

## ASPECTS OF IDENTITY IN EAST EUROPEAN RURAL NOVELS

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The Romanian literature has never been and could never have been isolated; on the contrary, it has continuously developed throughout the centuries, showing a genuine interest for stylistic innovations, especially for those coming from the European cultural space, which have been assimilated or rejected without altering its specificity and originality. The contacts with other peoples' literary achievements have been permanent, in spite of the fluctuations generated by socio-economical or ideological discrepancies, and have constantly increased so far, irrespective of the geographical distance. A similar development can be noticed in the particular case of the connections between our art and the art of the Slavic peoples in the East European area. Towards the turn of the century the interest for rural life became widely spread and generated a large amount of artistic productions, some of them, no doubt, masterpieces. After breaking free from the constraints and the discriminations of the classical and conventional trends, more and more authors approached the village without prejudices, but full of real compassion and understanding, eventually managing to transform it into a suggestive stage for romantic nostalgia, philosophical insights, scientific analysis of life slices or impressive tragedies. Previously neglected but now intensely exploited, this new source of inspiration provided perennial values, complex human types, true dramas and clearly stated moral issues, together with refined forms of art incorporated in specific folk traditions, in no way inferior to the achievements of the town. Balzac, Zola and Tolstoy are the first names that come to mind, but such examples, illustrative of the change in artistic attitude, are at hand in any national literature. In order to get closer to the profound meanings of such a prose, critics have to take into account not only the source of inspiration and each creator's originality, but also the esthetical systems that emerged and clashed at that time.

Prisoner of his exaggerated ego, prone to protests and fond of the elite, the romantic writer strove to identify himself with the prestigious notions of the human existence, but he always chose to do that in the most vibrant and intolerant way. He was the one to discover the bliss of nature and the vast resources of the peasants' way of life. Their distinct spirituality, their myths, legends, ancient customs, old and unchanged behavioural patterns, their original fictional frames and their simple but profound minds allowed the artist's imagination to fly free and deal with lofty ideals. With similar good intentions, yet with different results, the realistic writers, together with the naturalistic ones later on, focused on social issues presenting an objective and plausible depiction of the situation. The humanitarian intentions became even more poignant this time. It was not until the populists emerged that the artists and ideologists finally completed a program consisting in a series of steps to be taken in order to improve the rural life and the way it used to be regarded by the contemporaries. They acted against both naturalistic excesses and the idealisation of the industrial city. As the intention was to preserve the virtues and the purity of the village, at the same time trying to defend this cradle of old civilisation against random modernity, the populists soon realised that proper course of action would be to support the rural emancipation and prepare the peasants for taking a leading role in the national achievements. The populist ideology borrowed concepts from various trends and became the basis of a new literature, impressive mostly in point of quantity; still, it also produced masterpieces, which are due mainly to the authors' effort of transcending the strict limits of this trend. Such developments were typical of the countries relying mainly on the agricultural sector in their economies; geographically, they could be found in the central and the eastern part of Europe. Therefore it was this region that gave the world some of the most impressive and highly praised rural novels.

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At the beginning of the century, conveying village life into ample narrative constructions was a very common and enjoyed kind of art on the old continent. As a consequence, in 1924 the Swedish Academy of Sciences awarded the Nobel Prize for literature to an author of rural prose, the Pole Reymont, acknowledging thus the prevalence of village centred inspiration within the European literary phenomenon at the time. Among the competitors, but having uneven chances, there were prestigious artists like Thomas Mann, Thomas Hardy, Blasco Ibáñez, Maxim Gorki, Sigrid Undset, Grazia Deledda and Alojz Jirásek.

The rural prose in general, but the East European one in particular, shows some common traits, maybe the most important one being the deep concern for the national and the traditional aspects of the region. Such fictional worlds prove to be logical and predictable, praising the values of the community, which integrate the values of the individual, in order to show the unity and the permanence of this ancient and remote way of life.

The protagonist illustrates a human type and he is strong, full of contradictory energies that burst unexpectedly causing violent incidents. He is the symbol of a numerous and intensely exploited category which is the basis of the social hierarchy in an agrarian economy. When faced with the city and its modernity the peasant reacts with caution and reserve, defending himself against a kind of hypocrisy he has never seen before, against laws he doesn't understand and against a cultural code based on swift changes he is not able to grasp. He has a constant, stable and independent attitude.

The omniscient author is trustworthy and authoritative, telling the story without emotional attachment, in an attempt to demonstrate an absolute truth, valid for all people.

The books are supported by a rigorous documentation and a verifiable pretext which lead to a chronological presentation of events. The style is simple and efficient, always pointing to moral reflections that keep the distance between the author and his personages. The artist's purpose is to write the novel of one conscience, but this attempt will not necessarily become psychological prose.

The basic recurrent pattern is incident-revelation-crisis-solution; it is a never ending chain of conflicts without truce, presented against the background of hard work, which may bring out the evil but also the good parts in any human being. All motivations have deep social roots and psychology becomes a mere pretext for moral classifications. Irrespective of the geographical region it mirrors, this prose illustrates crises which are individual and collective at the same time and which

eventually articulate a complex fresco of a people's life, a dramatic chronicle of the main difficulties it managed to cope with.

The protagonists are a minutely calculated mixture of representative characteristics because the artist's intention is to show typical heroes in typical situations; thus the social protest and the communication with the deep mythical layers of existence are facilitated.

The solid narration reveals a refined architecture meant to desperately emphasise coherence and logic in a contemporary life that lacks both. As the investigated domain is so wide, the resulting fiction should be vast as well, with plots distributed on many levels, with numerous characters and various milieus evoked. Some novels are written in many parts, some others make up a cycle or become independent stories, which simply enjoy the presence of a few common characters that clarify and unify the comprehensive social picture.

East European prose has a particular and unparalleled interest in the issue of land owning: the simple and degrading motivations such as self-seeking and pathological greed are left behind in order to observe more complicated and elevated ones, such as the need *to possess* as a condition sine qua non in order *to be* (once they have land, the peasants gain self respect and consideration in the eyes of the community). Moreover, there are national implications because the motherland, their own land, will never become the property of foreigners, rich rulers or newcomers.

Therefore the land becomes the symbol of the peasants' permanence and endurance, a metaphor of a people's struggle to survive. Since they reflect a closed world bursting with life, the novels are, in their turn, closed, that is round and symmetrical, full of the tumult of a dramatic existence. Days follow one another like the stages of a pagan ritual, creating an impressive epic monography of the village viewed as the seed of the country.

The protagonists' fate is tragic because they have options only in theory; practical life forces them to choose the only alternative that fits their temperament and social interests, and it usually leads them to moral and economical ruin.

The western peasant's portrait emphasises the despair and the loneliness of the individual fight – protagonists like Tess, Buteau, Tonsard, Batiste Borrull and 'Ntoni Malavoglia bear witness to that – whereas the eastern peasant's portrait focuses on typical attitudes and on the community, providing the reader with an admirable image of *the character-crowd*, only one person actually, a variation of Ion endlessly multiplied, dominated by the same overwhelming will described by Rebreanu in *The Revolt*: "The peasants were listening, staring motionless with eyes like glass.

Hundreds of faces having the same expression seemed to belong to a one and the same head, the same individual in infinite versions.”[1:253]

The ruralist artists chose to present the village in all its essential hypostases, from tantalising work to celebrations, avoiding picturesque or idyllic depictions and diminishing the number of decorative folk elements. The result is that they paid more attention to real ethnographical details meant to reveal the true essence of the rustic life; in point of narrative construction such details contribute to a more clear definition of the space of action and facilitate the integration of events into a temporal framework, adding specific components to the atmosphere. The global effect is the achievement of a realistic, authentic and dynamic portrayal of the peasants, never attempted before.

We would like to illustrate the previous statements with some examples, bearing in mind that this comparative approach focuses only on Rebreanu and Reymont, the rest of the artists we evoke here constituting the topic of a future essay.

Ivo Cipiko, a classical representative of the Serbian rural literature, wrote *The Spiders*, a novel whose hero is Rada, a more sincere and emotional kind of Ion. He is in debt to a wealthy man whom he will eventually murder. The sombre realism is in obvious contrast with the beautiful landscape, leading to the conclusion that the raw village life conveyed with naturalistic hints can never match the purity of the environment. Any romantic glory is torn to pieces when it comes to portraying the protagonists: although conventionally idealised as compared to Ion, Rada has the same craving to possess land and he confesses that “As long as I live I won’t give my land to anyone. Not even to God.”[2:124]

Cehov imagined a harsh rural universe, unforgiving and depressing, a one-sided perspective on a world that was compelled to survive at a sub-human level. The hero is paralysed because he has allowed himself to be paralysed by the environment and dissolved by his own passions.

Tolstoy protests against the French rustic typology, especially against Zola’s view on the village. If Balzac’s peasants are just upstarts, illustrating a simple and crude algorithm of growing rich, if, on the other hand Maupassant’s peasants have merely “agitated, shy, selfish and coward”[2:127] looks chasing profit as the only value they cherish and understand, Zola’s village inhabitants are hopeless and morally more degraded, living according to zoological standards. Basic passions drive them to act violently and ruthlessly. Actions, settings and humans are described with luxuriantly squalid details, as required by the

naturalistic aesthetic program. Tolstoy incriminates such an artistic vision, pleading that „the hardworking people who supports France and its great personalities consists not of animals but of persons with great souls, and this is why I do not believe what novels like *The Earth* tell us.” [3:76]

Tolstoy, Cehov, Gorki and Dostoievski, as unique artists but also as representatives of the Russian realism, had a great impact on the East European novelists’ view on rurality.

The Gorkian impact is obvious in the stories about suburbs, no longer village but not yet town, a no man’s land, rejected by both social structures and, in its turn, rejecting them as well, with an equal violence. Most characters will desperately try to avoid changes because the attempt to make any progress at all always ends up in a tragedy, leaving the protagonist in the uncertain situation of hanging between two ways of life, the one that he can never really get and the one that he can never really return to.

This is why, in all the novels we have discussed, the village philosophy postulates that nobody should try to get more than what he already has and every person should stick to his equals. Any leap from obeying this rule generates dramas. At the beginning the protagonist is guilty of something he didn’t do, a mere victim of a rigid and unfair social system. Gradually he becomes guilty of his own faults and, with every step he makes, the victim within the character fades away leaving room to the guilty person. It takes lucidity and objectivity to present such a complex psychological mechanism, revealing that each protagonist has personal, plausible and just reasons to react the way he does. Many Tolstoyan traits are easily traceable in the narrative construction and in the character’s consciousness, alongside with specific moral or religious insights. Cehov’s art had a smaller impact on the East European authors who selected only essential and simplified components from the grey and hopeless universe imagined by the Russian artist.

Dostoievskian hints are even more rare and always implicitly understood from the context. For the sake of our present short demonstration we chose to speak only about few representatives of realistic rural prose in the East European cultural space, being aware of the fact that we haven’t taken into account all the regions and the multitude of such writers in each national literature. East European rural literature developed at a crossroads, in the impact zone between the German and the Russian achievements and trends. In this context it is significant to specify that both Rebreanu and Reymont assimilated most of their individual culture by means of the German language.

For instance, *The Peasants*, the novel of the Polish writer awarded the Nobel Prize, could have been read by our author in a German version, which appeared as early as 1912. Rebreanu always mentioned he had not read it before finishing *Ion* and in his study *Reymont 1935* he stated that later in he paid much attention to the Pole's fiction, highly praising it and recommending that it should be soon translated into Romanian. In his opinion, "Reymont has the great, unparalleled merit of having expressed for the first time the people's real soul, sincerely and logically, not only in the Polish literature but also in the world literature." [4:237] Making an inventory of similarities and differences between these two writers is not the purpose of this comparative approach. Of course there is a common arsenal of themes, realistic devices, typically passionate characters and monographically depicted backgrounds, but such resemblances are exterior and irrelevant to the critical eye because the writers' originality and genius actually rely in their personal style and fictional architecture.

Therefore Rebreanu and Reymont resemble very much and differ just as much and one can never say *better than* ... in favour of either of them. So the purpose of any esthetical analysis nowadays would be to convince the audience to re-read them both from a modern perspective because, surprisingly enough, they are our contemporaries from more than one point of view. It is also imperative that we should highlight Rebreanu's status as creator of masterpieces, entitled to an equally dignified place in the pantheon of world literature, in spite of his misfortune of not having been sufficiently translated and promoted abroad during his lifetime. A talented translator, maybe gifted as a writer as well, is a basic condition that helps the novel transcend its national borders and become part of the world culture.

When it comes down to value, Rebreanu surpasses all of his predecessors: his realistic observations are more clear and more direct, his narration has a more intense epic force and his characters are more coherent and true-to-life. Reymont finds himself in a similar situation overpassing Prus and Sienkiewicz in the verisimilitude of peasant portrayals.

Legends and idyllisms are discarded and the authors step out from the heroic history to enter the real and bitter ordinary life. Diverse characters, typical of all walks of life and of all ages inhabit a complex fictional universe, conveying a poignant illusion of intense life. Never showing compassion and watching their worlds with a keen eye, the artists analyse the overwhelming energies and the intrinsic violence of the village. Mysterious forces gather threatening the balance of the community and the narration is always done from the

angle that enables the artist to cover the whole perspective.

The land, like a living character, organises all human relationships. The personages participate in the rural life and in the plot according to the amount of wealth they own. Sometimes one of the protagonists becomes a symbol of the earth, as Reymont's Jagna, strong, whimsical and generous like the fertile soil, portrayed with poetic and naturalistic connotations that place her beyond good or evil, beyond traditional morals and beyond intellectual complications. With almost religious feelings, the peasants work the land as if they would perform a ritual, being deeply attached to their property in a pantheist manner.

Ibáñez's earth is capricious and exhausting to cultivate, therefore people curse it; Hardy's is luxuriant and menacing, so full of history that it can hardly bear the people; Verga's requires excruciating work, treacherously rewarding the workers; Reymont and Rebreanu's is generous and blessed, seen as a part of the peasant's own body.

It's not only the option for realism that made them famous. Besides it they had the courage of affirming the national spirit in its progressist and true values and they experimented in the field of the new writing techniques, showing a profound honesty and a superior artistic conscience. We owe them partly the way we write today. Most critics used to consider them completed aesthetic experiences but our modern reading nowadays might add some corrections to that. They are important as the architects of fictional worlds who ruled out for good the idyllism, the conventions, the theatrical pathos, the apathy and the nostalgic sense of the past.

Moreover, they rehabilitated in a productive and modern sense the concept of tradition: „Tradition has a civilising role. It is from here that any progress springs, it is from here that any ideal gets the power to go on. The whole civilisation grows in the cradle of tradition.” [5:247]

Mere talent is not enough. Writing requires perseverance and hard work, like in a battle that keeps the artist away from mediocrity. Creating art means winning the fight against all obstacles from the inside and from the outside, it means ignoring material poverty in order to create spiritual richness and it also means living by the Shakespearian standard of "to thine own self be true." This is the model of *The Artist*, the valuable lesson Rebreanu taught us.

The east European realistic artists created a rural prose that had the courage to demolish prejudices, showing the village as a vivid and resourceful community, not as a mere setting for schematic conflicts and pathetic solutions. They proved that the peasant's soul is

profound, complex and also complicated, hence suitable for novels, and that rurality was not an exhausted theme or a subject matter inferior to the town. Intense love stories, dramas and even tragedies happen in the rustic space and they are in no way diminished by the simple environment. The village swarms with local variations of Ulise, Harpagon, Julien Sorel, Iago, Othello, Gobsek, Medeea, Desdemona or Emma Bovary.

Rebreanu and all the rural writers we have evoked so far created an original and independent universe, which we can refer to as *his world*, unique and non-repeatable, just like Homer's or Shakespeare's or Tolstoy's. Resemblances or differences between the demiurgic creators of rural prose never lead to a lack of originality or to an alteration of the national traits. L. Rebreanu remains one of the best and highly representative novelists in our literature. Refined constructor, keen observer and pertinent analyst he synchronises the Romanian novel with the masterpieces in the world literature providing our realism with an identity of its own.

More concerned with a clear and coherent expression of truth than with stylistic ornaments, the artist gives the impression of an earthly force: „I can see myself lying in a vast field, recently ploughed – O. Goga wrote once, metaphorically characterising Rebreanu's art. Big clods of black soil, deeply rummaged, are watching me. It is Rebreanu's writing. The land is speaking.” [6:453]

As a matter of fact the land and its typical inhabitant were speaking in all these novels we referred to, creating an exciting and true-to-life picture of each national identity, a meaningful synthesis valid for all readers, irrespective of their age, their country or the epoch they lived in.

## NOTES

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