

THE SOCIALIST REALIST STRUCTURE OF MARIN PREDA'S MOROMETȚII

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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 *Morometii*. 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.

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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.¹ 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.² 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.³ And it had some ridiculous results, this was unavoidable. But what do we do when the socialist dogmas, the ones that asserted the voice of the new man, creates masterpieces such as *Morometii* [*The Morometes*]?

Marin Preda innovated and conquered the audience through the literary offer of the most important historic character of the time: the proletarianized peasant. Some call them the intellectual-peasant,⁴ but I call them "intellectual" because, finally, a social class that was silent⁵ 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 *Morometii* (first volume published in 1955, the second

in 1967)⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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*).⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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 Barbu’s *Groapa* [The Hole].¹¹ It’s a wonder that comes from rejecting or ignoring some historical realities.¹²

In the Romanian village after the Second World War, two modernities meet: the interwar modernity, the by the book one, beloved by all the tradition of liberal criticism, from 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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 Djilas once termed “taking over the burden” by the communists.¹⁵ Djilas 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.¹⁶

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 Moromete. 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹ 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 Auerbach²⁰) 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.²¹

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].²² 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.²³ 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 aesthetical criticism thinks is a bad one.

A few more words about the two modernities. As I said, the capitalist modernity suffered after the 1990s a process of mythologization. It is the organic, "normal," "the only real one" modernity. The Communist modernity vitiated the human nature, changed the peasants into inhumane miners, in questionable proletariat etc. The difficulties to explain the

quality of novels such as *Moromeții* come from the fact that the communist change from the 1950s and 1960s is not yet studied seriously.

Preda polemicizes with all preceding writers having a rural theme, starting with Rebreanu. In *Moromeții* there is the story of Biriță and Polina, basically a rewriting of the story from *Ion*: Polina, the daughter of the rich peasant, no longer having a victim, but a strategist status, and Biriță, the beautiful and poor lad, is just a pawn in the girl's revenge on the mean family. On the other side, Preda offers a collective character build "dialectically," an exceptional achievement if we consider the serial failures produced by the dogmas of socialist realism. Basically, Preda takes all the clichés of party's literary dogmas and gives them life. He gives them life because they really had life. The party activists really existed. Poor peasants really existed. There were also peasants with kulak status. Preda moves whole categories of social classes towards realist narrative instances.

The fundamental question remains: what do you do when you have an explosion of power for the social classes that suddenly assert themselves, that first take over the power, and 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:

1. See Nataša Kovačević, *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe's Borderline Civilization* (London: Routledge, 2008); Vasile Ernu, Costi Rogozanu, Ciprian Șiulea, and Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, eds., *Iluzia anticomunismului. Lecturi critice ale Raportului Tismăneanu* (Chișinău: Cartier, 2008); Florin Poenaru, *Locuri comune: clasă, anticomunism, stânga* (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2017); Vladimir Tismăneanu, Marius Stan, *Romania Confronts Its Communist Past. Democracy, Memory, and Moral Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
2. Monica E. Mincu, "Communist Education as Modernisation Strategy? The Swings of the Globalisation Pendulum in Eastern Europe (1947-1989)," *History of Education* 45, no. 3 (2016): 319-334.
3. Eugen Negrici, *Literatura română sub comunism. Proza* (Bucharest: Editura Fundației Pro, 2002).
4. Teodora Dumitru, "Conceptul Iovinescian de 'intelectualizare' a literaturii față de ipoteza postbelică a țărânului 'intelectualizat,'" *Transilvania*, no. 2 (2021): 31-50.
5. See Vlad Pojoga, Laurențiu-Marian Neagu, and Mihai Dascălu, "The Character Network in Liviu Rebreanu's *Ion*: A Quantitative Analysis of Dialogue," *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 6, no. 2 (2020): 23-47; Ștefan Baghiu, Cosmin Borza, "The Sickle and the Piano. A Distant Reading of Work in the Nineteenth Century Romanian Novel," *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 6, no. 2 (2020): 107-128.
6. Marin Preda, *Moromeții*, I (Bucharest: Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, 1955); Marin Preda, *Moromeții*, II (Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură, 1967).
7. See Nicolae Bârna, *Ipostaze ale modernizării prozei rurale: Pavel Dan, Marin Preda, Sorin Titel* (Bucharest: Ideea Europeană, 2009).
8. See Monica Spiridon, *Omul supt vreme. Eseu despre Marin Preda, romancierul* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1993).
9. See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen. The Modernization of Rural France (1870-1914)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).
10. Iacob Negruzzi, *Amintiri din Junimea*, with introductory notes by Elvira Sorohan (Iași: Junimea, 2018); G. Panu, *Amintiri de la Junimea din Iași*, ed. Z. Ornea (Iași: Polirom, 2013).
11. Passim Negrici, *Literatura*.



12. See Andrei Terian, "Socialist Modernism as Compromise: A Study of the Romanian Literary System," *Primerjalna književnost* 42, no. 1 (2019): 133-147.
13. Gail Kligman, Katherine Verdery, *Peasants under Siege. The Collectivization of Romanian Agriculture, 1949-1962* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011).
14. See 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, Andrei Terian (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021), 149-160.
15. Milovan Djilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957).
16. Alex Goldiș, "Pentru o morfologie a romanului 'obsedantului deceniu,'" *Caietele Sextil Pușcariu*, no. 3 (2017): 494-502. See also Ruxandra Cesereanu, "The Romanian Gulag as Reflected in the Novels of the 'Obsessive Decade,'" *Transylvanian Review*, no. 24 (2015): 29-43.
17. See Alex Goldiș, *Critica în tranșee. De la realismul socialist la autonomia esteticului* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2011).
18. See 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), 95-104.
19. See Ștefan Baghiu, "The Socialist Realist Novel in Romania between 1945 and 1955. Novelistic Genres and Subgenres," *Dacoromania litteraria*, no. 7 (2020): 56-71.
20. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard R. Trask, introduction by Edward W. Said (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).
21. Monica Lovinescu, "Delirul," in *O istorie a literaturii române pe unde scurte: 1960-2000*, ed. Cristina Cioabă (Bucharest, Humanitas, 2014), 281-286.
22. Nicolae Manolescu, "Cel din urmă țăran," in *Arca lui Noe. Eseu despre romanul românesc*, I-III (Bucharest: 1001 Gramar, 1998), 250-292.
23. Nicolae Manolescu, "Marin Preda," in *Istoria critică a literaturii române. 5 secole de literatură* (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2008), 950-965.

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