NATURE AND MYTH IN THE WORK OF CALISTRAT HOGAŞ

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Abstract: *The present work has been carried out based on the desire to return to Calistrat Hogaş's work, an authentic one, of a unique style in the Romanian literature, rediscovering, thus, a writer risking to fall in undeserved obscurity. Therefore, the present study aims at revealing the ways Calistrat Hogaş used in managing to turn memorialistic literature into great art. The fine sense of beauty and artistic virtuosity in the field of figurative speech, on the one hand, and the eternal, majestic thrill of nature and its projection in the universal culture, up to the great myths of humanity, on the other hand, joined to this purpose. This work underlines, once again, the fact that Hogaş's work depicts a world open to anyone wanting to know it, he himself being the guide, in a real space and in mythical times.*

Keywords: *hyperbole, myth, nature.*

Calistrat Hogaş is known to have promoted the memorialistic literature, perhaps in the most vivid way, by writing down all his travel experiences, identifying himself with each part of the explored nature. Being fond of hiking, he writes down, at each step and in detail, everything he hears and sees, intensely enjoying the satisfaction of discovering "virgin" nature. He is, according to Vladimir Streinu, the writer that remained in everybody's conscious as the author of the two travel volumes that he wrote, as he himself confessed, "far from the fine literature", "aiming at shoving the travel literature from the objective, didactic and almost geographic path it has followed so far to the subjective path, that this kind of literature should take, as far as I know" (Hogaş, C., 1912, *Preface*).

Hogaş's work can be considered as a very hard tried one, with a sinuous path along time, determined by circumstances and events that led to delaying the editorial debut of the writer. Initially, his travel memories and impressions appeared only in serial-story columns, in various publications of that time (e.g., *Arhiva (The Archive)*, in Iaşi), where the writer worked as a contributor and, only posthumously, they were published in a single volume. Unfortunately, although the writer wished and tried to unite them in a single volume, during his lifetime, he didn't succeeded, first, because of the unacceptable printing mistakes, then, because the World War broke out and of a fire to the book deposit of the magazine *Viaţa românească (The Romanian Life)*.

As if all these were not enough in order to prove the tumultuous evolution of Hogaş's work, critical considerations on it appeared very soon, sometimes expressing contradictory opinions of critics (G. Călinescu, Vladimir Streinu, Octav Botez, Şerban Cioculescu, Tudor Vianu etc.). However, all these critical interpretations are supported by a profound, objective analysis and outline the idea of a mixture of languages and styles (classic, romantic, modern, popular) that confer uniqueness to Hogaş's literary style.

In the book written in the memory of her father, *Daddy. Memories of the life of Calistrat Hogaş*, Sidonia Hogaş, the youngest daughter of the writer born in Tecuci, confirms his passion for mountain travels. Underlining the importance of these travels,

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Hogaş himself considers that "any trip made by other means than on foot, is [...] a trip made on somebody else's foot; being carried by a train couch, the wheels of a carriage or the feet of a horse is travelling sitting and seeing only what it is allowed by these handy means, not what the traveller would want" (Hogaş, C., 1988: 7).

Since he has always been interested in and attracted by nature, with its sublimity and grandeur, Hogaş defined himself as the "incorrigible lover of nature's great landscapes" (*ibidem:* 92), the image of the writer as a traveller remaining memorable, from all the perspectives he was known for (writer, teacher, traveller): "I don't know how others will be like; as for me, I know this, that I lose track of time when I abandon myself to my wild instincts, that is when, invaded by the unbridled love of solitude, I disappear from people and I merge, drawn by it, with the unknown nature, like a leaf driven by the fickleness of the wind" (*ibidem*: 162).

At a first literary analysis, the theme of Hogaş's work appears to be the travel, and the central literary motif of his work is the traveller, delicate observer of nature. But, analyzing more profoundly Hogaş's work, it is observed that its main theme is nature and the travel becomes a reason, for the writer-traveller, to discover everything sublime and magnificent in nature.

Octav Botez emphasized the indissoluble connection between the Moldavian writer and the nature, that "he feels through every pore" and whose charm possesses him, outlining, at the same time, the complex talents of the memorialist, those of a painter, of a poet of nature, but also of a story-teller, "of creator of vivid situations and types" (Botez, O., 1915: 72-74).

Indeed, Calistrat Hogaş lives intensely the Moldavia's nature "with its majestic aspects", managing, in an objective way, with an infinite artistic talent, to achieve in the pages of his travel chronicle true paintings depicting, in well-defined colours, both "Neamţ mountains with their spectacular centuries-old forests, with their wild densities", and "sunrises, sunsets, afternoons, storms and moonlit nights" (*ibidem*). To this regard, the following passage is eloquent: "We were now on the heights of Hălăuca. In the distance, the huge sun rising was burning in the fire waves of the dawn, and the sun, like a distinct huge eyebrow of gold, was rising from behind the dark wavy line of the aerial mountains. The shadows were piling in the sunset still in twilight and they jumped quickly in the chaos of other worlds. From the valleys, sleeping mist began to rise, awoken by the first sunrays of the morning; here and there, from the depths, grey columns of smoke were heading towards the sky, melting their heads in the clear bright horizon" (*ibidem*: 56-57).

Besides this objective vision, the writer's romantic vision on nature is also remarkable, "pouring melancholy and dreams into the soul" (*ibidem*: 17). Constantin Ciopraga emphasized the fact that Hogaş presents the forest both "in a pictorial way, as an expression of vitality", but also "ethically, like an image of total freedom" (*Ciopraga, C.*, 1970: 458-461): "the forests have souls and, into their soul, the love of a mother for all the creatures sheltering in their protective shadow" (*ibidem*: 199). In the following passage, for example, the forest is truly alive:

> The grey standing fir-trees, with smooth bare trunks, rose still and straight up to dizzying heights; and from the vault penetrated by the black-green shadow, made up of their branches embraced above all, drops of blue sky sifted in the stillness of the forest, like through a fine sieve; and fickle flakes of golden light were falling over me from everywhere. [...]. The little black redstarts, red-green collared, slipped quietly in silent and fast spirals up the tree trunks; black and red squirrels, with bushy long tails, calculated, from a tall branch, their jump to

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> the tree nearby; woodpeckers with steel beaks knocked trees and the large forest sounded hollow... Over the high crown of fir-trees the wind slipped like an invisible river and, hitting their sharp leaves, sent far into the distance plaintive long sounds of organ. From all parts, solemn silence, from all over holy silence...(Hogaş, C., *op.cit.*: 168).

Emphasizing the lyrical force of Hogaş's work, Octav Botez finds suitable to compare his talent, in terms of travel literature, with that of Mihail Sadoveanu, in another kind of literature: "if in the short stories of Sadoveanu, the writer gives life to the nature of Moldavia, with its mild aspects, silver waters, looping on large plains, with wheat fields swaying in the sun, in Hogaş's pages, the same nature with its majestic aspects is depicted [...]" (Botez, O., *op.cit.*: 72-74).

Referring to the same lyrical talent of Hogaş, Garabet Ibrăileanu stated that the nature lover "put in his pages only light and life, only sun and joy – he put all the mountain's mysteries and the blue Moldavian sky, the murmuring springs [...]" (*Opera lui C. Hogaş (C. Hogaş's Work)*, in *Viaţa românească (The Romanian Life)*, Iaşi, no.2, 1922), and Liviu Rebreanu is convinced that Hogaş is the only Romanian writer who had the gift to include, in his work, "nature and all its life [...] the great life where sky, man, insect, flower, rock have the same life, in a divine harmony" (*Însemnări şi dări de seamă privind Societatea Scriitorilor Români (Notes and Reports on The Romanian Writers Union)*, 1922: 63-64).

According to Hogaş's vision, nature is sublime regardless of its state. Be it calm, or undertaking apocalyptic storms, it offers to the traveller an original nondirected show. For example, a storm in the mountains, with dreadful roars, becomes a real flood. Thus, "nature unleashed in all its fullness reminds, in Hogaş's works, of the Homeric epic grandeur", as George Ivaşcu stated, in the magazine *Însemnări ieşene (Notes from Iaşi)* (II, vol. IV, no. 17-18, 15 sept. 1937):

> And, within the four borders of the infinity, the blind space was flickering alternating brief intervals of darkness and blue light under the quick glimpses of the heavenly fire... The air and the sky were boiling under the staggering thunders, and the frightened land vibrated helpless, down to its deepest foundations, under the burst of thunders deafening into the darkness, like huge bombs of flames, and crumbling, as if blowing into dust, the brave crests of cliffs of the bravest mountains... (*ibidem*: 225-226).

Trying to temporally frame Hogaş's work into literature, Eugen Lovinescu, in volume IV of *Istoria literaturii române contemporane (The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature)*, thinks that it "floats over the race and time...", dating "at least three thousands years ago, since the age of Homeric epic poems" or even "from the age of great Indian epic". The same literary critic characterizes the writer traveller "on mountain roads" as "a bard of the world, when the sun was a real divinity and its rise a universal transfiguration, when all nature's phenomena were concrete expressions of a heavenly force, when human and divine were mingled, when everything was a myth […]" (Lovinescu, E., *op.cit.*).

Calistrat Hogaş's work abounds in figures of speech and artistic images whose chaining leads to real representations of "living" nature and a multitude of sensations (colour, sound, smell), revealing the traveller's direct contact with the matter. He was said to be "a stylist of a rare virtuosity", with a very rich vocabulary, which "he masters with rare certainty" (O. Botez, *op cit*.: 81). It is to be noted, however, that the main artistic device used by Hogaş is hyperbola. The reader permanently feels the

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writer's tendency to exaggerate the characteristics of things, places, natural phenomena, but also of people he meets, as well as the situations and feelings he lives.

Hogaş's writings are peppered with mythological references, entitling the reader, but also the literary criticism, to compare this work with the great epics of universal literature. For example, the storm, that actually evokes the clash of titans at the beginning of the world, "the wolf hunger", making the traveller "jump" from "heterogeneous polenta" or the mushrooms scattered on the huge towel, resembling to "a flock of tired sheep, resting, on the yellowish and dusty road [...]" (Hogaş, C., *op.cit.*: 174; 193) create stylistic registers and effects similar to those of epics. That is why, it was spoken about Hogaş's "homerism", that, according to G. Călinescu, is of romantic essence, such as that of Victor Hugo, "with the same exaggerations, fantastic realisms and monstrosities" (*Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent (The History of Romanian Literature from its origins till present day)*, 1941: 593-596).

In the same study, Călinescu notices the same legend aura surrounding Hogaş's work, in which we can easily identify the mixture of real and fantastic, as well as the constant reference to mythology.

Surely, whoever reads Hogaş shares Dumitru Micu's opinion, referring to the image of a fabulous world achieved "through exaggeration", by "amplifying the proportions of reality", a world that is somewhere between reality and fairytale (*Calistrat Hogaş*, in *Istoria literaturii române (The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature)*, vol.2 [1900-1918], 1965: 4-18). For example, the travellers find that the two dogs coming towards them are two ferocious beasts, while the shepherd chasing them away seems to have in his hand a "heavy endless long mace" (*ibidem*: 231). The similarities between the characters Hogaş meets in his travels and the fantastic characters from fairytales or from Romanian mythology are obvious. Thus, Ovidiu Papadima, in number 8 of the magazine *Revista Fundaţiilor Regale (Royal Foundations Magazine)*, published in August, 1942, makes a comparison between the world depicted by Hogaş, in his work, and the fairytale world, noticing, rightfully, the resemblance of the writer's travel companions, on the way to Tazlău, Huţan and Sgribincea, with Păsări-Lăţi-Lungilă, from *Povestea lui Harap-Alb (The Story of Harap-Alb)*, by Creangă. The comparison of Ion Rusu with the hero Sfarmă-Piatră or of the hideous old woman from the forest with Muma Pădurii is also right.

Besides this mythical vision, the writer's references to the Romanian folklore are also obvious, entitling the literary criticism to talk about Hogaş's animism, seen by Ovidiu Papadima as a sign of the Romanian peasant's respect to the tiniest element of the world, in which he does not see a piece of divinity, but simply a soul" (*ibidem*: 425).

Vladimir Streinu, in number 3 of *Revista Fundaţiilor Regale (Royal Foundations Magazine)*, published in March, 1941, emphasized the importance of the education and professional training of Hogaş, revealed by the fact that, in addition to the aspect of common man, "with the soul of the primitive man", and the aspect of intellectual, able to analyze the architectural style of the monasteries he visits, the writer appears, in his own work, as a "literate with knowledge of mythology", the "humanist reminiscence" seeming to occupy the forefront of his literature.

About his writing style, Hogaş himself confessed, in *Prefaţa (Preface)* for 1912-edition of his book *Pe drumuri de munte (On Mountain Roads)*: "[...] I have never done and I have no intention to ever write easy literature for high society, I rendered people and things just as they are in their great wilderness", considering himself, thus, uninterested by the expectations of a certain "subtle aesthete X" or of a "sensitive decadent Y".

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Keeping alive the attention of critics on the writings of Hogaş which are not voluminous but impressive, gives the impression of a work at least interesting, which, such as its author, seems not to find its peace. Considering that, during his lifetime, "his work has not found its place", in 1922, Liviu Rebreanu proposes, as a sign of appreciation, the award of the first literary prize of the Romanian Writers Union, being, at the same time, "*pleased to have made an act of piety towards a great and still to be valued writer of our country."* (Rebreanu, L., *op.cit.*: 64)

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