own books, Preda cannot over-emphasize the importance of this novel. *Risipitorii* is allegedly his first book as a professional writer, "a book so much different from the others in every aspect", the author of *Moromeții* awkwardly writes as early as 1961<sup>7</sup>. In another interview that prefaces the publishing of the novel, this strong statement is further supported by the claim that "this book is closer to what I tried to express in my literature than the novels or short stories with rural subjects, like *Desfășurarea*, *Îndrăzneala*, *Ferestre întunecate*, except *Moromeții*"<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, the writer draws attention to the dismissal of the rural perspective: "Although this new novel contains scenes with peasants, they are, so to say, anti-rural, conceived outside the rural perspective, through urban lens. The rural point of view, the explanation of facts specific to this social medium are totally absent",<sup>9</sup> Preda writes. Another confession, from 1970, insists on finally finding his own voice through *Risipitorii*: "In spite of the tiring process of rewriting, I didn't feel any fatigue as I had the strong feeling that I was conquering a style of my own, of my own direct thinking, different from the one in *Moromeții*, where my thoughts were expressed indirectly, by the mediation of the peasants",<sup>10</sup> Preda writes.

These statements not only outline the importance of his arguably most feeble novel, but also mark Preda's intention to reinvent himself outside *Moromeții* and even outside rural perspective.

### Preda's Rebranding Outside Ruralist Frame

It is hard to say whether this process of de-ruralization represents an individual choice or it was triggered by the system constraints of the 1960's: however, it is almost impossible not to notice that this reinvention meets the standards of the post-Thaw period when, on the one hand, the revival of interwar modernist values, and, on the other hand, a sense of renewal and of reconnecting to Western or European culture were on the public agenda of Romanian writers. Although never expressed as such because of censorship, the 1960's represented a radical departure from socialist realism



norms in favor of an elitist and high-end culture. Preda's departure from his early works – with the relative exception of *Moromeții* – represents a disguised public declaration of break up from socialist realism. Or, with the exception of *Ana Roșculeț*, all his works on rural life resonated with the norms of Stalinist prose. In his most quoted 1970 article on the “obsessive decade”,<sup>11</sup> Preda openly condemns the dogmatism of the 1950's literary system. This revival of the modernist interwar culture also equated, unfortunately, with the revival of some of the most persistent stereotypes of the Romanian literary system, among which the superiority of urban prose over rural subjects. Although Lovinescu's strong urbanist bias was never fully embraced after the resurfacing of his writings in the 1960's, Cosmin Borza has already pointed out the postwar critics' tendency to sublimate ruralism by endowing exceptional rural characters with noble titles exceeding their class: the peasants of Sadoveanu's *Baltagul* are tagged by Alexandru Paleologu's readings as *princes-paysans*, while Nicolae Manolescu's Vitoria Lipan is an outstanding figure inasmuch as she is a representative of the bourgeoisie.<sup>12</sup>

The rejection of socialist realism also equated with the search for experiment, after almost two decades of practising traditional realist formulas. One of the authors most sensitive to ideological change, Marin Preda must have felt that neither the subject nor the technique of the first volume of *Moromeții* fit the emerging cultural values of the 1960's, that praised the dialogue with contemporary foreign formulas and intellectualist topics. Preda's major career shift comes from the acknowledgement that if an author of rural literature wants to stay relevant in the new context, she must either turn to formal experiment or give up the reflection on rural medium altogether. The first road is actually tested by Marin Preda in *Moromeții II*, where several scenes of rural life are depicted in the defamiliarized manner of Faulkner or even magical realism. Jay Watson stated that “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”.<sup>13</sup> These up-to-date literary devices, best expressed in Romanian postwar context by the rural prose of Ștefan Bănuțescu, Sorin Titel or D.R. Popescu, prove to be incompatible with the realist-driven prose of Marin Preda. The magical realist passages from *Moromeții II* – as the story of Sița who is cherished as a saint of Siliștea Gumești for becoming pregnant without being touched by a man – is quickly derailed in a satirical manner: her playing a saint is nothing but a scheme for finding a father for her unborn child.

The other alternative, that of de-ruralization, seems to be more adjusted to the values of the Romanian post-Thaw culture: it allowed Preda to rebrand himself as an intellectualist figure both against socialist realist political frames of the 1950's and against his ruralist identity. One of the major clichés of *Moromeții*'s reception lies in the juxtaposing of his authorial stance with that of the main characters: in other words, Ilie Moromete's rural and somewhat archaic perspective on reality was often read as an ideological position

of the author himself: in an 1966 article, Nicolae Manolescu states that “without being Moromete-like from the outset, Marin Preda ends up by imitating his character and acts like him. The profound Moromete spirit (‘morometianism’) of Preda's works lie in this subtle transfer: the author lends from his hero gestures, words, his very way of being.”<sup>14</sup> Or, Marin Preda's above mentioned rejection of being identified with the vantage point of his rural characters points to this effort of reframing. Preda's authorial voice couldn't afford to be mistaken with that of his fictional peasants as he claimed that peasantry was no longer (if it ever was) a progressive class due to the socialist mass industrialization already occurring in the late 1950s. The fact that the writer tends to avoid rural scenery hasn't gone unnoticed by Preda's contemporaries. In the famous series of 1970 articles in “Contemporanul” – most of them republished in *Imposibila întoarcere* –, the writer answers the somehow uncomfortable question of Adrian Păunescu: Why does the author of *Moromeții* is not interested anymore in depicting the life of the 1970's peasant? Preda's answer avoids any motivation linked to the literary style, focusing instead on sociological explanations: rural life cannot serve as means of inspiration anymore as the peasantry itself has undergone serious transformations through industrialization or urbanization: “What type of peasant do you have in mind, since most of them sleep in shacks at the numerous construction sites in Bucharest or other cities and fail to return in the village for months?”<sup>15</sup> the writer answers.

Last but not least, the rebranding as a writer of urban fiction had the advantage of meeting the Westernizing literary canon of the post-Thaw era. *Risipitorii*, *Moromeții II*, *Marele singuratic* or *Intrusul* were seen by most of the critics as sites of formal and thematic innovation, where Marin Preda engages in invisible dialogues with major European figures: Eugen Simion reads *Risipitorii* as a test of Preda's “acknowledgement of contemporary techniques”,<sup>16</sup> while *Moromeții II* is seen as a direct consequence of Preda's reading (and sometimes translating) Western prose. Al. Piru praises the philosophical attitude toward reality, based on some form of *nausée* in *Risipitorii*.<sup>17</sup> *Marele singuratic* is read by Valeriu Cristea as an existentialist novel,<sup>18</sup> while S. Damian engages in an outright parallel of Camus's *The Stranger* and Preda's *Intrusul*.<sup>19</sup> The examples may continue.

## Conclusions

To make just a few conclusive remarks: it is difficult to say for certain whether Preda's novels triggered this intertextual reading or if the inflation of Western intellectualist references created a pressure on his writing. What can be stated, however, is that Preda visibly rebrands himself – in interviews or confessions – as an explorer of several modernist formulas. Proust, Kafka, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Camus are frequent in the paratexts of his novels. As it is certain that starting with *Risipitorii*, all his works avoid the vantage point of rural characters in favour of giving voice to intellectuals tortured by sudden revelations (as in *Marele singuratic*) or baring the harsh

consequences of their decisions, as in *Intrusul, Delirul* or *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni*. The de-ruralizing of Preda's prose also coincides with an intellectualist turn: Preda's characters, intellectuals or artists themselves, are engaged in existential or even philosophical debates on the impact of history upon the life of the individual – with full emphasis on abstract matters – or explore a full range of attitudes against totalitarian regimes, from compromise or retreat to subversion.

The essayistic nature of the later novels, where the author has the tendency to cover the discourse of his characters with considerable displays of ideas, was noticed by several critics. Perhaps the climax of this intellectualist turn can be identified in *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni*, the novel where the voice of Victor Petrini – this time, a philosopher in his own right – is not only virused by the authorial stance but tends to replace it altogether. At a time of growing resentment against the Ceaușescu regime, parallel to the system's relative tolerance to subversive works, Preda wants to be acknowledged not only as a public intellectual figure endowed with a philosophical system like the one deployed by Petrini in the novel, but also

as a strong opponent of the system. It is what made him the superstar of the late Ceaușescu period, as recently pointed out by Ștefan Baghiu and Costi Rogozanu<sup>20</sup>. This symptomatic transposition between the identity of the novelist and that of his main character has been invoked by Monica Lovinescu, although perhaps not in the sense that Preda would have expected: "To the author of *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni*, who avoids the tabu of the Ceaușescu regime, I prefer the main character of the novel, the author of *Era ticăloșilor*", Monica Lovinescu asserted in her 1980 review<sup>21</sup>. Thus, it is not an overstatement to say that *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni* can be chronicled as the last stage of Marin Preda's reframing as both an intellectualist and a dissenting public figure.

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## Notes:

1. Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, translated by M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
2. See E. Lovinescu, *Scrieri 4. Istoria literaturii române contemporane*, ed. Eugen Simion (Bucharest: Minerva, 1973).
3. Mihai D. Ralea, "De ce nu avem roman," *Viața românească* XIX, no. 4 (1927): 82.
4. Camil Petrescu, *Trece și antiteze*, ed. Aurel Petrescu (Bucharest: Minerva, 1971).
5. G. Călinescu, "Camil Petrescu, teoretician al romanului," *Viața românească*, no.1 (1939): 81-88.
6. Alex Goldiș, "The Ideology of Ruralism in the Thaw Prose: The Case of Marin Preda's Moromeții," in *Ruralism and Literature in Romania*, eds. Ștefan Baghiu, Vlad Pojoga, Maria Sass (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019), 95-105.
7. Marin Preda, *Creație și morală*, edited by Victor Crăciun and Corneliu Popescu, preface and notes by Victor Crăciun (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1989), 298.
8. *Ibid.*, 310.
9. *Ibid.*, 298.
10. Marin Preda, "Cum am scris risipitorii," *România literară*, no. 1/65 (1970), 1.
11. Marin Preda, "Obsedantul deceniu," *Luceafărul*, no. 24/424 (1970): 1, 3.
12. Cosmin Borza, "Literatura rurală," in *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România*, vol. I. Imaginar literar, ed. Corin Braga (Iași: Polirom, 2020), 191-211, 197.
13. Jay Watson, *William Faulkner and the Faces of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4.
14. Nicolae Manolescu, "M. Preda: Întâlnirea din Pământuri," *Contemporanul*, no. 27 (1966): 3.
15. Marin Preda, "În fiecare săptămână Marin Preda răspunde la o întrebare," *Luceafărul*, no. 18:418 (1970): 1.
16. Eugen Simion, *Scriitori români de azi* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1973), 273.
17. Al. Piru, "Risipitorii," *România literară*, no. 2 (1973): 3.
18. Lucian Raicu, "Parabolele lui Nicolae Moromete," *Luceafărul*, no. 10: 514 (1972): 1, 3.
19. S. Damian, "Visul," *România literară*, no. 4 (1968): 5.
20. Ștefan Baghiu, Costi Rogozanu, "The Death of a Communist Superstar: Marin Preda's Last Novel and the Rise of Black-Market Postmodernism," in *Beyond the Iron Curtain. Revisiting the Literary System of Communist Romania*, eds. Ștefan Baghiu, Ovio Olaru, and Andrei Terian (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2022), 149-161.
21. Monica Lovinescu, *O istorie a literaturii române pe unde scurte 1960-2000*. Edited and prefaced by Cristina Cioabă (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2014), 286.



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