

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The peasant and the nation plot: a distant reading of the Romanian rural novel from the first half of the twentieth century

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## Abstract

Our article 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 nation. In order to evaluate the imagological scope and ideological implications engendered by this so-called ‘people-nation myth’, we focus on the Romanian culture, whom we consider fully representative for the Eastern European context. More exactly, our 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 the coalescence between the peasantry and the nation. By analysing the co-occurrences in these novels between words belonging to the vocabularies of nation and rurality, we aim at showing that – contrary to traditional historiographic consensus – nation building has less to do with language or ethnicity, and much more to do with social emancipation.

## Introduction

An Orthodox priest from early twentieth-century Transylvania<sup>1</sup> – a region seen, throughout history, as the centre of both ‘pure’ Hungarianness (Case, 2009) and Romanianness (Călinescu, 1988: 841–4) – speaks Hungarian when pleading with a judge to obtain a harsher punishment for a peasant who had challenged his authority in the village he is ‘shepherding’. The Hungarian judge concedes to his request, as he is flattered by the priest’s gesture, considering that the latter often behaved like an irredentist Romanian and stubbornly refused to address the authorities in the language of his ‘rulers’. The Romanian teacher from the same village, a self-declared irredentist nationalist, refuses to teach in the official language, Hungarian. However, fearing the possible consequences of a criminal complaint (which he wrote himself against the very judge who had been manipulated by the priest), the teacher ends up backing a Hungarian candidate’s nomination for the lower house to the detriment of the Romanian candidate. He even campaigns for him quite enthusiastically and provides the Hungarian politician the votes that ensure his victory. The teacher’s son, a self-professed Romantic poet, does not even manage to complete his secondary education, and, discontent with every job he takes, he channels his energy into supporting the ‘cause’ of the Romanian peasants, who are supposedly being persecuted by the Hungarians. No matter how often he is told that the peasants ‘across the mountains’ from the Romanian Kingdom are treated like slaves, with the boyars<sup>2</sup> of the same ethnicity exploiting them in a harsher manner than the foreign administration in Transylvania ever could, the young man’s nationalistic enthusiasm is ever stronger. Thus, the Romanian peasants become a pretext for strictly political or personal agenda. They never manifest or articulate any interest in

the ‘national cause’. At most, those who own many properties – and, therefore, have the right to vote – make their choice according to the priest’s or the teacher’s advice. The rhetoric of Romanianness takes shape in the name of the peasants but in their absence.

All of the examples above are taken from the novel *Ion* (Rebreanu, 1965), written by Liviu Rebreanu starting in 1913 and published in November 1920, that is, two years after the formation of Greater Romania.<sup>3</sup> It was proclaimed the first modern Romanian novel immediately after being published and it became not just a symbol of Romanian creativity having reached a new milestone after its initial stage (validated through the myth of the ‘national poet’, Mihai Eminescu – Tudurachi, 2018), but the essential symbol of a comprehensive national identity (Simuț, 2010).<sup>4</sup> Such was the general agreement on this symbolic status that the volume’s first translation into French was titled *Ion, le roumain* (Rebreanu, 1945).<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, to argue for national militancy in a novel that treats the exaltation of national consciousness with blatant irony<sup>6</sup> means to conduct such an *against the grain* reading that it lands entirely outside the text. This reading of rurality through the lens of national spirit in the most important interwar Romanian novel – as popular and long-lasting as it is lacking in textual proof – constitutes the main motivation of the investigation we are proposing in our article. The misreadings noted earlier are so pronounced that we believe we need to conduct a suspicious rereading of the entire rural-themed novel production of Romania from its beginnings until 1947.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, we want to find out: (1) how extensive was, in fact, the process of fictional depiction of the peasantry as representative of ‘authentic’ Romanianness?; (2) to what extent does the Romanian novel challenge the national avatars of the peasantry?; and (3) what are the new ideological definitions of the peasantry, engendered by literature in relation to the central political discourse of the time?

## Context

This kind of rereading is justified by the magnitude of the phenomenon by which the peasantry is being conflated with the people-nation in the Romanian cultural space.

On the one hand, the Romanian case is an accurate reflection of the ‘agrarian myth’, globally promoted by the various types of rural-nationalist populisms of the 1890s, as well as the 1920s and 1930s:

Possessing its more immediate historical, epistemological and political roots in the conservative reaction to the rationalist discourse of the Enlightenment, the agrarian myth argues for the centrality of the rural/urban divide, and reaffirms the enduring cultural and economic importance of an innate ‘peasant-ness’ not just to rural but also to national identity and existence. This view informed European nationalism in the nineteenth century, the ‘old’ populisms and nationalisms which emerged during the 1890s, the 1920s and the 1930s in Europe, the United States, Latin America and Asia . . . Notwithstanding the variety in contextually-specific forms . . . what is striking about the discourse of the agrarian myth is its epistemological uniformity across time and space. In all these places and at all these periods, therefore, the structure and components of the agrarian myth are basically the same. Its discourse-for proclaims the desirability – if not the actual presence – of an arcadian existence close to and in accord with Nature, an idyllic/harmonious village community in which small-scale economic activity undertaken by peasant family farms generates the elements of rural tradition constitutive of national identity. (Brass, 2000: 312)

Predictably, this myth was especially productive in the Central and Eastern Europe due to the largely rural character of this region (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969; Held, 1996; Wawrzeniuk, 2008; Radu and Schmitt, 2017). As shown in the *History of the Literary Cultures of*

East-Central Europe, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Polish intellectuals going by the name of *ludowcy* (from *lud*, meaning ‘people’) promoted a unique brand of ideology, ‘*chłopomania*’ (from *chłop*, meaning ‘peasant’), depicting the peasantry as the most valuable, healthy, and representative class of the Polish nation. The movement has influenced massively the Ukrainians’ struggle for national emancipation (as the secret societies – called *hromadas* – embraced their own version of peasantmania) and presented similar features with the phenomenon of ‘Heimatliteratur’ (the worship of the rural homeland in German-speaking communities), with the Estonian ‘*maakultuur*’ (promoted by Jaan Tõnisson and Villem Reiman), or with the Slovakian ‘school of lyric prose’, which sought to revive the national folklore (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, 2004: 53–5). Moreover, rural populism gains traction after the First World War, when national reawakening is invigorated after the massive territorial reconfigurations of East-Central European countries. Particularly telling is the case of Hungary, which by the end of the 1920s saw a large number of writers adhere to the populist ideal of ‘searching for the mainsprings of peasant society. There, if anywhere, lay the potential nation in its vigour – elusive, recondite’ (Duczyńska, 1963: 20).

In the 1930s, the Hungarian populist movement became even more emphatic, calling out – through the voice of the influential writer Dezső Szabó – ‘the idea of a peasant revolution connected to the idea of a new, second acquisition of the Hungarian Fatherland’ (Kovács, 2019: 73). In the same vein, the widespread agrarianism of the interwar period sought to restructure society through the establishment of a national peasant state in Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, aiming to offer a third way for societal modernisation, in opposition to both liberalism and socialism (Eellend, 2008). It comes as no surprise, then, that in East-Central Europe the writers considered the great national innovators of their respective cultural modernities published rural novels, while the critical discourse sought to highlight how the peasant protagonists were the quintessential representatives of their nation. Thus, correspondents to the Romanian Liviu Rebreanu and the nationalisation of his novel through critical reception can be found in the Polish Nobel prize winner Władysław Reymont, the author of the tetralogy *Chłopi* (*Peasants*, 1902–08); the Hungarian Zsigmond Móricz, who published in 1910 the highly acclaimed novel *Sárarany* (translated only in 2014 into English as *Gold in the Mud: A Hungarian Peasant Novel*); the Slovak Milo Urban, with his *Živý bič* (*The Living Whip*, 1927), or Elin Pelin, a forerunner of the Bulgarian literary canon with *Geratsite* (*The Gerak Family*, 1911).

On the other hand, the particulars of the Romanian perspective on rurality are also relevant, since they reveal the extent to which ‘the peasant question’ underpins the myth of the ‘peasant-nation’ in the Romanian historical provinces. Thus, the Romanians from Transylvania, who were under Austrian-Hungarian rule until 1918 and had limited political and civil rights, belonged to the peasant class by an overwhelming margin – 80 per cent of the population (Livezeanu, 1995). Similar proportions apply to the peasants from the Principalities of Moldova and Wallachia, united under the name of Romania since 1859, while their living conditions were similar to those in Third World colonised countries (Chirot, 1976); this was also proven by the bloody 1907 Peasant Uprising, ‘the most violent and destructive episode in Romanian history ever to occur in peacetime’ (Marin, 2018: 5), when – after several days in which the peasants attacked the boyars’ manors and offices under the slogan ‘we want land’ – the brutal intervention of the army caused around eleven thousand victims. Despite multiple reforms and countless political initiatives, the precarious situation did not change substantially after the First World War, so that ‘four-fifths’ of the support gained by the Romanian fascist movement of the 1930s – The League of the Archangel Michael, founded by Corneliu Zelea Codreanu – ‘was composed of the peasantry’ (Brass, 2000: 34).

This deplorable situation – socially, economically, and politically – of the majority of the population from a country or a region inhabited predominantly by Romanians who struggled to become a nation determined the phenomenon of overcompensation through the rhetoric of the ‘peasant-nation’. As Alex Drace-Francis demonstrates in his comprehensive

and well-documented study, which traces ‘the creation of the figure of the peasant as one of the cornerstones of modern Romanian identity’ (Drace-Francis, 2013: 14) from its pre-history until the middle of the nineteenth century, the Romanian term for peasant – *țăran* – itself is steeped in national connotations. Before the Revolution of 1848 (the so-called ‘Springtime of Nations’), legislative, political, economic, journalistic, and literary discourses from the Romanian principalities employed heavily the words *plugar* (ploughman) and *sătean* (villager) in order to designate the peasant. *Țăran* (derived from *țară*, meaning ‘land’ or ‘country’) gains popularity after Romania commences its ‘nation-building’ processes and imagines itself as *țara țăranilor* (the country of the peasants).

There are numerous symptomatic examples of these processes; we will list a few, authored by the most important Romanian cultural personalities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: in 1868, the founder of local cultural criticism and a very influential ideologue and politician of those years, Titu Maiorescu, stresses the fact that in Romania the peasant constitutes ‘the only genuine class’ (Maiorescu, 2010); in the 1890s and 1910s, Nicolae Iorga, the most renowned and widely translated Romanian historian of all times, equates the authentic national spirit with the idealised archetypal village (Iorga, 1979); in the 1910s and 1920s, the highly influential literary critic Garabet Ibrăileanu, a supporter of ‘Poporanism’ (from *popor*, meaning ‘people’), the Romanian version of Russian Norodnicism,<sup>8</sup> postulates the modernised, independent, smallholder peasantry as the embodiment of the uncorrupted national spirit (Ibrăileanu, 1925); in the interwar era, Lucian Blaga, one of the few canonical poets of Romanian modernism, asserts in his 1937 discourse of induction as a member of the Romanian Academy that ‘living in the village means living in a cosmic horizon and in the consciousness of a destiny emanating from eternity’ (Blaga, 1972: 35); in the same period, George Călinescu ‘transylvanises’ and ‘ruralises’ (Terian, 2009: 142) the entire local cultural production in order to support the ‘ethnocentric project’ of his *History of Romanian Literature*. But perhaps the most suitable example to help us understand the weight and the incisiveness of the peasant-nation myth in the interwar Romanian culture is provided by Liviu Rebreanu himself. As we have already mentioned, his debut novel, *Ion*, treats the nationalist discourse with irony, while his 1932 *Răscoala* [*The Uprising*] (about the 1907 Uprising) explicitly develops the idea that the exploitation of the Romanian peasantry has nothing to do with a supposed ethnic cause. Nonetheless, in 1940, upon being welcomed into the Romanian Academy, Rebreanu abides by the contemporaneous horizon of expectation and gives a speech teeming with nationalist clichés, *Lauda țăranului român* [*In Praise of the Romanian Peasant*], in which the peasantry is described as ‘the source of pure and eternal Romanianness’ (Rebreanu, 1940: 3).

## Methodology

We begin our inquiry by looking at the rural novel, that is, the literary subgenre which is supposed to constitute a perfect reflection of the tight connection between the people (made of the peasantry) and the nation. Accustomed to the Romanian cultural space through translations and by imitating the successful Western formulas (especially the French ones), the novel became the star of the cultural debates taking place at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth century (Wächter, 2020). This was especially due to its perceived ability to realistically present the great problems of its age, among which national identity had become the most stringent and noticeable. Indeed, the novel was called to fulfil the role that should have been played, in any given society, by sociological, anthropological, or crowd psychology studies – all of which were still in an incipient stage of popularisation in the Romanian provinces at the time (Rostás, 2011; Koszor Codrea, 2019). Although it appeared much later and had a much lower incidence (Borza, 2019) than was to be expected considering the political, social, and cultural context outlined above, the Romanian rural novel was meant to be the privileged subgenre able

to capture the ways in which an East-Central European culture internalised the imaginary of the ‘people-nation’.

This is precisely why we were interested in the incidence of terms expressing the idea of the nation in the discourse of and about the peasantry in these novels. The selection of the sample (namely, what makes a novel *rural*) was guided by the most inclusive conceptual delimitations. Building on the influential theoretical studies that focus on defining the rural novel (Vernois, 1966; Williams, 1973; Cavallero, 1977; Parkinson, 1984; Freitag, 2013), we adhere to the prevailing interpretation that this subgenre is characterised by: protagonists who are closely connected to the rural environment (peasants, shepherds, anglers, primary school teachers, priests); a preponderantly rural setting (hence, we except the rustic novels, whose plots develop exclusively in spatial enclaves such as manor houses that have little to do with the peasant life); themes that are intimately linked to the peasants’ existence (poverty, hard work, exploitation, the relationship between the individual and the traditional community, migration of work force, etc.).

Thus, our methodology borrows from some of the most recent proposals in the field of ‘digital humanities’, using distant reading (Moretti, 2007; Moretti, 2013) or, more exactly, close reading with computers (Eve, 2019)<sup>9</sup> as a method of accessing and collecting data about the novels we are considering in our analysis. These analyses are based primarily on Franco Moretti’s formulations about the utility of distant reading and on the premises put forward by Matthew L. Jockers when implementing macroanalysis on novel corpora, as well as on alternative solutions such as topic modelling.<sup>10</sup> Without negating that these are crucial contributions, our study has been influenced by more recent research, which brings further nuance – sometimes even polemically – to the principles observed by the aforementioned scholars and the ways in which they understand the relationship between the new method of reading and the tradition of literary historiography. Therefore, our study tries to build on the conceptual and methodological results in the most recent volume by Katherine Bode. Bode accuses the Morettian model of an ahistorical tendency and proposes the notion of data-rich literary history instead of distant reading, in the attempt to plead for a change in the perception of the text by the authors of computational analyses: from a fixed object to a historical, dynamic object.<sup>11</sup> The data we have collected and analysed are as well part of what we consider to be the context of our analysis (Kirilloff, 2022), a data-rich literary history of the Romanian rural novel.

The corpus represents 87 per cent of the entire production of rural novels from the first half of the twentieth century, some sixty-one novels. The selection process was based on three instruments, namely the *Chronological Dictionary of the Romanian Novel from Its Origins to 1989* (Istrate et al., 2004), which holds an exhaustive record of the novels published in Romania until 1989 and provides information about the subgenre and the plot of each novel, and the archives of *Astra Data Mining. Digital Museum of the Romanian Novel: 1900–1932 and 1933–1947* (Baghiu et al., 2020–1). In terms of thematic modelling, we focused on keywords related to the idea of the nation – *națiune* (nation), *patriotism* (patriotism), *patrie* (homeland), *popor* (people), *neam* (people),<sup>12</sup> *român* (Romanian) – in relation to terms defining rurality, such as *țăran* (peasant), *sat* (village), etc. The processing of the corpus and, subsequently, of the data was assisted by TXM (Heiden, Magué and Pincemin, 2010), a lexicometry and textual statistics tool employed for the analysis of large textual corpora. Using the tool’s co-occurrence feature on the top fifty content words appearing before and after our keywords in any given text, we extracted data on the frequency and lexical distance, which we then converted into a dataset. Then, for data visualisation, we used Gephi, a software package that renders in network form the properties informed by the relation between keywords and accompanying words (that is, lexical distance) measured in ‘weighted degree’. The higher the number, the farther the accompanying word from the keyword; conversely, the smaller the number, the more frequent the use of a given word in proximity to the keyword. To create the thematic clusters, we then applied a modularity statistic, which assesses the number of distinct groupings within a network and separates them according to the strength of the relationship between words, creating lexical ‘communities’ (Cherven, 2015: 189).

## Outcome

The most visible and intriguing result of our distant analysis was the dispersal of the keywords. Thus, we were able to outline two divergent subcorpora: (1) the subcorpus comprising novels that are characterised by the total absence of nation-related terms (there are eighteen such novels, about 30 per cent of the entire corpus); (2) the subcorpus comprising novels that cumulate an overwhelming proportion of the keywords under consideration. In the latter, the topics we analysed have different degrees of dominance. For instance, 97 per cent of all occurrences of the word *patrie* (homeland) – with variations like *patriotism* – can be found in eight novels; 85 per cent of all occurrences of the word *român* (Romanian) – with its variations – appear in eleven novels; 73 per cent of all occurrences of the word *național* (national) – with its variations – can be found in six novels; 71 per cent of all occurrences of the word *neam* (people) appear in eleven novels; 64 per cent of all occurrences of the word *popor* (people) can be found in twelve novels. It must be said that the first two topics (*patrie*, *român*) generate clusters that are more stable from a semantic point of view (in terms of defining the nation), while the other three (*național*, *neam*, *popor*), having inferior percentages, present different degrees of polysemantic contamination, through which they reduce their nationalist function. Adding up the five categories, we were able to identify what we call the *nuclear novels* of the national discourse, that is, the main novels that agglutinate the vocabulary of the nation: *Strein în țara lui* [*A Stranger in His Own Country*] (N. Rădulescu-Niger, 1900), *Măria-sa, Ogorul* [*His Highness, the Land*] (N. Rădulescu-Niger, 1907), *Orfanii neamului* [*The People and Its Orphans*] (N. Rădulescu-Niger, 1913), *Ion* (Liviu Rebreanu, 1920), *Domnul deputat* [*Mister Member of Parliament*] (V. Demetrius, 1921), *Răscoala* [*The Uprising*], vols I–II (Liviu Rebreanu, 1932), *Apostol* [*Apostle*] (Cezar Petrescu, 1933), 1907, vols I–III (Cezar Petrescu, 1937–43), *Momâia* [*The Scarecrow*] (Tiberiu Crudu, 1947).

## A nationless peasantry

The first set comprises those novels from which the vocabulary of the nation is absent. There are no keywords pertaining to the national/patriotic discourse in these volumes, which separate the rural themes from more specific, nation-building narratives. Such a separation between the peasants and the symbolic space of the country they are supposed to represent is all the more intriguing, seeing as the novels that orchestrate it do not form an ideologically or stylistically homogenous corpus. Furthermore, the analysis of the occurrences and co-occurrences of those terms that are typical of the rural novel – such as *țăran* (peasant) and *sat* (village) – demonstrates the diversity of the ideological and social agendas of these narratives: they vary from perspectives typical of social realism (including instances of socialist-inspired social critique) to satirical approaches emblematic of anti-ruralist modernist orientations.<sup>13</sup>

At this juncture, a few examples are in order. One of the most symptomatic cases is the novel *Voica* (1924) authored by Henriette Yvonne Stahl (1900–84), a writer who was close to the Romanian avant-garde circles. Despite its affinities with modernist psychologism (through the use of inner monologue, hyperreflexivity, or fragmented narrative), the novel does not develop a satirical perspective on the peasantry; on the contrary, it continues the realist model established by Liviu Rebreanu in *Ion*, which implies remaining sceptical towards any populist form of idealisation. *Voica* is a naturalist reworking of a war narrative set in the countryside and complete with erotic subplots. However, Stahl writes from the perspective of a cosmopolitan character. Rurality and its social problems are seen first and foremost through the eyes of a young woman – a member of high society – who takes refuge in a house owned by peasants. She presents them as both primitive in terms of social, interpersonal practices and behaviours, and representative of a ‘purity of heart’ which she can only admire from afar, as an *outsider*: ‘There is a wonderful similarity between the soul of the peasants and the setting of the village: the same aspect – wilderness,

primitivity, and peace, the purity of the heart – and, in order to understand them, one must enter into their life’ (Stahl, 1924: 63).<sup>14</sup> Here, the author seems to claim, the logic of rural life can be comprehended only from within. According to Stahl’s account, the isolation of the peasant from the nation is implicit, since the problems of rurality are in themselves incompatible with those of the nation. The rural world that is depicted here is an exotic one, captured as it unfolds by its own rules, while the narrative gaze is exploratory, mapping in an ‘authentic’ manner an experience that exists only outside everyday life.

Another novel that tackles the social issues of the peasantry, albeit differently, is *Oameni la pândă* [People on the Lookout] (1946) by Liviu Bratoloveanu (1912–83), perhaps the most interesting case in the entire corpus. A committed admirer of Liviu Rebreanu, our initial pretext in the present article, and, at the same time, a supporter of the interwar socialist movement, Bratoloveanu wrote an original plot that can be interpreted as an inverted *Ion*. The narrative focuses on the trajectory of a few families from a Romanian village after the 1918 Union, highlighting the exchange of material and symbolic capital between them; while the novel starts from a seemingly common point with Rebreanu’s, it develops in the opposite direction. The social theme of the impossibility of overcoming one’s material circumstances also appears in Bratoloveanu’s novel, but without any discourse on the nation: the protagonist, despite becoming a wealthy, self-made character, cannot aspire to superior symbolic status, because, once he transcends his precarious condition, the other villagers see him as an oppressor exploiting the poor. The problems of the village imagined by Bratoloveanu never expand onto the broader stage of the nation: the social conflicts are so acute that the major crisis faced by the peasantry is survival itself, in other words the formation of a class identity, rather than the imperative to embody an abstract metaphor like the people-nation.

Similarly, there is another series of novels in which the rural narratives are isolated from the country and the national(ist) discourse: Victor Ion Popa’s *Velerim și Veler Doamne* (1933), Horia Miculescu’s *Hanul ‘La Uriesești’* [The Inn ‘La Uriesești’] (1939), Eusebiu Camilar’s *Cordun* (1942), *Blestemul Solobodei* [The Curse of Sloboda] (1943), and *Turmele* [The Flocks] (1946). Although they address social issues, these rural fictions exclusively describe a stateless world, governed by archaic, customary, and, therefore, so-called natural or primitive laws, which become congruent with the practices of modernity only when modernisation is synonymous with moral corruption.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is the category of the modernist satires: *Fete și văduve* [Girls and Widows] (1931), authored by Damian Stănoiu (1893–1956), *Nuntă cu bucluc* [Trouble at the Wedding] (1936), *O daravelă de proces* [A Bumpy Trial] (1941), *Oameni degeaba* [Useless People] (1944), written by Ion Iovescu (1912–77). All these novels depict a rural world impossible to integrate and civilise, a world dominated by promiscuity and degradation. According to such satirical perspectives, the peasant cannot represent the nation because of their unsurmountable primitivity. This also explains the prevalence of perverted peasant-characters: promiscuous widows, drunks, sluggards, revellers, thieves, and murderers. Oftentimes, these novelists make use of colourful, regional language, individualised through popular songs or sayings, and meant to sound picturesque. However, the purpose of these folklore-inspired insertions is not so much ethnographic as it is preponderantly parodic: presented as a fallen world, prone to criminality and petty personal tragedies, rurality cannot function according to the laws of the modern state but isolates itself through its very ‘primitive’ nature.

All these novels of the nationless peasantry isolate the village from the state, either by subsuming it to the logic of *ab illo tempore* or that of marginality. The village is depicted as a closed-off community being watched as a spectacle, with admiration and sometimes even empathy, or, on the contrary, by exacerbating its ‘guilty’, reprehensible elements. Isolated by nature or self-isolated through its actions, the rural in these rural novels never conveys anything explicitly nationalist about the nation whose territory it occupies.

### **A peasantless nation**

Conversely, the vocabulary of the nation produces a verbose discourse in the second representative corpus obtained through our quantitative analysis. However, once again, the functionality of the peasant-nation relationship is no less intriguing and no less diverse than in the case of rural novels that are completely free of the nationalist discourse.

In fact, a single novel in the entire corpus under discussion actually showcases the cliché of the peasant as an embodiment of pure Romanianness. This is Galia Henegar's *Alexa a' boldaşului* [*Alexa, the Shopkeeper's Kin*], written in 1943, published in 1944, and set in Transylvania. The explicitly propagandistic character of the novel (which includes many pages recording non-fictional accounts of historical events) is explained by the fact that between 1940 and 1944 a significant part of Transylvania was annexed by The Kingdom of Hungary, with help from Nazi Germany.

On the contrary, starting from the quantitative analysis of what we previously called the 'nuclear novels' of the national question, the first important observation that needs to be made has to do with the marked distance – or even the rupture – between the nation and the peasantry. As shown by the networks below, which explore all fifty words employed by the authors before and after the terms *român/românesc* (Romanian), *naţiune/naţional* (nation/national), *patrie/patriotism* (homeland/patriotism), *neam* (people), *popor* (people), an association between the peasant or the village and the idea of the nation represents a rare occurrence. Phrases such as 'people-nation', 'peasant nation', 'Romanian peasantry', 'country/homeland of the peasants' – which are prevalent in the Romanian public/political discourse in the first half of the twentieth century – are almost completely absent. In the linguistic imaginary of those rural novels that make massive use of the vocabulary of the nation, the peasantry has nothing to do with Romanianness, let alone intermingle with it.

By analysing the co-occurrences of nation-related and rural-related terms, respectively, in this second corpus, we were able to discern two possible major ideological explanations for the distance between the nation and the peasantry. On the one hand, there is an ideological and socio-cultural theme common to the novels written or published in the first decade of the twentieth century by authors belonging to the 'Sămănătorist' movement, the most influential Romanian populist orientation (nationalist and peasant-centred) before the First World War.<sup>15</sup> For instance, in *Strein în țara lui* . . . [*A Stranger in his Own Country*] (1900), in *Măria sa, Ogorul* [*His Highness, the Land*] (1907) or in *Orfanii neamului* [*The People and Its Orphans*] (1913), N. Rădulescu-Niger (1861–1944), one of the most prolific and popular writers of the time, the peasants cannot be 'good' patriots or Romanians, because they are not sufficiently educated. Rădulescu-Niger's demonstrative narratives are premised on the idea that not only is national identity not inherent, but it cannot even be passed down by means of a communal/familial memory, due to corruption caused by foreign interests; in particular, these are ascribed to the Jewish land administrators (who overtook from the 'local' boyars when the latter relocated to urban centres or abroad). Consequently, these rural novels have as their protagonists the primary school teachers (and, sometimes, Orthodox priests) who are also patriots and the only agents able to 'enlighten' and 'emancipate' the exploited peasants. From this perspective, the emancipation of the peasantry does not imply the abolition of serfdom (that is, their dependent status in relation to the boyars); rather, the peasants need to foster their own love for the nation and their hatred towards foreigners. It is not by chance that, in Rădulescu-Niger's novels, *roman* [Romanian] appears most often alongside terms such as *școală* (school), *suferință* (suffering), *întrerupere* (interruption), *cucerire* (conquest); *patrie* (homeland) is tied to *șovin* (chauvinistic); and *naţiune/naţional* (nation/national) constantly collocates with *vis* (dream) or *redeșteptare* (reawakening) (see Figure 1).

The same antisemitic or chauvinistic clichés are also closely connected with the patriotic activity of the rural primary school teacher or with the providential intervention of the tutelary



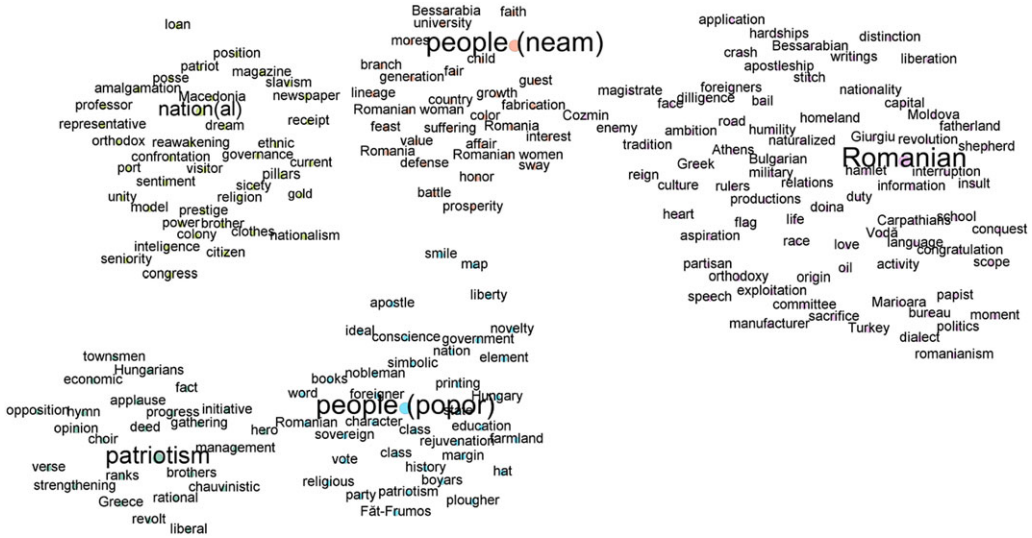


Figure 1. Co-occurrences of nation-related words ranked by lexical distance in N. Rădulescu-Niger’s novels.

deity of the peasants in other novels written by ‘Sămănătorist’ authors such as V. Pop’s *Domnișoara Viorica* [Miss Viorica] (1905) or Mihail Gașpar’s *Blăstăm de mamă* [A Mother’s Curse] (1909). Likewise, in these novels, the peasants – obtuse, easily manipulated, preponderantly led by their instincts – are not yet worthy of being Romanians, and their only hope of ascending to the status of national symbols is patriotic or religious education.

Such perspectives on reclaiming of the peasantry as a national value through the institutional expansion of the activism conducted by rural educators seemingly confirm Eugen Weber’s theory from *Peasants into Frenchmen* (Weber, 1976).<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the Romanian case cannot possibly correspond with the French one, not just because of its different historical-political situation, but especially due to its entirely distinct configuration of the idea of modernity: the precarity of peasant existence in Romania is so acute that institutional education represents a minor palliative measure, not a markedly revolutionary one. The Romanian case goes hand in hand with a plethora of critical surveys that – especially starting with 1990s – challenge the alleged efficacy of the school in spreading the ideology of the nation, because, even though ‘cultural nationalism precedes the formation of the national state, it does not follow that the former should be seen as the most influential or decisive element in the achievement of the latter’ (Llobera, 1994: 198). Such findings also represent the main outcome of research projects that aspire at global representativity, which end up acknowledging that, ‘although always presented as one of the key elements of modernisation and the first significant step on the road from the warfare to the welfare state, what a detailed examination of the classroom reality reveals is the limits of nation building’ (Brockliss and Sheldon, 2012: 9).

In fact, many Romanian rural novels from the 1930s and 1940s revisit and explicitly contest the ‘Sămănătorist’ myth of a providential role being played by the primary school teacher, as an ‘author of rural enlightenment’. For example, Tiberiu Crudu (1882–1952) writes in *Momâia* [The Scarecrow] (1947) an explicitly autobiographical story about the sometimes-insurmountable obstacles faced by teachers at the beginning of the twentieth century in their attempt to reform the traditional village and to educate the future loyal citizens of the nation. The novel includes entire fragments that cumulate the populist clichés related to the creation of the peasant-nation. It is no coincidence that *Momâia* represents one of the few novels in our corpus that suggest a close link between *național/națiune* (national/nation) and *țărănime* (the peasantry), between *neam* (people) and *energie* (vitality), *țarie* (strength), *mișcare* (movement), or between *patrie*/







*Parliament*] (1921) or Florea Căruntu's *Crucile albe* [*The White Crosses*] (1936), the strong assertion of ethnic and racial exceptionalism is directly proportional to the programmatic representation of the peasantry's dire living conditions and their status as 'slaves'. This category also includes those novels, which thematise the relationship between the Romanian village and the First World War, another traumatic event when peasant patriotism was the subject of political propaganda. For example, Dumitru Almaş's *Acolo, în Filioara* [*There, in Filioara*] (1943) highlights the quick dissolution of the peasants' patriotic allegiance to the so-called 'war of national reunion' once villages become predominantly sites of the plague of the corruption and the abuse that were being perpetrated by the authorities against women, children, and old men, or, alternatively, a space in which previous promises of land allotment were being cynically broken.

## Conclusions

The most unexpected result of our distant reading was not necessarily the fact that the Romanian rural novels from the first half of the twentieth century provide alternative or even opposing perspectives to the central ideological discourse about the peasant-nation coalescence. When it is something other than pure propaganda, literature stands out precisely through its subversive character towards the 'principal' of ideology, politics, and official history (Nemoianu, 1989). However, it is completely surprising to observe in these novels the magnitude of the critical detachment from the myth of the 'people-nation', on the one hand, and on the other, the various strategies for the explicit disavowal of the nationalist cliché according to which the peasant embodies authentic Romanianness. As proven by the case studies above, the peasant-nation divide is a common factor in novelistic orientations and formulas that are otherwise incompatible: the demonstrative utopianism of writers committed to populist-ruralist cultural movements (N. Rădulescu-Niger, V. Pop, Mihail Gaşpar, Tiberiu Crudu); the satirical or, on the contrary, realist-objective approaches of authors aspiring to be part of the modernist orientations of their time (Damian Stănoiu, Ion Iovescu, Henriette Yvonne Stahl); the critical realism of the supporters of socialism (Liviu Bratoloveanu, V. Demetrius, Florea Căruntu); the maximalist social tableaux that facilitate the intersection of the most conservative-traditionalist worldviews with the most progressive-modernist ones (the canonical writer Liviu Rebreanu and the very popular and versatile novelist Cezar Petrescu), etc.

Such a paradoxical amalgamation, which also prefigures the coincidence of ideological opposites (between traditionalist, socialist, and liberal modernist perspectives), is based on the idea that the peasantry is too rudimentary, too isolated, or too exploited to represent the nation. More to the point: the peasant is too poor to aspire to be a national symbol or even to be concerned with obtaining such a symbolic status. This is the reality that transpires from most of the novels in our corpus, regardless – as we have already highlighted – of how diverse they might be in terms of narrative formulas or their authors' ideological agendas. In this sense, we argue for the relevance of the conclusions drawn by the only study (as far as we know), which reads the story of Liviu Rebreanu's *Ion* through the lens of political economy (Polanyi, 2001) rather than a national framework:

The peasant Ion's love of the land is divorced from any concept of meaning, culture or spiritual value. He is wedded to soil, this uniform element that reveals the reductive, instrumentalized, rationalized commodity to which land has been reduced in the modern global economy of which Transylvania is here a part. How can a nation that means something of intrinsic worth to its members be erected on such an attenuated foundation, Rebreanu seems to ask. If we look to his protagonist, Ion Glanetaşu, for an answer to that question, we find the author's evident pessimism confirmed: not once during the entire course of the novel does this prototypical Romanian peasant suggest that being a part of the Romanian nation means a damned thing to him (Lewiss, 2009: 283).

What is being showcased in the Romanian rural novel is an aspect that was eluded by the local elites or was even impossible to accept for them before the Second World War, but which was confirmed by one of the most important studies on the nation and nationalism at the end of the twentieth century: nation-building has less to do with language, ethnicity, tradition, or shared histories, and much more to do with social emancipation (Hobsbawm, 1990; Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991). No matter how much institutional pressure or how much rhetorical energy was deployed by the promoters of the ‘people-nation’ myth, assimilating an ‘imagined community’ also involves a material dimension related to the social class, which is even more accentuated than suggested by Benedict Anderson’s seminal study on nation-building (Anderson, 1991). This is precisely why the Romanian rural novels published in the first half of the twentieth century prove that a semi-peripheral country like Romania constitutes a nation only inasmuch as it can exclude its largest and most abiding<sup>17</sup> social class – the peasantry.

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## Notes

1 A former voivodeship in the Kingdom of Hungary, a principality under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire, or part of the Austrian Empire and of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Transylvania was integrated – at the end of the First World War – into Romania (alongside other two regions mainly inhabited by Romanians: Bessarabia and Bukovina).

2 Members of the Romanian social elite, the boyars were the largest population of landowners in the country. Beginning with the middle of the nineteenth century, the ranks and legal privileges of the boyars were abolished, and their noble status became symbolic. In turn, they retained great economic and political influence through the Conservative Party that represented their interests until the end of the First World War I. See Keith Hitchins’s evaluation that the Romanian Constitution of 1866 (that ‘abolished all privileges of the class and, by extension, eliminated the boier ranks’) was ‘hardly revolutionary’: ‘the large landowning class (*moşierime*) remained a powerful force in the countryside, and it retained a key place in the country’s economy as a whole’ (Hitchins, 2014: 133).

3 Greater Romania refers to the Romanian state between the two World Wars, when it reached its peak territorial development. Just by annexing Transylvania in 1918, Romania gained around five million inhabitants (of which over 50 per cent were Romanians, around 30 per cent Hungarians and 10 per cent Saxons). Consequently, the newborn state had to integrate at least another two million peasants (over 80 per cent of the Romanians from Transylvania worked in agriculture) into the over seven million people (of which over 80 per cent of the population were peasants) existing before the First World War. For more details, see the section ‘The Demographics of National Expansion’ (Livezeanu, 1995: 8–11).

4 It was no coincidence that, according to a critic from the interwar period, ‘Rebreanu’s value – in its exact appreciation – generated a consensus that had not even been granted to [Mihai] Eminescu [the “national poet”, seen as a representative of the solemn-metaphysical dimension of the Romanian national identity] or [Ion Luca] Caragiale [the most important Romanian playwright of all times, the prime representative of the national satirical, ironic, and self-deprecating spirit] during their lives. From the highest state dignity to the lowliest gendarmerie chief, from the church leaders to the rural stand-in teacher, from the army general and the university professor to the most insignificant newspaperman, everybody knows two or three of Rebreanu’s novels, if not his entire work’ (Aderca, 1935).

5 What is more, until recently, even those reassessments of the novel which resonate with the most contemporary methodologies have reconfirmed the myth of Ion-the-Romanian: supposedly, Rebreanu’s purpose was to inject ‘Transylvanian Romanian men with a substantial dose of peasant virility at the very moment in the region’s history in which the peasantry is being reinterpreted as the repository of Romanianness’ (Pârvolescu and Boatcă, 2021: 594).

6 For an extensive inventory of Rebreanu’s ironic devices against the nationalist rhetoric, see Biró (2009).

7 We chose this temporal milestone because, once the communist regime was established in Romania (1948) and the process of collectivisation initiated, the phenomenon of conflation between national identity and the peasantry underwent a complete change. Although it did not entirely disappear and was consistently revitalised after 1970, this phenomenon had radically different boundaries than those from the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century – see Kligman and Verdery (2011); Radu and Budeancă (2016).

8 On the similarities, but mostly distinctions, between the Romanian ‘Poporanism’ and the Russian Norodnicism, see Alexandrescu (1987).

9 In his 2019 study, Martin Paul Eve argues for a ‘microscopic’ perspective on literary objects that owes to distant reading tools, one that he calls a ‘close reading with computers’: ‘The processes of iteration, repetition, and quantitative analysis that

are made possible by computational methods have an analogy not just in the telescope but also in another optical instrument: the microscope' (4). This new approach to computational formalism builds on previously acquired methodologies in the field of Digital Humanities, but aims to 'reintegrate the digital findings with the text' (129).

10 See Block (2006): 'Topic modeling is based on the idea that individual documents are made up of one or more topics. It uses emerging technologies in computer science to automatically cluster topically similar documents by determining the groups of words that tend to co-occur in them. Most importantly, topic modeling creates topical categories without a priori subject definitions. This may be the hardest concept to understand about topic modeling: unlike traditional classification systems where texts are fit into preexisting schema (such as Library of Congress subject headings), topic modeling determines the comprehensive list of subjects through its analysis of the word occurrences throughout a corpus of texts. The content of the documents – not a human indexer – determines the topics collectively found in those documents.'

11 See Bode (2018), who advocates for a new perspective on Digital Humanities, literary history, and the nature of computational gathered data: 'Although it is often understood as such, literary history is not solely an analytical and critical enterprise; it has always been bound up in – enabled and produced by – the knowledge infrastructure that it creates and employs. Equally, although digital humanities is frequently presented as a methodological and infrastructural endeavour, it is just as much a historical and analytical one' (13).

12 In Romanian, 'neam' and 'popor' are semantically interchangeable. However, 'neam' was very popular in relation to the discourse on the nation: 'The closest term to nation was *neam*, a word of Hungarian origin originally meaning kind or *genus*, with many of the same connotations as nation. Like nation, *neam* could refer to groups of anything, not just people, furthermore, it had connotations of a consanguineous group, and occasionally, of non-Christian groups' (Drace-Francis, 2006: 82). Additionally, both terms tend to be used in phrases that have nothing to do with our topics. For these reasons, we have chosen to treat these words separately and exclude phrases that are semantically distinct from our topical inquiry.

13 All throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Romanian modernist orientations were defined by the conviction that the 'excessive ruralism' of the Romanian culture was the main obstacle to its synchronisation with the West. For Eugen Lovinescu, the most important ideologue of Romanian modernism, rurality meant exclusively primitivity, instinctiveness, mysticism, and psychological instability, hence regress in relation to society's alleged natural evolution – see Dumitru (2019).

14 Unless otherwise stated, translations are provided by the authors.

15 The name of this sociocultural current – nationalist, localist, ruralist, conservative, antibourgeois, anticapitalist, antisocialist, and chauvinistic (which is also cultural and literary, but only secondarily so) – was inspired by the cultural magazine *Sămănătorul* [*The Sower*], published between 1901 and 1910, whose main ideologue was the historian Nicolae Iorga.

16 On the idea that the nation is a product of modernity, dependent on the successful organisation 'of human groups into large, centrally educated, culturally homogenous units', see also Gellner (1983).

17 In the 1930s, Romania's rural population constitutes over 78 per cent of the total population; it only decreases to less than 50 per cent at the end of the 1980s.

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