

# Rural Modernism in East-Central Europe

## Abstracts

**Ștefan Baghiu (Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu), *“The Scientist and the Monster”:  
Peasants between Unorganised Mob and Human Machine***

Franco Moretti's famous 1982 "The Dialectics of Fear" envisioned modernity through metaphors of monstrosity: while Dracula embodies the strive to accumulate of the capitalist monopolists, Frankenstein's monster is the representation of the proletariat, the amorph mass of workers sewed together through technology. Moretti observes that "like the proletariat, the monster is denied a name and an individuality," and sees how the relationship between the monster and his creator gives his name. In *Grundrisse* (written in 1857-1858), Marx used the most famous metaphor of living and dead capital (i.e., the capital of the work and the surplus), and paralleled the fact that "capital absorbs labor into itself" with Goethe's lines in *Faust*: "as though its body were by love possessed." This paper aims to see how this "love possessed" body of collective workers and peasants was absorbed into labor through technology and how Romanian literature portrays the "human machines" made through technology in the rural side of Eastern Europe. The evolution of the representation of the peasants here is crucial, since they were the largest working class in Romania and the discourse on the importance of industrializing the agrarian work went through different stages, from the reforms of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, to the communist period when the "human machine" was given a socialist meaning.

**Gheorghe Berciu (Babeș-Bolyai University), *Coping with Social Unrest in the Rural  
World. Radical Social Events in the Romanian Interwar Novel***

Inspired from an unusual reference (see Moritz v. Commissioner, where then attorney Ginsburg argued that radical social change was needed for the freedom of both sexes), this paper explores the radical social changes or events that were depicted in some of the Romanian interwar novels from an auctorial narrative perspective and how they are linked to factual events from rural communities. Furthermore, this paper will try to analyse the outcomes of such events and the institutional response they were met with. Despite the fact that the social events depicted throughout the concerned novels are not a means of freedom for both sexes, but freedom for various reasons, the paper will explore the rural world along with the impact it sustained during its struggle. The main scope of this study is to

demonstrate that the social events depicted in the concerned novels are all part of a modern movement for self and collective empowerment.

**Cosmin Borza (Sextil Pușcariu Institute of Linguistics and Literary History), *Unmaking Primitivism: Peripheral Modernity and the Romanian Rural Fiction***

This paper addresses the paradoxical relationship between primitivism and rurality in the Romanian literary culture from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By analysing the local network of ideological debates and literary depictions of rural primitivity, the study proposes a historical and analytical survey based on the premises that the Romanian approaches of primitivism are typical for the European (semi-)peripheral cultures before World War II. In such predominantly rural regions, primitivity is seen mainly not as an imaginary construct, that could become a source for idealization/exoticization, but as a realist and critical standpoint which reflects the ways peripheries assimilate and confront the metropolitan modernity.

**Vladimira Derkova (Masaryk University), *Changes in the Way of Cultivating the Land through the Lens of Czech Ruralist Literature***

The paper focuses on cultural changes that the depiction of land cultivation in Czech ruralist literature (authors like Josef Knap, František Křelina, Václav Prokůpek etc.) goes through in Modernism. It refers to the impact of political discourse and the influence of media – especially newspapers – of time on the ruralist literature. The analysis points out the relevance of the different way traditionalist literary discourse incorporates modern approaches to agriculture and new modes of representation of the countryside.

**Daiana Gârdan (Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu), *The Rural Novel in Romania and Brazil. Naturalism and National Identity at the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century***

Following Fredric Jameson's observations on literary modernity and the concept of "third-world literature," as well as Warwick Research Collective's notion of "world-literature," the paper aims to provide a comparative analysis of two modern Romanian and Brazilian rural novels that use naturalist techniques in order to present rurality and its historical issues at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both Liviu Rebreanu (in *The Uprising* [Răscoala]) and Euclides da Cunha (in *Rebellion in the Backlands* [Os sertões]) employ naturalism as a way to deliver a social critique of the effects that industrial modernization, regional segregation, and cosmopolitanism had upon rural communities in peripheral countries. While having modernist views and rooting for social progress, Rebreanu and da Cunha, in a rather paradoxical fashion, manage to expose in their narratives the negative impact of the official national discourse regarding the rural areas and the peasant. The paper therefore proposes a close reading in the vein of new modernist studies that can reassess some of the canonical interpretations on their works and provide a new and transnational perspective.

**Alex Goldiș (Babeș-Bolyai University), *The Pressure of Foreign Models in Marin Preda's Post-Thaw Novels***

The presentation looks at the tension between ruralism and urbanism and between foreign models and autochthonous engagement in Marin Preda's literary evolution. Although Preda is seen as the most representative rural novelist of the post-war Romanian literature, the aim of the paper is to demonstrate that, starting with the 1962 *Risipitorii*, his career can be described as a systematic attempt to de-emphasize this framing. The presentation also tries to pinpoint some of the ideological or cultural aspects responsible for the writer's growing internalization of the skepticism toward rural literature.

**Doris Mironescu (Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași), *Monographing the Peasant in Nineteenth Century Romanian Literature. Encounters, Immersions, Myths***

The paper focuses on the ways of visualising the peasant community in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, from the early romantics (Alec Russo, Vasile Alecsandri) through the rural prose writers in the "Junimea" group (Ion Creangă, Ioan Slavici) to the late populists of the 1890s (George Coșbuc). The aim is to explain how the exterior, exoticising and aestheticizing perspective on the local peasantry initiated by the early romantics became a staple of Romanian literature in the canon-building age of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Various ways to visualise peasantry are investigated, from the remote appreciation of peasant talk to the familiar recollection of peasant childhood and further, to the effort to reconstruct a peasant pantheon. Special attention is given to the "monographic" approach, whereby customs, habits and mores are investigated in an almost anthropological manner by writers in the attempt to unearth the features of an ideal-type, national-specific "national character" embodied by the Romanian peasant.

**Emanuel Modoc (Sextil Pușcariu Institute of Linguistics and Literary History), *Modernity and the National Real Estate. A Distant Reading of the Romanian Rural Novel from the First Half of the Twentieth Century***

The paper conducts a critical reassessment of one of the most influential cultural myths in Eastern Europe throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the nationalist definition of peasantry as embodying the quintessence of the whole nation. In order to evaluate the imagological scope and ideological implications engendered by this so-called "agrarian myth" the study employs a distant reading of the Romanian rural novel from the first half of the twentieth century, precisely the literary subgenre supposed to reflect *par excellence* the coalescence between the people (made up of the peasantry) and the nation. By analysing the co-occurrences in these novels between words belonging to the vocabularies of nation and rurality, respectively, the paper aims at showing that – contrary to traditional historiographic consensus – nation building has less to do with language, ethnicity, or tradition, and much more to do with social emancipation.

**Ovio Olaru (Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu), *Rural Ethnocentrism. The Romanian-German Sprachinsel***

In perpetual isolation from the German states from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the historical ethnic German clusters on the territory of modern-day Romania (The Western/*Banater Schwaben*, the Transylvanian *Sachsen*, the *Dobrudschadeutschen*, the *Bukowinadeutschen*, the *Bessarabiendeutschen*, to name only the most numerous) have been a rather peculiar case of an imagined community (Benedict Anderson) relating rather to their distant “co-nationals” speaking the same language than to their immediate neighbours speaking Romanian or Hungarian, *foreign* languages they inevitably came to master, but that rarely became the *lingua franca* of familial ties, friendship or intimacy. By drawing on several concepts discussed in his previous research (“diasporic nationalism” and “ethnocentrism by proxy”), Ovio Olaru’s presentation deals with discussing the prerequisites of *Heimatliteratur*, a form of rural, neoromantic, idyllic literature stemming from the isolationist stance of Germans in Romania, and how diachronic Germanness developed into a sort of “feudal aristocracy” built on *Burg*- and group identity, social cohesion and a proclivity for wealth accumulation, ethnocentric purism, a traditional, conservative worldview, and a strong emphasis on the intrinsic value of work.

**Ionucu Pop (Babeş-Bolyai University), *The Anti-ruralism of the Sibiu Literary Circle. I. Negoïtescu and the “Pășunism” in Romanian Modernist Literature***

The members of the Sibiu Literary Circle coined and disseminated the rather abusive term “pășunism” (from the Romanian word “pășune”, meaning “pasture”) in order to combat the confusion between ethnic, ethical and aesthetic. In the spirit of Eugen Lovinescu’s literary ideology, this was considered by the Literary Circle as an urgent mission in the context of Romanian literature in the 1940s. Originally intended to ironize (neo)“sămănătorist” or “fascist-sămănătorist” literature, the term “pășunism”, given the thematic aspect which it implies, gained a lax usage. Therefore, rural literature and folklore-inspired literature among others fit in the satirical term’s category. The aim of the following paper is to investigate the origins and manifestations of the anti-ruralist tendencies of the Sibiu Literary Circle in its earlier days, starting from, but not limited to the writings of I. Negoïtescu.

**Costi Rogozanu, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, *The Socialist Realist Structure of Marin Preda’s Morometii***

Taking into account the two Romanian modernities that alternated, and clashed throughout the twentieth century – the capitalist, and the communist, respectively –, with their different public assessment, the paper analyzes realist patterns emerging in the post-1945 Romanian narrative. These patterns did not only concern new characters and topics, but also the shaping of a new, mass-scale, intensively cultured reader. To the same extent, the respective age saw the replacement of traditional bourgeois narrative voices with rural and proletarian viewpoints (in a marked shift from the simply rural or proletarian characters). I will explore

this new ideology of the narrative voice, and its indebtedness to the socialist realist paradigm, in Marin Preda's landmark novel *Moromeții*. The case analyzed proves how Romanian postwar fiction helped naturalize socialism, and how this very ideological backbone might strengthen the value of the novel in the long run.

**Nicoleta Șerban (The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile), *The Communist Reinvention of the Countryside as Resurrection of Modernity: The Rural Systematization Project (1988-1989)***

In 1988, the communist regime urged the rural systematization project, which involved the demolition of half of the Romanian villages, about 7-8 thousand. The resulting population was to be moved to "rural blocks", which ensured a lifestyle situated between rural and urban. 558 agro-industrial centers were to be built, they were meant to ensure the livelihood of these people. Of course, the regime promoted this project as a *modernization*, an efficiency of production and a recovery of land for agriculture. In reality, the totalitarian regime wanted more rigorous control over the population, over the grain resource, and a social and ethnic uniformity. The project, as conceived by Ceausescu, was far from reality: by its brutality, it would have destroyed a rural world and its identity, it meant the demolition of an entire patrimony, as well as the forced relocation of a population. This would have meant a huge impact. Fortunately, the regime fell on time, and the phantasmagoric project was abandoned.

**Adriana Stan, Sextil Pușcariu Institute of Linguistics and Literary History, *Non-Bourgeois Modernities. The Early Twentieth Century Realist Novel in East-Central European Literatures***

The paper provides a comparative assessment of the rise of the realist novel in early twentieth century literatures of East-Central Europe (Romanian, Hungarian, Polish, and Slovak respectively), by negotiating hybrid forms of modernity in predominantly agrarian societies, and in (semi)peripheral literatures which encountered forms of the Western bourgeois capitalism by ways of the transnationalization of the realist paradigm. The literary cases analyzed instantiate the canonical centrality of realist novels mostly dealing with rural life in such "unevenly developed" cultures, but also their recourse to mixed realist registers in which economic awareness of a still dysfunctional social set-up combined with a substantial approach of peasantry, which tended to forego the class conflict and the mechanical determinism that were usually featured in Western European realism.

**Claudiu Turcuș (Sextil Pușcariu Institute of Linguistics and Literary History), *The Countries of the Countryside. Imagining Post-Peasantry in East-Central Europe after 1989***

The paper's main focus is the fictional depictions of post-peasantry that confront the post-1989 instrumentalization of the countryside as a space of backwardness, populated by

hostile/menacing attitudes towards European values or integration. Consequently, the paper discusses a series of novels and East-Central European feature-films on the topic of post-peasantry (authored by Radka Denemarková, Jáchym Topol, Marta Petreu, Agnieszka Holland, Radu Muntean, Tomáš Vorel etc.) that problematize the fact that the image of post-1989 peasantry depends, par-excellence, on a cultural memory, which is deeply ideologically conditioned.

**Ana Țăranu (Babeş-Bolyai University), *Folk Art in The Avant-Garde. On Russian Primitivism and Its Reworking of Rurality***

Thoroughly committed to the displacement of academic naturalism and the uprooting of Western aesthetic hegemony, the prewar Russian avant-gardes strove to formulate a nationally autonomous artistic lexicon. Nowhere is this effort more obvious than in the works of Primitivism, which expressed its anti-Eurocentric stance through what Tomas Winter terms “a fascination with folk art”. Artists like Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova engaged in reworkings of folkloric art forms, envisioning “national art” as deeply tributary to rurality, both in terms of themes and imagery. By relocating the previously neglected forms of “low” art (*lubki*, Orthodox icons) at the center of a newly formulated East-centric canon, the primitivists ultimately aimed to amend the historiographical reflexes of Western art by turning it Eastwards. In order to examine the context and aesthetic premises of this project, my paper attempts a reading of Primitivism through its manifestoes, ultimately locating it within the broader modernist revisitation of rurality.

**Snejana Ung (West University of Timișoara), *The Countryside and the World: A Few Remarks on the Representation of Village in Mircea Nedelciu, Adriana Babeți, and Mircea Mihăieș's Femeia în roșu***

This essay aims to analyze ruralism as a possible kernel of transnationalism by focusing on the representation of village in Mircea Nedelciu, Adriana Babeți and Mircea Mihăieș's *Femeia în roșu* [The Woman in Red]. A close reading of the novel will shed light on the intricacies of a border village, namely Lunga, a settlement which, during communism, was situated at the Romanian border with Yugoslavia. While the double positionality of the border village zooms in on how inter-national contacts are negotiated during the 1980s, the inter-imperial legacy foregrounds the impact of shifting cores on a peripheral settlement. Hence, starting from an expansive representation of the village in this novel and drawing on recent studies on spatial theory and rural modernism, this essay will subsequently show that not only is the peripheral countryside constantly caught up in a transnational network but its position allows for different other transnational routes to take shape.