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THE SICKLE AND THE PIANO. A DISTANT READING OF WORK IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY ROMANIAN NOVEL

Recommended Citation: Baghiu, Ștefan and 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* 6.2 (2020): <https://doi.org/10.24193/mjst.2020.10.06>

Abstract: This article conducts a semantic search of *The Digital Museum of the Romanian Novel: The 19th Century* (MDRR), through which the authors attempt to identify the occurrences of several key concepts for *class* and *labour* imagery in the nineteenth-century Romanian novel, such as “muncă” [labour/work], “muncitor” [labourer/worker], “țăran” [peasant], “funcționar” [civil servant], alongside two main words that strikingly point to a dissemblance of representation of work: “seceră” [sickle] and “pian” [piano]. The authors show that physical work is underrepresented in the Romanian novel between 1844 and 1900, and that novelists prefer to participate to *the rise of the novel* through representing the bourgeois intimate space.

Keywords: work, labour, Romanian novel, nineteenth century fiction, realism.

We proceeded to this analysis with a semantic search conducted on the archive of *The Digital Museum of the Romanian Novel: The 19th Century* (MDRR), through which we attempted to identify the occurrences of several key concepts for *class* and

labour imagery in the Romanian novel of the nineteenth century: “muncă” [labour/work], “muncitor” [labourer/worker], “țăran” [peasant], “burghez” [bourgeois], “funcționar” [civil servant], and so on. The archive was made public in 2019 and the authors of the present study participated in its compilation with a view to deploying it to carry out future quantitative analyses. Two people alone could not have attempted such an endeavour had it not been for the peripheric status of Romanian literary production itself: far from being a *massive* archive (MDRR consists of only 160 novels, published between 1844 and 1900), it is highly comprehensive, in the sense that it contains 90% of the period’s *entire novel production* (published volumes). Therefore, we could proceed by conducting simple searches of *occurrences* and *recurrences* according to a system that had been already perfected in past studies focusing on the Romanian novel between 1901-1932 (Baghiu et al.; Modoc et al.; Pojoga et al.).

Fully aware of the possible shortcomings of the *interpretation* of our data, which can unfortunately occur when performing a semantic inquiry, we will put forward several case studies of two instruments whose presence or absence from the novels published between 1844-1900 is, we believe, surprising. For those familiar with Franco Moretti’s *The Bourgeois* (2013), semantic analyses of this sort will not seem outlandish. Even in his introduction, Moretti *counts*, within a corpus of 250 English novels (in the Chadwyck-Healey database, to be exact) the occurrences of words such as “bourgeois”, “rich”, or “wealthy”. The difference lies in the proportions and canonical selection of the corpus: whereas Franco Moretti worked with canonical novels from a considerably larger archive, our study focuses on nearly *all the published novels*. In short, as we aim to show, if a term occurs a number of x times in a y number of novels, and as we have checked the context of the corresponding occurrences *up close*, we could say that we have assessed the meanings of those terms as they appear in the *entire novel production*. In other words, the term does not effectively exist *elsewhere*, at least not as much as to shift our perspective or to alter our categories.

At the beginning of our research, as we closely followed the aforementioned quantitative analyses of literary geography and ideological reading of identity, we made the observation that terms such as “muncitor” [worker] or “muncă” [work, labour] are relatively seldom occurrences during the nineteenth century (115 occurrences of “worker” throughout 61 novels from a total of 160 and 538

occurrences of “work” in 114 novels from the same total, respectively). These relatively small numbers get even smaller when taking into consideration that many of these occurrences are metaphorical, either describing that someone is diligent or denominating activities which have no connection whatsoever with *labour* but rather with abstract results of work describing *any process*. This means that during the most unregulated, i.e., the most exploitative¹ period in the history of Romanian labour (also presented recently within the frame of “coloniality of labour” – Boatcă 362), hence during a prolonged “Medieval Prelude” (Wallerstein), the words denominating labour itself are barely mentioned in contemporary novels. This is surprising, since even the most conservative voices of the period described the novel as a narrative discourse depicting *the lower classes*, with protagonists originating in society’s most exploited, underprivileged, and financially precarious strata².

The situation is even more interesting when considering that, between 1901 and 1918 and between 1919 and 1932 (MDRR2)³, labour seems to undergo an upsurge, it seems to *intensify*, at least when considering occurrences of the terms⁴. Work (and the worker) seems to make a late entrance into the vocabulary of Romanian novelists, although there is not a single novel in which the peasant does not play a role (the term “țăran” appears a total of 1,364 times from 1844 to 1900, 2,007 times from 1901 to 1918, and 3,664 times from 1919 to 1932)⁵.

¹ Or, when regulations do appear, they offer exploitation a legal basis – see Slăvescu 170ff, especially for the reactions occasioned by the Agricultural Law of April 7, 1872, which introduces the bodily constraint of peasants who did not fulfil their obligations to landowners according to the agricultural agreements.

² See Titu Maiorescu, “Literatura română și străinătatea” [1886], in *Opere*, 557: “That is why we now claim that the novel’s main interest is the nationally specific life, and that it is imperative that the main protagonists become the mouthpieces of an entire social class and especially that of the peasantry and the lower strata. For a figure of the people is from the very beginning subjected to conjectural forces as to a predetermined faith, it can be passive without necessarily showing weakness, for it embodies the impersonal strength of class tradition, and the manner in which it gives voice to its feelings and emotions can be likewise clearer, since it happens naturally, without excessive artistic elaboration and without falling victim to the uniformization that high culture unavoidably undertakes”. Unless stated otherwise, all translations for Romanian are made by the authors.

³ MDRR2 is a digital archive covering 80% of the novelistic production between 1901-1932.

⁴ In the archive spanning 1901 to 1918, the word “muncitor” [worker] occurs 170 times throughout 45 novels, whereas “muncă” [work] appears 1,001 times throughout 81 novels (against an absolute total of 100 novels); in the period between 1919 and 1932, “muncitor” occurs 427 times throughout 127 novels, whereas “muncă” occurs 1,944 times in 241 novels from a sum total of 270.

⁵ The first period (1844-1900) features with 160 archived novels, representing 90% of the period’s production; the second period (1901-1918) contains 100 novels, amassing 80% of the period’s production; the third period (1919-1932) consists of 270 novels, 80% of the period’s total output. We are aware that the archive is not complete for the 1901-1932 period, but its completion would nonetheless show even more occurrences, strengthening our argument that it is during this time that work shifts from the background to the forefront.

Proportionally, the peasant appears as much throughout the nineteenth century as she/he does during the twentieth century. But *work* appears less in the nineteenth century. This is peculiar, since, as we will discuss in more detail in the second part of the present article, physical labour in the period's social reality consists overwhelmingly of agricultural labour – i.e., performed by peasants. In the absence of industry (which up until WW1 employed only 3% of the active population – Murgescu 143), physical labour is essentially *rural*. And if the peasant is so ubiquitous, but the words denominating work and the worker are employed so rarely, two crucial questions inevitably arise: what do these peasants actually *do* in the novels? And, if we assume that, notwithstanding the rarity of directly mentioning “work”, there are, indeed, other forms through which labour is described, what are these forms?

In short: how, why, and by whom is work performed throughout these novels? And what does that convey about the representation of the division of labour in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe?

The sickle and the plough: *papier-mâché* peasants

The first search focused on the lexical field of agricultural *work*. In order to work, in real life and in literature alike, the peasants require *tools*. However, to the 1,364 occurrences of the peasant throughout the nineteenth century, there are only 33 instances for “seceră” [sickle] and its variations in 24 novels, and 75 occurrences of “plug” [plough] in 29 novels. Furthermore, “sickle” is preponderantly used metaphorically (“the cholera sickled,” “the sickle of death,” the army “sickled” the foe on the battlefield, and so on), whereas the activity most suited for a sickle, “seceriș” [reaping], appears only once. Likewise, in several instances, the plough is deployed to describe characters (e.g., “strong, vigorous hands, good for ploughing or working on a ship, but not for lifting a cream cake in order to sell it”⁶) or marks an absence/need (“God grant us timely rains, but the field will remain unworked, for many have no hoes, no scythes, no ploughs, no oxen, no nothing”⁷). Notwithstanding, the word is so

⁶ Z. C. Arbure, *Nihilistiții. Din amintirile mele*, 1896, 40: “mâini zdravene, bune pentru plug sau pentru a lucra la mașină pe vas, iar nu a lua o prăjitură cu cremă pentru a o vinde.” See all the novels in the MDRR archive.

⁷ Panait Macri, *Haiducul Țandură. Scriere originală*, 1894, 36: “Dumnezeu a dat ploi la timp, dar o să rămână nemuncite bucatele, căci mulți oameni au rămas de nu mai au nici sape, nici coase, nici plug, nici boi, nici nimic.”

seldom used in its proper sense, that we can almost unreservedly claim that the sickle and the plough are, in fact, not used for work.

What is their use, then? Essentially, they are used for anything *but* work: the nineteenth-century novelist constantly repurposes the tools of agricultural labour to pursue “nobler” goals. This fact is explained, first of all, through the roles ascribed to peasants. Until 1900, they are cast as main characters in only four novels (published in magazines, two of which uncompleted, therefore also not included in the MDRR)⁸. In fact, these are the only works that can be regarded as truly belonging to the category of “rural novels” (Borza). In most of the others, the narrative’s setting against a rural backdrop and the employment of peasant typologies are simple delusions, meaning that we can pinpoint a total of 4 categories, unveiled by the quantitative inquiries of agricultural tools:

a. The most prominent category comprises the *romanticized heroes*. Having become hajduks, soldiers, or revolutionaries overnight, the peasants leave behind their spades, their ploughs, and their scythes in order to fight for patriotic or national causes: the uprisings, the wars waged against the Turks, the hajduks’ resistance against the exploitative Phanariotes (very rarely against the local boyar landowners), the 1821 and 1848 Revolutions, or the 1877-1878 Romanian War of Independence. In certain instances, as in Ioachim C. Drăgescu’s 1867 *Noaptele carpatine sau Istoria martirilor libertății* [The Carpathian Nights or the History of the Freedom Martyrs], tools become literal weapons: “if we cannot acquire weapons by these means, we’ll take the iron from the plough, and from its iron and from the scythes we’ll forge weapons, and we will fight regardless” (190)⁹. In cases like these, traditional work is always a form of nostalgia and marks the desire to return to a normal life. This is why it is idealized and vilified in equal measure: its melancholic remembrance is regarded as diversion, weakness or act of cowardice¹⁰. In hajduk novels, working the field is

⁸ T. N., *Moravuri și năravuri*, 1884, George Stama, *Mărunțelu*, 1894, N. Rădulescu-Niger, *Foame and Fuga*, both in 1896.

⁹ “dacă nu vom putea câștiga arme pe calea asta, vom lipsi plugul de feru, și din fiarele lui și a coaselor vom face arme, și tot ne vom lupta.”

¹⁰ The hajduk is constantly contrasted to the passive peasant, “who oversees his oxen and his plough”, accepting the humiliations of the landholders (N.D. Popescu, *Bujor haiducul*, 1892, 71); likewise, the scythe and the plough feature as symbols of protecting one’s family against the danger of death brought about by participating in struggles for national independence: “Thank God you’re healthy and in one piece! Come to momma, come home! Come and see your little brothers, come see how we live out meagre lives without you, come see the scythe, the plough, and many more...” (“- Dar bine că dete Dumnezeu să te găsească sănătos! Aide cu mama ta acasă! Aide să vezi de frații tăi, să vezi de viețșoarele noastre, de seceră, de coasă, de plug și de altele multe...”, Al. Pelimon, *Revoluțiunea română din anul 1848. Mușătoiu*, 1868, 128).

depicted as a return to a desired, serene existence, from which the foreign oppressor is excluded¹¹. In the case of historical novels, an episode is illustrative: after his coward son flees the army, returning to his native village, the old father takes away his haversack and his firearm and mockingly shows him the work field: “I bequeath you the land, the house, and the garden... You take care of them. As you made a fool of your nation for the sake of the scythe and for the sake of your mother... Stay with them! You are now a master! I am leaving! You have stolen so many years of service for your country, and I have to pay for them!”¹². Work appears here as a mere potential activity, like something that the peasants are eager to return to after the war, or participate in instead of going to war. Work is a desirable utopia, and the man who works, but does nothing else besides that, is considered to be actually deserting.

b. The idyllic stance is also quantitatively consistent. It embodies the unattainable ideal of *mythical peasantry* or the so-called “quintessence of the nation.” This is a common occurrence in historical, sentimental, satirical, mystery, and sensationalist novels¹³, as an alternative to the corruption reigning supreme in noble courts and in the aristocratic/bourgeois milieus of cities and boroughs. Work is either completely eliminated from the rural setting, as the village is reduced to a landscape¹⁴ or to a space of leisure for the boyars and for the emerging financial elite. Otherwise, it is heralded (but still *unrepresented*, i.e., undepicted) as a symbol of vitality and fulfilment, if not even as a space prone to instil spiritual awakening. But there is a point, however, where these two representations converge. Bolintineanu’s character Manoil follows a young peasant woman working. Her attire and posture are altered so as to resemble the peasant ideal: she carries “a pail on her shoulder: blonde and kissed by the sun like a wild rose, bursting with youth and health [...] Two blue eyes shadowed by long, golden lashes” (17)¹⁵. N. Rădulescu-Niger, a typical

¹¹ See N. D. Popescu, *Iancu Jianul, căpitanul de haiduci*, 1873, 205, where, in the novel’s epilogue, considering their mission completed, the hajduks bid each other farewell by saying “May God grant we see each other again, but not with flints in our hands, but with the plough’s stilts” (“Să dea Dumnezeu să ne vedem, dar nu in mani cu flintele, ci cu cornele plugului”).

¹² “Îți las ogorul, casa și grădina... aibi grije de densele. Deoarece ți-ai răs de cinstea neamului teu pentru coasă și pentru muma ta... remei cu ele! Ești stăpân desăvârșit!... Eu plec!... Tu ai furat atația ani de slujbă țării tale, ei bine, îi voi plăti eu!...” From Th. S. Stonenescu’s 1892 *Ștefan cel Mare* [Stephen the Great].

¹³ To understand the expansion and the tendencies underpinning these subgenres in the nineteenth century or at the beginning of the twentieth century see Terian et al., 2019; Terian et al., 2020.

¹⁴ See Raymond Williams’ remarks about the peasantry as absent community in the nineteenth century British novel in *The Country and the City*, 165-181.

¹⁵ “cu o cofă pe umeri: bălaie și rumenă ca o roză sălbatică, plină de frăgezime și de sănătate [...] Doi ochi albaștri acoperiți de gene lungi și aurite.” (Dimitrie Bolintineanu, *Manoil. Roman național*, 1855).

writer of the Sămănătorist¹⁶ movement from the early twentieth century, identifies the national ideal in the symbolic convergence of “the book” and “the plough”: “when they will sweat for the flourishing of all that is around them, – all of them literate, yet remaining in the furrows ploughing, all of them watching over the others and holding each other dearly, then the dream might just come true: all Romanians coming together to form a great, powerful nation”¹⁷. Idealizing, aestheticizing, and perhaps even objectifying the peasant fulfils the same function as in the most well-known paintings of the period. Although literature is the *most dynamic* artistic mean of the time, the scenes that involve peasants are as static as the paintings of Nicolae Grigorescu – and of every other painter of rural themes, for that matter. Work is an idealized projection, wherein the peasant is depicted donning a beautiful attire and poses in the field for the snapshot.

c. When the narrative focuses on realistic depictions, the representation of work is still biased¹⁸, showing either the figure of the *exploited serf* or that of *the idle peasant*, whose sole “motivation” is the whip. This takes place also because, even in these particular instances, the “workers of the land” are neither a cohesive social class nor a set of unique individuals, but are used in order to illustrate the foreign landowners’ greed, the boyars’ alienation from traditions or, more generally, the toxic effects of financial interests seeping into the rural world. It suffices to *mention* the backbreaking, brutalizing work of the peasants. The novelist does not feel the need *to show it* as well, especially since most nineteenth-century novels that fall under the category of social novels¹⁹ cultivate (sometimes even knowingly) a nationalist narrative. In fact, the novelists depict the hardworking peasant only when aiming to criticize the foreign exploiter. Hence, they rekindle two unrealistic

¹⁶ Sămănătorism, taking its name from the magazine *Sămănătorul* (The Sower), was – in the first decades of the twentieth century – a conservative, Romanticism-inspired ideology, whose national mystic discourse postulated the idealized archetypal village as the sole preserver of the authentic Romanian spirit.

¹⁷ “când își vor da osteneala să le fie înfloritoare toate cele de aproape vieții lor, – toți știind carte și rămânând la plug, toți săritori pentru unul și fiecare cu gând bun pentru toți, atunci se va putea ca visul să fie adevărat: toți românii într-o singură țară mare și puternică.” N. Rădulescu-Niger, *Străin în țara lui*, 1900, 25.

¹⁸ Especially since, as Axenciuc observes in his *Introducere în istoria economică a României: epoca modernă*: „Never in the country’s modern history has the rift between the urban economic progress and the social and cultural backwardness – akin to squalor – of the village ever been so great as in the latter half of the 19th century” (116).

¹⁹ From Nicolae Filimon, *The Old and the New Parvenus*, 1863, Nicolae D. Xenopol, *Brazi și putregai. Moravuri provinciale române*, 1881, G. Baronzi, *Confidențele unui om de inimă*, 1885, to I.C. Panțu, *Liniștea casei*, 1890, Const. Nottara, *De vânzare. Moravuri sociale*, 1897, to Duiliu Zamfirescu, *Viața la țară*, 1898.

preconceptions: firstly, that the peasants' work would have been righteously rewarded if the former feudal relations had not been spoiled by tenants acting as intermediaries; secondly, that if the peasants became small independent landholders, they could be properly integrated into the capitalist labour.

d. Fully illustrative of the link between the number of mentions of peasants and the near absence of their work in the nineteenth-century Romanian novel is the depiction of the rural world in Alexandru Vlahuță's *Dan* (1894). The protagonist of this sentimental novel, a poet "defeated" by the meagreness of the bourgeois society, as well as by the precariousness of his intellectual professions (professor at an all-girl boarding school, later prosecutor in a provincial town), exaltedly reacts to an observation made by one of his friends who notes that, throughout the entire Romanian literature, "there is not a single text showing the true soul and state of the Romanian peasant" (87)²⁰. Following this, the young poet aspires to become a realist novelist, capable of avoiding the prevalent depiction of "well-dressed, well-behaved peasants, much like those His Majesty's subprefects put on display at parades," in order to "inquire", "discover", and "tell" "the whole truth, the great social drama in its entirety"²¹. Yet Vlahuță's protagonist can only console himself with the imaginary projection of the peasants' exploitation and hard work: "How many tired, sickly people, some without a bed to sleep in, who cannot yet sleep! His mind painted the pictures by itself: endless fields of wheat, thousands of peasants sickling under the scorching sun, bare-chested, pulling out the treasures of the earth with sunburnt and scratched hands." This projection does nothing but soothe his own bourgeois existential ruminations, which he ceases to consider so burdensome: "And he felt renewed as if by a refreshing current" (96)²². In this case, the labour of the rural lower classes serves as a *psychological palliative* for the upper classes to feel better about themselves.

What can be said about rural labour after these inquiries? There are almost no sickles and only a few ploughs, which appear to fulfil an aspirational purpose. In fact, if we pursue these inquiries even further, focusing on the work conducted in urban

²⁰ "nicio scriere unde să se arate în adevăr sufletul și starea țaranului roman." Al. Vlahuță, *Dan*, 1894.

²¹ "țărani de ocazie, și de teatru, ca acei, pe cari îi scot subprefecții înaintea Măriei Sale la zile de paradă"; "tot adevărul, toată marea dramă socială".

²² "Câți oameni trudiți, bolnavi, cari n-au un pat, care n-au voie să se culce la vremea asta! Și-n mintea lui se desfășurau tablouri: ogoare imense, lanuri de grâu, și mii de secerători cu capetele în soare, cu piepturile goale, storcând bogățiile pământului cu mâinile lor pârlite și zgâriate. (...) Și se simți recreat ca de-un curent răcoritor."

industrial centres, there are even fewer hammers²³. Generally, nearly all the rural and urban instruments alluding to *heavy labour* are lacking, usually being part of idiomatic expressions describing feelings and states of mind (certain decisions place the character “between the hammer and the anvil”; some bad news fall “like a hammer blow” in the protagonist’s soul; the soldiers are “sickled down”, the diseases “sickled” the population, and so on). One could get the impression that the period’s novelists muffle labour in every one of their works while “inventing the peasant” (Simion Cosma). Yet they are not doing it in *all* the instances, but only when they should not be doing it.

In other instances, they do the exact opposite.

Working the piano: *la bourgeoisie fatigué*

In “From the Time of Caragea”, included in his *Scrisori către Vasile Alecsandri* [Letters to Vasile Alecsandri] (published during the 1880s), Ion Ghica writes about the city of Bucharest during the first stage of post-Phanariot urban modernization, referring especially to the 1830s. He describes a series of violent scenes from the plague epidemic and, in a downright cynical manner, continues by mentioning the “epidemic” of weddings that ensued after this tragedy. As he describes the weddings, the writer makes a series of observations regarding the music and, implicitly, regarding the musical instruments used at that time: “[i]n the whole of Bucharest, one could find only a single piano and a harp”²⁴. Of course, they belonged to the country’s ruler or to the ruler’s daughter.

It is hard to fathom what the piano meant for nineteenth-century culture without simultaneously insisting on its rarity. A luxury entertainment device, a marker of wealth and, at the same time, an illustration of a person’s distinguished education, the piano is *the most fashionable instrument*: it says a lot about the narrative, and it is therefore assigned a crucial function in several novels. Except for hajduk novels and historical novels set in the Middle Ages, the nineteenth-century Romanian novel invariably features a piano somewhere between its covers. Oftentimes as simple accessory to the narrative, since its mere mentioning is

²³ Out of 24 occurrences throughout 20 novels, only one refers to labour, and even then, the sound of a hammer is heard by several members of the upper class traveling by train and awakening in the thundering sounds of work. See Alexandru Vlahuță, *Dan* (1894), 220.

²⁴ „în tot Bucureștiul nu se aflau decât un piano și o harfă”.

sufficient to convey that the characters (and implicitly the writers) are not altogether ignorant of the habits or lifestyles of the upper classes.

Briefly, one can garnish one's novels with peasants without once mentioning the sickle and the hammer, but one cannot write a novel *without a piano*. We have unearthed this peculiar obsession (for it is an obsession during this time, as the authors often seem to add the piano only retrospectively, when they suddenly remember its omission in the novel) through a semantic search as well. The term is featured 419 times in 75 novels, to which we can add the novels in which the obsolete "clavir" [harpsichord] appears, another 40 occurrences from 13 novels. Taking into consideration that many of the 160 novels with which we worked are hajduk novels or historical novels, we come to the conclusion that the piano is a compulsory element in all the other novels. As a recent study of the archive shows, many of the period's novels are also *set* in the nineteenth century (Vancu et al.). The piano, it seems, embodies modernity itself. Not the industry, not necessarily the technology of labour and production, but rather this symbol of the private space of the bourgeois and aristocratic circles is, for the Romanian novelists, the symbol of modernization. Notwithstanding that 90% of the country's population lives in the countryside and is virtually illiterate, literature is keen on presenting the upper-class component of the modernization process.

Of course, it is far-fetched to claim that novelists consider it contemptible to depict rural physical or industrial labour, but we cannot help but notice the careful omission of *working tools* and, at the same time, the emphasis on the symbols of the upper class, which are sometimes inserted artificially, when there is no need for them. The majority of the 400 occurrences we have studied actually construct an *aspirational decorum*, in that certain characters are endowed with a certain *aura* by being placed in the proximity of a piano. However, there is always something happening *around* them as well. Even in Dimitrie Bolintineanu's 1862 novel *Elena*, things happen around the piano: affairs are taken care of, ideas take shape, relations are being established, networking is being made. In other words: work is done²⁵. In

²⁵ "In a small reception room not far away, there was the girl's piano, at which one of the young girls sat and tried to remember, clumsily playing one of Chopin's waltzes. Here and there some men were discussing business; among them, mister Aplengrun, the new, proud owner from Moghileni who read the *Official Gazette* by a lamp". Duiliu Zamfirescu, *Un drum greșit*, 1888, 587: "Într-un salonaș mai dincolo era pianul fetei, la care una din duduici își aducea aminte, știi ca prin vis un biet vals de Chopin. Ici și acolo câte doi bărbați vorbind de afaceri, între care și d-nul Alpengrun, noul și marele proprietar de la Moghileni, care, sub o lampă, citea publicațiile din *Monitorul oficial*."

other instances, playing the piano conveys erotic refinement – itself a product of work and practice. In *La gura sobei* [*By the Fireplace*] (1865), following a lovemaking scene, a female character

turned facing him with an expression of devout love and resignation. ‘Master, I await your command, she told him tenderly, your slave will follow your orders!’ ‘Well, then! Sit at the piano and play something for me!’ ‘But you know very well, George, that I cannot play the piano!’ ‘Ah! You’re right, your piano is but a piece of fancy furniture...’ (201)²⁶.

Following this, the young man continues his rant: “In Bucharest, our women can make conversation, they can paint, they can embroider, they can sing, they can dance, and they can, at least, play the piano or the guitar as well (201)²⁷.

In other words, the “pure, ethereal, divine” love is a product of *work*. The piano illustrates that being a nobleman or a bourgeois is not that easy. In his 1880 *Brazi și putregaiu* [*Fir Trees and Putrefaction*], N. D. Xenopol likewise illustrates the difficulty of playing the piano: “apparently you didn’t have enough of reading and playing the piano...” (16); “she was either very sickly or she would not stand up from the piano or the writing table for hours” (208)²⁸. In *Domnișoara Ursuza* [*The Morose Young Lady*] (1881) by Iulia Hasdeu, there is even a chapter titled “Urăsc pianul!” [*I hate the piano!*] where young Elisa’s piano teacher tells her mother that the girl does not seem to like playing the piano and that it would perhaps be better for her to quit, to which the mother replies that “a young lady, not playing the piano?! That is preposterous, it is absurd ...” (45)²⁹. The girl who hates the piano is, in the narrator’s own words, “a naughty, moody, and mischievous child”. Apart from being the hallmark of dedicated work, the piano is, by the same token, a sign of intelligence. In *Strada Carmen Silva* [*The Carmen Silva Street*], Alexi Teochar’s 1893 novel, when asked “so are you saying she’s a tad boneheaded,” Traian’s friend replies

²⁶ “Se stârcei după dânsul cu o nespasă expresiune de amor și de resignare. ‘Stăpâne, ordonă, îi zise ea cu tandrețe, sclava ta așteaptă ordinele tale.’ ‘Ei bine! pune-te la piano și execută ceva!’ ‘Dar știi bine George, că nu cunosc pianul.’ ‘Ah! ai dreptate, pianul tău nu e decât o mobilă de lux...’” Radu Ionescu, *La gura sobei*, 1865.

²⁷ “în București, femeile noastre știu să converseze, să deseneze, să brodeze, să cânte, să danțe, și cel puțin ele cântă la pian sau cu ghitară.” *Ibid.*

²⁸ “pe semne nu te-ai săturat mata de atâta carte și piano...”; “se făcea când foarte bolnavă, când nu se mai scula ceasuri întregi de la piano sau de la scris.”

²⁹ “o domnișoară să nu cunoască muzica! E ceva scârbos, e absurd...”

with “Oh, God, no, quite the contrary! She speaks French, German, Greek, she can play the piano, she sings with her voice” (13)³⁰.

The piano is not only mentioned on account of being fashionable, but especially because it symbolizes work/labour. This is all the more strange since, as we have shown in the first section of this article, physical labour is almost entirely absent. Among all the cases that we have encountered in the novels, one seems symptomatic in this regard: the aforementioned *Elena* by Dimitrie Bolintineanu.

Elena sat at the piano, the ivory keys started moving, emitting enchanting sounds under her white, gracious hands. She withdrew from society; her soul passionately dived into a torrent of harmony that took over it entirely and made it vanish into a world of ecstasy. (145)³¹.

This passage described the scene in which the main protagonist of the novel plays Schubert for an audience of people from high society. Immediately after “withdrawing from society” (in the sense of art absorbing her from the palpable world), however, she “called upon Caterina to take her place at the piano” so that she could speak to the young Alexandru. Once the narrative progresses and the two characters start to flirt increasingly more, Elena insists that singing makes her extremely uncomfortable, even when Alexandru asks her to “play the piano” (“don’t force me into doing something that hurts me deeply”) (161). But she accepts shortly after: “if you care about it so much, fine ... I’ll try! ...’, she said, sitting down at the piano”³². During another “musical” moment, Alexandru sings together with Elena in front of “ladies”, who “constantly asked him to sing.” When Alexandru was about to go, Elena “began to sing *Romanza del Sol*, accompanying herself at the piano. Her voice was so clear, so suave, so plaintive, that the entire society there felt taken away and transported to an ideal world” (181)³³. Later on, we discover that, in a letter whereby she informs Alexander of her recovering health (after Caterina informed him that Elena had fallen sick), the protagonist says that she hopes “to work with the

³⁰ “Va să zică cam prostică!”; “Doamne ferește! Știe franțuzește, nemțește, grecește, cântă la pian, din gură...»”.

³¹ “Elena se puse la piano, îndată ivoriul începu să tremure și să verse sunete desfătătoare sub mâinile albe și grațioase ale Elenei. Ea dispăru din societate; sufletul ei se aruncă cu voluptate într-un torent de armonie ce îl răpi și îl rătăci într-o lume de extaz.”

³² “nu mă sili a face un lucru care mă ucide”; “dar dacă ții mult... să încerc!...’ Zise și se puse la piano.”

³³ “se puse să cânte *Romanza del Sol*, acompaniindu-se singură. Vocea ei era atât de curată, atât de suavă, atât de plângătoare, că toată societatea ce era de față se simți răpită, transportată într-o lume ideală.”

piano a lot this summer” (185)³⁴. When the ladies conspire to compel Ranu to confess his feelings to Elena, which he, to Elena’s exasperation, promptly does, we are told that “she was in the salon, busy with deciphering a musical piece for the piano” (198)³⁵. Every time Elena is working, struggling, labouring to decipher the piano, she becomes “tired” afterwards. Even in the scene where Alexandru discovers that Elena’s sickness is incurable, we encounter a sort of “Swan song”. After kissing Alexandru, Elena instinctively reaches for the piano: “Alex – she told him – I feel a passionate haze taking me into its arms! ... the fever, of course. I would like to sing, in your arms, the heart’s final sighs ... my voice has not yet withered!” But Alexandru warns her a final time: “singing will exhaust you...” (327)³⁶.

Elena dies while singing (an ostentatiously heart-breaking scene, not out of line with the period’s sentimental novels), but the narrator implies that she dies while working. Bolintineanu places in every one of the novel’s crucial scenes a piano at which someone is working, a piano whose role is to make the physical/social world vanish if it is properly handled. This is also the first consistent occurrence of the instrument in the Romanian novel: as an instrument that torments, exhausts, one that requires work and sacrifice. It also conveys a thing or two about the manner in which the authors envision the modernization of the Romanian literature and society: the period’s obsession betrays a powerful desire to enact a shift from self-colonial aspirations to the professionalization of borrowed instruments. But, far from studying the bottom of the social pyramid, they aim to fortify its top. This gave rise to a different question and a new semantic inquiry: how does work look like for the small Romanian urban bourgeoisie in a time where the *nouveau riche* wage a Darwinist battle against the old aristocratic structures?

Urban class wars: conquering the public service

Definitely better represented throughout the period’s novels than agricultural and industrial work is the work of the civil servants. Except that, in their case, the perspective through which work is portrayed is even more constrained, limiting itself mainly to satire. From this point of view, the *petite bourgeoisie* is exceeded (through a series of grotesque exaggerations) only by the *grand bourgeoisie* (dubbed “ciocoi”,

³⁴ “că o să lucrez mult în vara asta cu piano”

³⁵ “era în salon, ocupată a descifra la piano o piesă de muzică.”

³⁶ “Alexandre – îi zise ea – simț o beție voluptoasă ce mă cuprinde!... frigurile, negreșit. Aș voi să cânt, pe brațele tale, cele din urmă suspinări ale inimii... vocea mea nu s-a stins încă!...”; “un cântec te va osteni.”

meaning ‘toad-eater’, ‘parvenu’, ‘racketeer’), which competes with and eventually replaces the old aristocracy, perpetuating its decadent morals and taking them a step further. If work is a thing of the past for the grand bourgeoisie (since they merely pursued reaching the top of the social hierarchy), for the petite bourgeoisie, work is supposed to be a daily activity.

Therefore, we can divide this civil servant class that has not yet reached the stage of *not having to work anymore* into two categories: a. The servants who desire to climb the social ladder or preserve, from within the public system, their privileged position, and for whom work is only simulated; b. The servants who genuinely attempt to do their jobs and for whom work becomes a tedious chore or a disappointment. Generally speaking, the productivity of the civil servants in the first category consists of establishing a network of political and economic relations, corruption, fraud, influence peddling, and so on. Almost all the 285 mentions of the term “funcționar” [civil servant] (throughout 54 novels) are associated with reproachable actions or negative feelings at the very least, e.g., “abuse”, “plague”, “scourge of society”, “venality”, “theft”, more “crooked [than] thieves lurking in the forest”, “ruling class” and also “unindustrious world without aspirations”, “the most contemptible life is when [...] you work to create the illusion of success, not in order to earn your bread,” or “a myriad of living automatons without a will of their own and without freedom of thought, who are animated, work, and even think according to a foreign will; the will of their superior”³⁷.

We encounter here, paradoxically, the exact opposite of the peasant’s situation. To a certain extent, nineteenth-century Romanian novelists present a detailed description of city dwellers, the bourgeois, and the civil servants in order to publicly ridicule them. Following this logic, those who actively produce (the peasants) are not depicted as working precisely because they are idealised or objectified. And those whose work is strictly abstract or intellectual (civil servants) are depicted as working with a view to being criticized. It is because of this that work itself is very rarely featured *as work*: it is always performed in other ways than those that define it. Such an undiversified approach can be explained by the very negative reputation of the bourgeoisie working in the public system of the nineteenth century,

³⁷ Al. Pelimon, *Trei sergenți*, 1879, 372; Al. Vlahuță, *Dan*, 1894, 250; Gr. H. Grandea, *Vlășia sau ciocoi noi*, 1887, 188; N.D. Popescu, *Iancu Jianu, jăpiciu de plasă*, 1887, 22; Nicolae Filimon, *Ciocoi vechi și noi sau Ce se naște din pisică șoareci mănâncă*, 1863, 272; Duiliu Zamfirescu, *Viața la țară*, 1898, 175; Const. Mille, *Dinu Millian*, 1887, 16; N. D. Popescu, *Amazoana de la Rachova*, 1879, 7.

i.e., the social class that is supposed to have initiated and helped achieve the modern Romanian state. For example, one of the period's progressive figures, Ion Ghica, pays homage, in several brochures published during the 1860s, to unrestrained liberalism, to the importance and usefulness of credit (which "bring[s] a tenfold and a hundredfold increase in wealth, encouraging everyone to work, because [...] it is nothing but a promise, an obligation, a duty to work, to produce") (98)³⁸, or the technologization of labour (man's chance to "unshackle" himself), while defending a series of conservative and classist stances on civil servants included. It is the attitude described by Cornel Ban in his chapter "Între liberalism și mercantilism" [Between Liberalism and Mercantilism] (25-26). In this manner, Ghica criticizes "the bureaucratic class" not only on account of the illusion that their service would "acquit them from the labouring class" and place them directly among the ranks of "the grand boyars", but also because it has become the aspiration of lower-class children, who will presumably come to bitterly regret "having disavowed their initial social class, the precarious state for which they will later dearly yearn" (18)³⁹.

The criterion of social class therefore underpins the two major ways of depicting the work of civil servants in nineteenth-century Romanian novels. Both reinforce the idea that the boyar class, regardless of how much it had waned compared to its heyday, can still bring the lawful state to its knees. This appears to come in contradiction with what we announced earlier in this article, namely that writers often seem to plead for a return to the feudal system, to a world in which the boyar/ruler/landowner can once again exert direct control over the work of his subjects. In fact, even this attempt by the boyars to enter public institutions and therefore corrupt them is a symbol of debasement, since it illustrates a desperate attempt by the old families to conserve their class privilege. The boyar/aristocrat must now crawl out of his comfort zone and even stoop as low as to enter the ranks of public bureaucracy in order to maintain his former level of influence, at which the new capitalists have slowly chipped away. By entering this bureaucratic class, the boyar was compelled to *work* (to build a network for himself, to acquire influence, to bypass rules and regulations, and so on). There is, therefore, some sort of dynastic "officialdom", through which the boyars impose their rule on the state by

³⁸ "Înzecește și însutește bogăția, îmboldind pe fiecare la muncă, căci [...] nu este decât o făgăduială, o obligațiune, o îndatorire de a lucra, de a produce."

³⁹ "sustragerea de la condiția în care s-au născut și au crescut, de la condiția modestă după care mai târziu cei mai mulți au să ofteze greu."

“sacrificing” their own offspring. Considering them still unripe to handle the family’s estates in the new capitalist world, the old landowners assign their children positions within state administration⁴⁰. By claiming the advantage of having studied abroad (even if not fully completing their education) and enjoying the unreserved protection of their parents, they rapidly accumulate wealth and benefit from the advantage that their illicitly obtained assets are not dependent on the market’s fluctuations or the changes in the political sphere. The boyar civil servants⁴¹ occupy positions in ministries, prefectures, and administration in the country’s big cities, they live a life of luxury and banquets, demonstrating that it is possible, as one outraged character from Radu Ionescu’s 1861 *Don Juanii din București* [The Don Juans of Bucharest] blurts out, “to live and to spend... without once working or inheriting” (371)⁴².

These forms of control boyars exerted on state administration affect the lower servants – precarious and vulnerable workers. We are referring to the servants that *actually perform work* throughout the novels. In fact, they are almost the sole categories whose work is actually depicted constantly and in detail in the nineteenth-century Romanian prose. We cannot help but notice an underlying solidarity: except for a few authors, nearly all the writers belong to these social classes; it is what Nicolae Iorga observes in his 1880 “De ce nu avem roman” [Why We Don’t Have Novels], that the genre cannot evolve when writers are forced to survive from other intellectually demanding, petit bourgeois professions⁴³. Lacking protection from influential families and notwithstanding their capacities or intellectual accomplishments, this category of civil servants invariably end up in inferior positions⁴⁴. These professors, doctors, prosecutors, and judges from the country’s provincial towns, bureaucrats in ministries and smaller administrative jurisdictions, notaries, teachers, private tutors, archivists, copyists, statisticians, telegraphists, secretaries, and so on can barely survive from their meagre salaries. They are also

⁴⁰ This is, in fact, historically true; Bogdan Murgescu has shown (2010, 113), that in the second half of the nineteenth century, the state becomes the main attraction of the elites: boyars’ sons display an ever-growing interest in becoming civil servants, while at the same time, sons of merchants and intellectuals follow political-administrative careers increasingly more often than before.

⁴¹ From novels such as Dimitrie Bolintineanu’s *Elena* (1862), Nicolae Filimon’s *Ciocoii vechi și noi* (1863), Costache Negruzzi’s *Mihai Vereanu* (1873), Teochar Alexi’s *O cură radicală* (1881), Duiliu Zamfirescu’s *În fața vieții* (1884).

⁴² “să trăiești și să cheltuiești... fără să muncești sau să moștenești.”

⁴³ Where exceptions do appear, they are also accompanied by a visible empathy toward the old landowners. The best example in this regard is that given by Nicolae Manolescu in *Arca lui Noe* regarding the Duiliu Zamfirescu’s narrator, who is “emotionally attached” to aristocratic characters, as the author himself is the member of an ancient boyar family.

⁴⁴ See Al. Pelimon, *Un funcționar sinucis*, 1873; I. C. Fundescu, *Scarlat*, 1875; G. Baronzi, *Muncitorii statului*, 1880; N. D. Xenopol, *Brazi și putregai*, 1881; Teochar Alexi, *Babeta*, 1882.

dependent on the ever-changing disposition of their superiors, of politicians, and local magnates. Therefore, they are either alienated and eventually excluded from the system, or they become an active part in the process of surrendering the state to the interests of the boyar ruler and forced to live off scraps. It is worth mentioning that, although doctors are preponderantly positively connoted as providential or consoling presences, and the frequency of the references to them is not at all negligible (581 mentions of “*medic*” [medical doctor] and 945 mentions of “*doctor*” in 84 and 88 prose works, respectively), the medical profession in the country’s hospitals is regarded as degrading. In *Brazi și putregaiu*, “the last thing the first doctor in Piatra Neamț cared to do was his work [...], as he was involved in the county’s most urgent affairs (in plain Romanian: in its various swindles)” (61)⁴⁵. In Teochar Alexi’s *Babeta* (1883), a prodigious student, passionate about Latin, is told as an ultimatum that a career as a doctor is inferior to one as bookkeeper for a local merchant. In Const. I. A. Nottara’s *De vânzare* [For Sale] (1897) and Duiliu Zamfirescu’s *În război* [During the War] (1897), although playing cards with local officials, the doctor ends up being mocked by them. In Duiliu Zamfirescu’s *Viața la țară* [Life in the Countryside] (1898), one of the protagonists, Matei Damian, unremorsefully gives up a career in medicine (after having studied seven years abroad), which for him would be strongly connected to the dehumanising town and attempts, in turn, to revive the family’s bankrupt estate.

At the same time, “*profesor*” [teacher] (a term which is mentioned a total of 405 times throughout 63 novels, alongside several other occurrences such as “*învățător*”, “*meditator*” or “*tutore*” [all meaning teacher, tutor, and instructor]) is positively connoted when evoking abstract roles (master/role model) or personalities from the characters’ past. When denominating the heroes’ professions, it is employed with contemptuous undertones. In Duiliu Zamfirescu’s *Lume nouă și lume vechie* [The New World and the Old] (1895) (the novel containing the highest number of occurrences of the term – 53), the professor is not only overwhelmed by his tasks⁴⁶,

⁴⁵ “Lucrul, de care întâiul medic al Petrei se îndeletnicea mai puțin, era meseria lui [...], fiind vârat în toate afacerile cele mai însemnate (pe românește coțcăriile) județului.”

⁴⁶ “He had gone out at half past seven in the morning and had hurried uninterruptedly from the school to the commercial school; from there, back to school, for a committee; from here to a private class; jumping in tramways, when he could catch them; in carriages, when he found himself too far; thus squeezing as much time as he possibly could. His day was so full, that he could only think about his private affairs on the road”. (Duiliu Zamfirescu, *Lume nouă și lume vechie*, 1895, 115: “Ieșise de la 7 jumătate dimineața și alergase, fără întrerupere, de la gimnaziu, la școala comercială; de acolo înapoi la gimnaziu, pentru o comisie; de aici la o lecție particulară; sărind în tramways, când îl prindea; în

but is also treated as a mere servant by the wealthy couple whose daughter he tutors. In Constantin Mille's *Dinu Milian* (1887) (in which "profesor" is mentioned 47 times), the teaching staff is fully subjected to the interests of the wealthy class, who is implicitly unfair and abusive towards the underprivileged. The main character in Gr. Granda's 1872 *Fulga sau ideal și real* [Fulga, or Ideal and Real] is nothing but an outcast for the boyars, with whom he comes into contact only via his love for a landowner's daughter⁴⁷. In another novel (Petru Vulcan, *Dragomir*, 1895), a highly intelligent and hardworking young man is forced to leave Bucharest after having sacrificed his youth as a teacher, because his salary can only provide him a modest life in the countryside. The same image equating teachers with material precariousness and moral despair is emphasized in Al. Vlahuță's *Dan*⁴⁸ and Traian Demetrescu's *Iubita* [The Beloved] (1895).

Conclusions

In the nineteenth-century novel, the economic and social modernization of the Romanian cultural space is connected to a seemingly baffling, but actually explainable phenomenon: physical work is nearly excluded from the narrative. And this takes place not because the novel does not contain the lower classes, not because the peasants are not present (as we have noticed, "peasant" is a frequently referenced word in the novels), but because a syncretic society (Gherea 1910) inevitably generates a major inferiority complex: incapable of constructing narratives with the instruments of realism, unaware, in fact, that realism is the by-product of the careful study of social strata and class, Romanian novelists contrive new formulas through which they attempt to become representatives of their times. Some of them consider that they can reach a high degree of *modernity* by cultivating *class Bovarism*. They glorify the empty sign, the hollow class token (the piano) and herald it as some sort of a superior work instrument. Another category of novelists is under the impression

birje, când se găsea prea departe; storcând astfel din timp, tot ce putea să-i producă. Îi era ziua atât de plină, încât numai pe drum se mai putea gândi la ale sale").

⁴⁷ it was wrong of you to spend your time with this young man who does not belong to our class, who is nothing more than a teacher" (129). Granda, *Fulga sau Ideal și real*, 1885: "Ai făcut rău acordând intimitatea ta acestui june care nu face parte din clasa noastră, care nu este decât un profesor."

⁴⁸ "For six years since he moved to Bucharest; in the summer, after the exam session, the same unpleasant thoughts occurred to him time and time again: why couldn't he put aside a couple of hundred lei at the end of the year, so that he could finally afford to go somewhere, perhaps to a mountain resort, to cool off a bit!" (20). Al. Vlahuță, *Dan*: "Șase ani de cand era în București; și întotdeauna vara, după examene îl apucau aceleași gânduri urâte: să nu s'aleagă și el la sfârșitul anului, cu câteva sute de lei, ca să se poată urni, să se ducă undeva, la munte, să se mai răcorească!"

that they can resolve the challenges of capitalism's entrenchment in all the relations, strata, and geographical expanses of nineteenth-century Romania through staging a social protest. Most often, all they succeed in doing is to objectify the period's most consistent social class (the peasantry) and, through this, to exclude it from the modern, contemporary world. Finally, a third category of novelists identifies the opportunity of becoming modern precisely in amending the simulacra and abuses inherent to the modernizing process. However, their satire (pretexted by the loose morals of civil servants big or small) ends up obscuring work altogether. Hidden behind so many burlesque guises, work becomes so abstract of a concept that it seems entirely absent: its so-called "ethos" seems to evoke either simple simulations of itself or to compel the protagonists to give up administrative work altogether. It does not come as a surprise that, in the nineteenth-century Romanian novel, work is depicted metaphorically and not as an actual, explicit activity. Of course, some might ask: is it the novel's *duty* to depict work? In theory, no, since the topics approached by nineteenth-century Romanian novelists oftentimes fall outside "the ferocious struggle of capital and labour" which, in being "fundamentally global in character", "gives the world its unity" (Ahmad 10).

Several questions inevitably arise, however: why is physical work *only mentioned*, but never represented, given that in at least two of the canonical novels of twentieth-century realism (Liviu Rebreanu's 1920 *Ion* and Marin Preda's 1955 *Moromeții* [The Morometes]), words such as "sickle" occur as many times as there are instances of them in the 116 novels of the previous century? Not to mention that the word is, in these twentieth-century novels, part of a detailed description of agricultural work. Apart from what we have hitherto shown by surveying the corpus of nineteenth-century novels, we can speculate that the genre's *evolution* consisted, during the following period, precisely in the *representation* of work, something we hope to illustrate in a future article. This is something we know for certain: the starting point of the Romanian novel is not necessarily a show of narrative *naivety*, poor character development, rudimentary style, and so on (these shortcomings have always been invoked in national literary historiography – Mușat; for a computational analysis of stylistic *complexity*, see in this issue Modoc and Gârdan 48-63), but rather a consistent disregard of the social body and of work. Aside from the formal issues these novels most likely pose, their failure to stand the test of time is primarily a consequence of the writers not becoming aware of the novel's mission to reflect

these two. At the very periphery of the European literary production system, in one of the most unequal European societies of the time, the instruments with which this peripheral condition can be empirically analysed are not as exciting for the authors as those that could grant them access to the reception rooms of high society. And this alone excludes them from their own epoch, during which the novel contrives around the continent *scapes* of work and exploitation. And this is something that Romanian authors have eventually understood in the twentieth century. When literature's stake is truly social, work and its distinctive instruments must not be sought after through meticulous interpretation, in order to be glimpsed between the lines, but shine bright, hiding in plain sight.

Acknowledgements: Ștefan Baghiu's work was supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministry of Research and Innovation, CCCDI – UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.2-PCCDI-2017-0821/ INTELLIT, within PNCDI III. Cosmin Borza's work was supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research, CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.1-TE-2019-1378, within PNCDI III.

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