

Ștefan BAGHIU, Vlad POJOGA, Maria SASS (Eds.), *Ruralism and Literature in Romania*, Peter Lang, 2019, ISBN 978-3-631-80792-7, 311 p.

Review by Maria CHIOREAN
Faculty of Letters, Babeș-Bolyai University
Cluj-Napoca, Romania
chioorean.r.maria@gmail.com

When postcolonial studies first gained momentum, they were designed to investigate and demystify Western rhetoric regarding former colonies. In the work of Said, Spivak and Bhabha there was a manifestly political component, since decolonization was still an ongoing process, and the specific sites of European domination were therefore centre-stage. However, with the advent of decolonialism, the debate was vastly expanded – first, the critique of the Occidental discourse of power was deemed insufficient and autotelic, producing more information on the history and the self-perception of central cultures, but never allowing Spivak’s subaltern to speak of anything but persecution and difference; then, the very concept of *colonization* was reinvented as to include geographies which had not technically belonged to colonial empires – Eastern-European states of the recently dismantled USSR, economic peripheries, exploited by capitalist expansionism, and, finally, all minoritarian communities without access to the Western canon and whose artistic repertoire struggles to enter an international network.

This is where debates around ruralism come in, tackling issues like the perspective of autochthonous critics on their own cultural areal, inferiority complexes, pervasive narratives of modernization, along with the exclusion and the inequality they imply, or the bidirectional dynamics between influential cultures and less vocal ones. Ultimately, rural populations are often caught in the crossfire when the national structure they belong to pursues emancipation and a strenuous path towards economic and cultural power, leaving its own peripheries behind. The Romanian case has been no different, especially starting with the 19th century, when synchronicity with the West became the absolute goal of intellectual elites and transformed the peasantry into a museal object to be exhibited either as a token of local spirituality or as proof of national backwardness. *Ruralism and*

Literature in Romania, recently edited by Ștefan Baghiu, Vlad Pojoga and Maria Sass is meant to offer a counterbalance to the often impressionistic and ideology-infused discourse on the Romanian village, its population and its artistic potential. The contributors focus on the distortion and mythization of the peasant's figure throughout the last two centuries, on the relationship between rural literature and ideology, but also on the ways in which rural voices made themselves heard and even provided literature with forms of subversion and dissidence.

A solid foundation for this remapping is ensured by the results of quantitative studies. The very first chapter, by Cosmin Borza, convincingly disproves some of the most famed historiographic clichés in Romanian literature: the dominance of the rural novel (shown to have taken up under a tenth of the total number of novels between 1896 and 2000), the reductive understanding of the rural, assimilated with sentimental, ahistorical, nostalgic depictions of the archetypal peasant (this edulcorated prose was just one subgenre among many), and Eugen Lovinescu's belief that the village can only produce anachronistic, aesthetically invalid literature (the 60s, 70s and 80s actually saw a great diversification of the rural novel). Ultimately, Borza reaches the conclusion that only when the discursive *overpopulation* of the fictional village finally ended – along with the propaganda and the critical interest in the rural – could this literary sector flourish through aesthetic differentiation. The merits of quantitative analysis do not only reside in the rigour it brings to historiography, though. Besides challenging entrenched perspectives and showing the true magnitude of literary events, this approach also forces one to devise precise criteria for categorization. In Daiana Gârdan's essay, for instance, it implies questioning the simplistic duality of rural vs. urban and their significant ideological and socio-cultural baggage, highlighting the existence of a third, interstitial space, extremely relevant for the interwar years. This is not proposed as yet another restrictive subgenre, whose fictional geography should have stable boundaries (slums and small towns only), but rather as a phenomenon of intense circulation between the village and the city, which ends up hybridizing an urban setting with rural themes or the other way around. Thus, the author argues, it is the mutual subversion of novelistic categories that can best encapsulate interwar social and cultural tensions. Likewise, Snejana Ung discusses intermediary spatiality in her investigation into the ambivalence of border villages. Her case study addresses two specific novels, *Femeia în roșu* and *Noapte bună*,

copii!, and shows that, despite being usually imagined as kernels of national specificity, rural communities gain flexibility, an ambiguous collective identity and transnationalist tendencies through their peripheral position: living at once in a closed environment and in the proximity of Western life, borderlanders can easily become migrants.

By this point in the development of literary studies, to say that the elite cultural discourse has constantly misrepresented and ideologically colonized other social classes is to state the obvious. However, since the identitarian nuclei of peasantry, put forward since the 19th century seem to endure and to still plague literary criticism, the chapters written by Valer Simion Cosma and Teodora Dumitru, centred around the discursive constructs grafted onto rural realities are instrumental in achieving what decolonialism (from Samir Amin to Walter Mignolo) termed conceptual and imaginary *de-linking*. The first author looks into the case of Transylvanian peasants between 1848 and 1918, used as embodiments of a still uninstitutionalized national identity. It was the authoritative voice of scientific disciplines and administrative branches that moulded a counterfeit peasant according to biases and political imperatives: in Valer Simion Cosma's words, *peasant culture was transformed into a discursive battleground* (165). Moreover, what comes into focus is the internalization of these constructs by the peasant population, as no foreign influences were to be tolerated, and even education was devised by intellectuals with a view to keeping the village unchanged. Teodora Dumitru also makes a persuasive case for dissecting the dominant perspectives on rurality in the first decades of the 20th century, arguing that the age of liberal experiments and modernist ambitions is a perfect example of modernization causing deeply undemocratic results. She focuses on the theses of Eugen Lovinescu, the main promoter of urban literature, because *before attempting to change this reality—we need voices to describe it as accurately as possible: Lovinescu was that voice* (207). Dumitru explains the critic's success through his ability to deconstruct the philo-rural canon and to show that the works of its most prominent writers (Sadoveanu and Creangă, for example) did not really have peasantry as their target audience. The truly classist component of his theories would therefore be the absence of any solutions for including the real peasant into modernity, cynically citing the laws of sociological evolution.

Consequently, the involvement of ideology in the production and reception of Romanian rural literature is a constant of the last two centuries. There is a permanent

negotiation between political drives and the aesthetic response, which can be best observed in the novels adapted to the communist canon. In a chapter on the intentional *softening* of peasant brutality in socialist realist rural prose, Ștefan Baghiu argues that the banishment of rage, hatred, impulsive rebellion and selfishness from the behaviour of peasants was supposed to minimize struggles between individuals, shedding more light on the one against superior social classes. Enlightenment and a decision to act for one's own emancipation could then only be triggered through education and political awareness. This is the reason why the novelists who managed to navigate socialist realist norms and still maintain a relatively naturalistic aesthetic were those who – like Marin Preda – allowed intercharacter conflict to develop as if prompted by abstract oppressive forces. The author of *Moromeții I* also comes into focus in Alex Goldiș's study, who sets out to answer questions regarding ideological meaning and conflicting critical views around the volume. More specifically, the author notices that, although there is a clear departure from the rules of socialist realism in Preda's novel (no Manicheism, no didacticism), the book received unanimous praise from party critics and even served as confirmation of the literary value of new, politically-obedient prose. At the same time, hermeneutical efforts rendered vastly different interpretations, from Eugen Negrici's belief that Ilie Moromete stands for a spirit of independence and dissidence from the regime to George Geacăr's monography, which places Preda amongst socialist realist authors. Alex Goldiș offers an explanation of this intricate critical landscape by drawing attention to Preda's narrator of choice: instead of a clearly present, invasive voice who should evaluate the characters from a moral standpoint, the narrator of *Moromeții* is conspicuously discrete, thus permitting endless debates on the political significance of the story and on Preda's own relationship with the regime's dogma.

At this juncture, it can be reasonably said that *Ruralism and Literature in Romania* includes extremely varied and well-documented accounts of how the autochthonous peasant was transformed into a multifunctional tool for the completion of cultural, political and aesthetic programs. In other words, the Romanian village has been endowed with huge symbolic capital, with numerous imaginary structures and social behaviours, with a never-existent homogeneity and a set of corresponding *mentalities*. But this is not to say that the last two centuries only brought about ideological fiction and distortion, completely ignoring the objective of scientific knowledge and its ability to

generate social change. Dragoş Sdrobiş addresses this exact subject in his analysis of the incipient sociological projects of 20th century Romania. Namely, he writes about the work of Dimitrie Gusti, one of the first scholars to understand that *until the beginning of the 20th century, the Romanian peasant was rather portrayed than analyzed* (220). Gusti was aware of the importance of detailed information on the real situation of the peasantry, but also pleaded for its conversion into practice, thus envisioning an academic combination of sociological theory and social work. The centrality of accuracy, unmediated contact with peripheral communities and emancipatory action proves that the ethical turn was, in fact, the main precondition of rural research. Of course, this comes as no surprise, as contemporary literary studies have also been significantly impacted by an interest in axiology, politics and ideology (one only needs to look at Marxist studies or feminism). However, once again, the clearest link is that between ruralism and decolonialism, since the values enshrined in Gusti's utopia (close relationships between the scholar/social worker and the village, solidarity, altruism and transparency) can also be found in more recent anthropological pursuits (Sylvia Marcos's investigation into Mezoamerican communities, for instance, pinpoints the same principle of approaching indigenous tribes only after having abandoned Western philosophical patterns). More importantly, both Gusti's sociology and the current recovery of peripheral cultures are oriented towards quantifiable social progress or political representation: Sdrobiş mentions Gusti's ambition to reform the university, to promote collaborative work and a direct dialogue with the peasantry. It must also be said that a rural sociology would have never taken form without the presupposition that there is indeed a complex social structure within the Romanian village – multiple ethnicities, hierarchies, economic competition and a problematic relationship with urban areas. This, in turn – the rejection of a monolithic image of peasantry – is symptomatic for the recent interest in inter-peripheral connections, visible in the work of Bogdan Ştefănescu, among others. Similarly, rural literature is finally perceived as an intricate phenomenon, both in terms of self-perception and integration in the world system, as becomes evident in Ovio Olaru's essay, a historical survey of German literature from Romania. The evolution of such a cultural enclave, he argues, from ethnocentric and idyllic *Heimatliteratur* to its abandonment during the first decades of Soviet rule and the subsequent anticommunist instrumentalization proves that peripheral literature is always bound up with politics,

harbouring multiple identities, each with its own cultural agenda. In the case of ethnic minorities inhabiting rural spaces, the equation is further complicated.

Then, in the last section, devoted to Romanian poetry, the rural is granted an even unlikelier role – a mediator of literary experimentation and social protest. Not only does this mean that the conservative image of the pure, atemporal Romanian village is abandoned for good, but rural reality, formerly passive and constructed through an urban, elitist gaze is catalyzed and becomes vocal. In his study, Emanuel Modoc comments on the avant-garde's engagement with rural imagery and themes, demonstrating that its objective was twofold – importing Western aesthetic innovations, thus radically changing the traditional depiction of the village, while also striving for self-consecration on the international stage and oscillating between the regional and the global. By contrast, Mihnea Bâlici discusses the post-2010 trend of New Ruralism, whose representative poets continue to use the technique of the previous generation: they show no interest in further experimentation or in the mirage of posthumanism, but maintain biographism and naturalistic descriptions as means of social critique, exposing the discrepancy between globalized urban areas and economically deprived rural communities. In both cases, the village becomes the site of counter-cultural voices.

Finally, *Ruralism and Literature in Romania* is also remarkable due the wealth of methodologies displayed, from quantitative analysis and geocriticism to sociocriticism, the deconstruction of cultural discourses, transnationalism and the critique of ideological influences, all of which serve the case studies presented above. But at least two more have to be added to this non-exhaustive list. Anca-Simina Martin delves into the problem of translation, analysing the English renditions of Romanian rural novels during the communist period. Making use of previous research, which had generated the conclusion that these translations were mostly foreignizing (using Venuti's term) – that is, dense in explicatory footnotes for culture-specific terms, Anca-Simina Martin questions the usual way of looking at translation as a form of cultural export guided by market criteria and shows that, in the case of communist Romania, a third party enters the play: the commissioner. Yet again, ideology steps in to distort an otherwise predictable dynamic. Not only do translators find themselves under the pressure of the political system, but they are also forced to adopt its nationalist doctrine. So that, although domesticated translations are easier to put out into world literature, acculturation is seen as a betrayal

of the autochthonous identity and replaced with a market-hostile preference for enhanced specificity. Ultimately, this understanding of the purpose-oriented policies of translation is instrumental in uncovering the workings of ideology, but also as proof that generalizations regarding intercultural exchange are often prone to erroneous simplification.

Last but not least, Andrei Terian and Mihai Iovănel propose non-anthropocentric readings of rural literature. Terian explores the bestiary imagined by Liviu Rebreanu for his 1920 *Ion* and notices that, unlike other writers concerned with the autochthonous village, such as Ioan Slavici or Marin Preda, Rebreanu never anthropomorphizes or individualizes the animals of his world, because they are meant to play a different role: time and again throughout the narrative, inter-animal relationships coexist with the Darwinian social order of the village, where status and power are employed to subdue the already weak and to assert dominance. Without falling into either typical allegorical frames or mere demonstrative sociology, Rebreanu adds an economic layer, as well as a moral one to the biological competition represented through zoopoetics: whenever the narrator, through his *animalistic perspective*, signals similarities between a character and a nonhuman creature (most likely a dog), he actually announces the loss of all moral coordinates and the impossibility of social success. In short, Terian's hypothesis reveals how, in Rebreanu's fictional village, the characters might not engage in meaningful relationships with animals, thus invalidating any posthuman interpretation, but they make their judgments dreading the non-human condition they could succumb to: the bestiary becomes a factor in shaping the collective subconscious. As for Iovănel's study, it follows the insertion of robots into rural literature from the bizarre case of traditionalist, idyllic prose presenting almost science-fiction themes within agrarian communities to the communist propaganda of the 50s and 60s, when industrialization had become part of the national folklore, and to the satirical science-fiction of the 80s (parodies of peasant novels, caricatures of socialist ambitions in the realm of technology). Then, the author also emphasizes the mostly ironic presence of technology in postcommunist rural prose, citing Dan Lungu's 2018 *Pâlpâiri*. In the absence of any real access to recent technical inventions, the only character who can perceive the life of the peasantry as a video-game projected on a screen is the urban traveller. By contrast, the village itself represents the ruin of the socialist industrialization utopia. Iovănel's essay thus touches upon essential

aspects of today's rural imaginary, situated on the border of extreme globalization and extreme underdevelopment, especially since man's relationship to machinery has been an indicator for measuring progress and synchronicity with the West for decades.

One advantage of the numerous research tools employed in *Ruralism and Literature in Romania* is their obvious efficacy in relation to their respective subjects. However, it is my belief that their variety is not simply caused by recent critical trends, but by the fact that, in the project of re-localizing world literature, methodological plurality is actually necessary. Of course, by *re-localizing* I do not mean falling back on atrophied forms of parochialism and national or *organic* historiography. On the contrary, the volume under debate gives excellent examples of distant-reading and understanding the global network, the circulation of literature and the intrusiveness of political imperatives. But at the same time, all contributors manage to steer clear of any generalization, broad pattern or cliché regarding the periphery (be it social, economic, cultural, or all of these combined). The awareness that there is no single centre of the world system which all marginal cultures should regard as exemplary and that the rural literature of Romania must first be considered through its relationship with the national elites, political upheavals, and its own cultural capital; the attention paid to the polyethnic structure of the peasantry and its potential for subversion; investigations into the travelling abroad of marginal literature and the inherent self-validating strategies, as well as into the construction of local identities in light of their interaction with wider cultural webs – all these reveal Romanian rural literature to be more complex, problematic, self-aware, and ideologically relevant than previously thought.

Reference:

BAGHIU, Ștefan and Vlad POJOGA, Maria SASS (Eds.), *Ruralism and Literature in Romania*, Peter Lang, 2019, ISBN 978-3-631-80792-7, 311 p.