THE SOCIALIST REALIST STRUCTURE OF MARIN PREDA’S MOROMEȚII

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Abstract: Taking into account the two Romanian modernities that alternated, and clashed throughout the twentieth century – the capitalist, and the communist, respectively –, with their different public assessment, the paper analyzes realist patterns emerging in the post-1945 Romanian narrative. These patterns did not only concern new characters and topics, but also the shaping of a new, mass-scale, intensively cultured reader. To the same extent, the respective age saw the replacement of traditional bourgeois narrative voices with rural and proletarian viewpoints (in a marked shift from the simply rural or proletarian characters). I will explore this new ideology of the narrative voice, and its indebtedness to the socialist realist paradigm, in Marin Preda’s landmark novel Moromeții. The case analyzed proves how Romanian postwar fiction helped naturalize socialism, and how this very ideological backbone might strengthen the value of the novel in the long run.

Keywords: modernity, socialist realism, narrative voice, Marin Preda, rural/ proletarian characters.


In Romania, as in many other places in Eastern Europe, two modernities fought and are still fighting, a capitalist one and a communist one. The latter is beaten, but it still is ritually condemned in whole libraries. But the literature after 1945 meant not only inventing new characters and themes. It meant creating a new reader, at the most direct level of intensive teaching of reading and writing. It also meant creating new forms of narrative instances: instead of bourgeois and petit bourgeois narrators and points of view, rural and proletarian storytelling instances appeared. For the aesthetes, the stake seemed and continues to seem ridiculous. And it had some ridiculous results, this was unavoidable. What do we do when the socialist dogmas, the ones that asserted the voice of the new man, creates masterpieces such as Moromeții [The Morometes]? Marin Preda innovated and conquered the audience through the literary offer of the most important historic character of the time: the proletarized peasant. Some call them the intellectual-peasant, but I call them “intellectual” because, finally, a social class that was silent for millennia starts to speak.

The goal of my study on Marin Preda is to ascertain the importance of a relation between the structure of a novel such as Moromeții (first volume published in 1955, the second in 1967) and the political context of the time. Preda started in 1948 by a selection of short stories where he seemed to follow the course of another great realist, Liviu Rebreanu. Preda’s Întâlnirea din pământuri [The Meeting Between the Lands] has many similarities with Liviu Rebreanu’s Golanii [The Hooligans] (1916). It’s about the rural world and various dispossessed. Both are typified by the authors’ desire to offer “a zero-degree of narrative voice,” an impassible narrator who writes down crudely, but never speaks on behalf of peasants. One cannot talk on behalf of them, they both knew that. One could not talk in a liberal order of culture. I do this with differentiations, of course: Rebreanu in a naturalistic style, Preda in a Hemingway or Steinbeck style. But I consider vital the polemics that Preda carried constantly in his head with the great portraitist of peasantry, Rebreanu. I think the main reason of this polemics pertains to the desire to give voice to the voiceless, these strange creatures, the peasants, idealized by some, considered just scum by others (see Balzac and his Les Paysans). The peasants are always narrated by others from different social classes: teachers, priests, intellectuals, aristocrats, bourgeois. When the peasant has something literary to say, everything seems conceived to amuse the high society: Ion Creangă is such a case. Marin Preda is the first powerful voice coming from a godforsaken village bent
on telling how the peasants are and how one should write about them. A huge political change helps him: the arrival of communism in 1948.

Romanian literary criticism always wondered, and still does, that in a complete “Stalinist desert” were possible Moromeții, but also Petru Dumitriu’s Cronică de familie [Family Chronicle] or Eugen Lovinescu to Nicolae Manolescu. Preda presents it in scenes such as the peasantry reading the newspaper and discussing politics in the center of the village. But we also have the new modernity, the one forcefully brought by communists. After 1948, in the 7 years before the publication of Moromeții, things change radically. The ownership changes, the strategies to conquer the peasant world change constantly. And especially there is a constant political discussion about a necessary class awareness in the rural setting. Preda doesn’t avoid such dogmatic simplifications, because he was not only a writer, but also a very politically educated intellectual. It is ridiculous to discuss Preda in terms of “opportunism” or “cowardice;” also to search for “courageous fragments” in his novels. Preda believed in what the Serb dissident Milovan Dijas once termed “taking over the burden” by the communists. Dijas wrote that the Eastern Communism assumed the mission that capitalism had in the West: eliminating the feudal remains and accelerated modernization. Because in the East, periphery capitalism had not produced the expected effect of mass modernization. The process was absolutely necessary. Preda stated that time and again, including in that famous article, “The Obsessive Decade,” quoted by many but read by few.

Preda finds a credible narrator, a new point of view for recounting the peasant world. It’s the Communist “new man,” the future Communist activist Niculae Moromețe. He is the special witness who has to tell the last episode of a rural world which is about to die. It’s true that Niculae himself will be the victim of machinations inside the Communist party. And the utopian world of the activist will fall. But the plausible voice of the masses individualized by a revolutionary figure had already been invented. This is the great moment, unique in our literary history: a plausible literary voice from among the voiceless masses.

The fact that Moromeții was possible in a dogmatic time was due to the political talent of Preda and of the intellectual group with which he stays in contact. It was no different for the case of Petru Dumitriu. These people had endless ideological discussions about the guidelines from Moscow, about the way literature was going. And each of the two advanced two new narrative perspectives that changed the face of realism: Preda immortalized the peasant that, in only one generation, becomes urbanized, becomes “intellectual;” Petru Dumitriu was proposing a voice of an underground activist that takes the power and runs the new world. Both based their credibility on a detailed description of the history of defunct social classes. Dumitriu writes a history of grand bourgeoisie (and aristocracy). Preda writes a history of peasantry caught between the two modernities. For a peasant such as Ilie Moromete, both are strange fictions. Not so for Niculae. In volume two of Moromeții, which many considered failed, we actually have a splendid deployment of literary forces through which Preda tries to describe a unique historical moment. Hurried analysts say about the 1950s that everything was absurd, cruel, criminal, and that’s all. Preda had the patience to write an extremely complex version of the political struggles of the village, unleashed by the Communist change. He did that by using the very “class plot” that the socialist-realist current recommended. Preda’s political cleverness was to use a hard and calcified structure, full of party meetings and intrigues, to create an extremely credible fresco of the rural world. Therefore, the narrative instances and the structure of his novels have to be analyzed always bearing in mind the class tension.

Why Soviet agitators had so many problems with socialist-realist texts? They had no credible “voices” of peasants (rural proletariat) or proletarians. The literature produced as the entire attention of the party was focused on the writers was bound to be strained and artificial. The fact we lose sight of is that any literary ecosystem is full of dogma and clichés at any time. Few manage to surpass the calcified forms. In spite of an ocean of failures, the ambition to take up the megaphone of the upper classes’ literature will always have something troubling. And Marin Preda did that. It is a profoundly realist gesture, perfectly integrable in a world trend started by Zola (and later glorified by Auerbach) to give a voice to popular classes. Monica Lovinescu, the most anti-communist voice, but also the one that respected Preda the most, once said the biggest truth about the profound class incompatibilities that divided them: she couldn’t stand Preda’s disdain towards the urban high society.

The critic Nicolae Manolescu involuntarily offers an interesting landscape of the battle between the two modernities I was talking about. In Noah’s Ark, his essay from the 1980s, Manolescu offers a tour de force: of close reading and contextualization both. The critic had a good knowledge of Lukacs, but also of Wayne C. Booth. The text about Moromeții is titled “Cel din urmă țăran” [The Last Peasant]. It should be titled “The First Peasant.” Manolescu doesn’t speak about “modernizations,” but speaks about a capitalist phase and a socialist phase in peasants’ lives. More importantly, he notices the great change in only 35 years, from Rebreanu’s narrator from Ion to Preda’s narrator from Moromeții. In short, the peasants no longer needed a narrative middleman. They finally spoke themselves on their behalf. Manolescu says that there is an emancipation from a central authority which up until then was a super-omniscient narrator. Actually, it was the classical bourgeois or petit bourgeois narrator who spoke from a liberal or conservative position of strength about lower classes.

What actually took place was that there really was a literary change determined by a real one: the peasants become an extremely mobile and active class, run through radical
changes, have a political voice – the scenes from Preda’s Desfășurarea, but also from other socialist–realist texts, that describe class tensions in the village are not untrue only because they are poorly written. Manolescu only suffers from the intellectual’s disease, from his tendency of describing the world starting from text towards realities. Preda knew how to make the opposite move, to start from realities towards literature.

The sad thing is that Manolescu was to negate his own insights in the Critical History of Romanian Literature, published after 30 years, and reduce Moromeții to the thesis of some critics who say that the novel has a deep flaw because it includes traces of socialism realism. Another good insight poorly used. Yes, this is the structure, it belongs to socialist realism. But it is the essence of the novel, not a flaw of it. So here are the two modernities fighting in the career of a literary critic also. The liberal modernity, with its interwar aura, intensely mythologized after the end of the Cold War, would want to erase the traces of testimonies about the other modernity, the communist one. And Manolescu is willing to erase his best pages for the sake of ideological acknowledgement.

From here a debate could start: why such a good novel came out of a calcified form, from a recipe that all the tradition of aesthetic criticism thinks is a bad one. Do we have an explosion of power for the social classes that suddenly assert themselves, that first take over the power, then invent a literary voice for them? Preda took that moment seriously. He tried to expose the fake in the peasant account before him. And rendered the transfiguration of the peasant into a hero of a new modernity, one that proved to be historically a loser, but no less real.

Translated by Ciprian ȘIULEA

Notes:


8. See Monica Spiridon, Omul supră vremi. Eseu despre Marin Preda, rromanierul (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1997).


19. See Ștefan Baghiu, Vlad Pojoga, Maria Sass (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2009), 95-104.

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