Aspects of the Sacred Reflected in the Novel *Moromeţii* by Marin Preda

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La critique a salué, à juste titre , la force de la création typologique, la vision entièrement nouvelle sur le paysan et le monde, les qualités stylistiques et la composition du roman, tout cela a consolidé pendant le temps sa position ainsi qu' aujourd'hui personne ne doute que le roman de Marin Preda est non seulement chef-d'œuvre de l'auteur , mais aussi l'un des écrits les plus importants de la prose roumaine, de tous les temps. Moromeţii est le livre d'un «moment» dans le développement historique particulier du village roumain, moment qui se trouve non loin du début de la Seconde Guerre mondiale.
Preda plaide par la littérature humaine pour un soulagement de l'écriture humaine, croyant que toute culture nationale doit créer des mythes, des concepts de référence qui soient un lien entre les personnes et le passage du temps.

Mots clés: instant, mythe, le sacré, la famille, le temps

In the view of Marin Preda, any national culture should create some myths, some terms of reference to offer the possibility to link the centuries that fly over people's heads.

Marin Preda advocates through literature for the human relief of writing; he is a moralist passionate by the show of life, by the adventure of being.

Marin Preda's work is that of an analyst, but by means of objective prose. The author of the novel *Moromeţii* proves to be a total writer; he not only narrates the events, but also their thoughts, makes some moral observations, within the moral necessity of the facts. Marin Preda develops dialogues or reproduces the characters' inner speech (interior monologue) with a perfect knowledge of the spoken side of the language (the oral aspect of the style is prevalent). The so-called free indirect speech achieves the correspondence between inner and outer expression of the characters' thoughts[1].

Marin Preda's debut with the novellas and stories in the volume *Întâlnirea din pământuri* [*The Meeting between the Lands*] (1949) had drawn attention to a writer of great power and subtlety. The peasant world in this volume appeared in the landscape of characters and behaviours, which was uncommon in the Romanian prose up to that moment that covered the same world of the village. Even the short story with the same title as the volume, whose protagonist is Dugu, a teenager in love with Drina, for whom he faces a rival in a place called Pământuri, illustrates

[1] Adrian Marino, *Hermeneutica ideii de literatură* [Hermeneutics of the Idea of Literature], Cluj Napoca, Dacia Publishing House, 1987.

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this new literary perspective on the rural universe, as the writer is especially interested in the spiritual feeling, the moral dimension of existence, the landscapes of a strong, dominant emotional state. In the character Paţanghel from another prose in this volume is the outline and the essence of the protagonist in the author's masterpiece *Morometii*.

When the novel *Morometii* was published in 1954, in the magazine "Viaţa românească", and in 1955, in the volume, the critics hailed, rightly, a masterpiece of postwar prose. The force of typological creation, the entirely new view on the peasant and his world, the stylistic and composition qualities of the novel strengthened its position over time, so that today no one doubts that Marin Preda's novel is not only the masterpiece of the author, but also one of the most important writings in the entire Romanian prose, ever.

Morometii is the book of a special "moment" in the historical development of the Romanian village, a moment in time not far from the beginning of World War II, in the world of the novel, starring the protagonist Ilie Moromete, with his entire family: his story is that of a peasant who does not appear to have the instinct, is not at all fascinated or captivated by the voice of the land. On the contrary, the hero of the novel sees the land only as the foundation of stability (economic, family) beyond which lie the true pleasures of man, of humanity: to understand, to communicate, to contemplate the spectacle of the world, without embellishing artificially, but also without marring what the eyes and the spirit can discover in it.

Around him, in the village as well as in his own family, there are enough signs of mindsets that do not resemble those of people. His neighbour, Bălosu is animated only by greed and the insistence with which he hopes that drought and money difficulties would make the protagonist sell some of the land he and his family own, as well as the image of that same neighbour in the story about travelling together in the mountains to sell the crop for better prices than at home is precisely what the protagonist refuses to believe and exactly what he does not imagine that he could turn against himself his own sons who, instigated by Guica's ploys, would run away to Bucharest towards the end of the novel, taking the family's horses and sheep. Thus, the novel is not lacking in manifestations of cupidity, a monstrous distortion of humanity, but they are not in the spotlight, only terms of contrast meant to emphasize a way of thinking and living, that of the "independent" Ilie Moromete.

What defends Marin Preda's hero against such distortions is humour, his ability to rise above immediate conditionalities. He does not live better than others, but he has a detachment and an understanding that help him resist the difficulties of everyday life. The famous scene of collecting "the land tax" is a veritable recital of irony, humour and playfulness presented by Ilie Moromete, embarrassing Jupuitul right from the start, so the protagonist controls the situation, step by step, psychologically dominating the other. What delights Marin Preda's hero and, in equal measure, the readers is not money saving itself, which is rather small, but this art of the character to drive the game, to somehow be "the director" of the

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situation. There are also numerous details (moments, lines, reactions) that give colour, a special flavour of humour and irony to the pages dominated by the presence of Ilie Moromete and his particular in them: how the characters react when the dog, Duţulache, takes all the cheese from the family dinner "Give him water!"; the famous dialogues with Bălosu, rich dissimulation and irony effects, the scene of the meal the family has in the fields. Marin Preda has the art of a writer able to see and to hear the characters manifesting themselves in scenes in almost theatrical relief[2], which gives the presence of the characters, their gestures, reactions and their dialogue a great and charming vivacity, whose secret could not be matched by any of his contemporaries and successors.

Perhaps rather than seeing Ilie Moromete as a "peasant philosopher"[3] (Eugen Simion), we should emphasize in him the tendencies of a moralist peasant: because he cares about people and their relationships, attitudes, their view of the world and how they relate to others. The story of the mountain travel is an perfect illustration of protagonist's interest in what distinguishes human behaviour in a given situation; wave of excitement read in the eyes the woman from the mountain means more for Ilie Moromete than the money he could have earned by selling, like Bălosu, later and for a better price. In the small cruelties of the protagonist towards his sons, and especially Paraschiv, have an explanation in his reluctance to face greed and inhuman aggression in his immediate vicinity. But the beauty and complexity of the character derive not only from his attempt to avoid the distortions to humanity, they do not belong only to the moral side of the literary universe of the novel.

Repeatedly, Ilie Moromete appears as an observer, as a character who likes to contemplate his peasant world that others fail to see in a similar light, like a spectacle, a great "stage" where there are and the good and the wicked, the stupid and the clever and so on.

His spot on the bench in front of the house is a place of observation. His dialogues with Bălosu, in which the main character gives the impression that he cannot hear what the other one is saying, represent his way of balancing out his greedy and unfeeling neighbour, while a scene such as that in Iocan's meadow is a veritable synthesis of humour, irony and peasant democracy of dialogue, of the confrontation of viewpoints and voices (Ţugurlan, Cocoşilă and the others). The novel also includes scenes that offer a certain lyrical atmosphere (the harvest, the school festivity, traditional moments), even if they are not the main focus of the novelist's art. Finally, beyond the substantiality of the typological creation of the novelist through his protagonist and the image of family tensions in the house of Morometii, and especially the father-sons, other narrative lines and planes from the pages of the book (the fate of Boţoghină, the sick peasant who is forced to sell his land, the rebellion of the wronged Tugurlan, "forgotten" in the allotment, the

[2] *Caiete critice* [Critical Notebooks], No 3-4, 1987.

[3] Eugen Simion, *Scriitori români de azi* [Romanian Writers Today], Vol. I. (2nd Edition, Revised and Enlarged), Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing House, 1978.

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disobedience and the rebellion of Polina, Bălosu's daughter) amplify and enrich with other shades the image of the peasant world of *Moromeţii*. The compositional balance and the stylistic strength of the novel also contribute to the highly artistic synthesis, achieved by the author in a work in which he uses processes related to the poetics of the modern novel, and especially the novel of psychological analysis[4] (interior monologue, for instance), processes which would not be suitable for the world of this novel manages to suggest the play of nuances of inner life and centring the entire behaviour of the protagonist on the conscience of the moral values whose defender he is in a world increasingly threatened by the distortions of humanity.

Fine connoisseur of psychology of the common people, the author discovered in their immense simplicity an unsuspected greatness, which discreetly covers the real human values: "the only thing that made me remain silent in fascination was the word uttered by people" (Marin Preda).

Under pressure from the innovations the village goes through, the creative man is defeated by the social man. "Moromeţii sit under a cosmic bell and the highways of history pass through their yard"[5] (Eugen Simion). The novel is placed under the sign of the sacred time, of history, which enters a world that was under the illusion it could live outside it, and this generates the drama of Moromete family. The action focuses around some narrative nuclei, true key scenes with symbolic value: the family dinner, the cutting of the acacia tree or the scene in the meadow of Iocan's smithy. During the dinner scene, Moromeţii gathered around a small round table, dominated by a father who is feared and obeyed, appear to be the image of old traditions. Their dinner is an echo over millennia of the ceremony of a noble family, which has preserved almost intact its structure, but not its mentality. Cutting and selling the acacia, an element of Moromeţean sacredness/timelessness, the first sign of decline of the eponymous family, of the economic and moral crisis which will start the drama of Moromet himself. But the true heart of the village is Iocan's meadow where, like in a recurring ritual, on Sundays or holidays, get together the most intelligent people in the village, Moromete, Cocoşilă and Nae's Dumitru, to read the newspaper and comment, ironically and with humour, on political issues, according to certain ancient rules, known only to them, in which the duel of intelligence sparkles spontaneously, giving them the illusion of freedom and dignity. Here, Moromete's spirituality and authority are acknowledged: "three issues actually emerge from this situation." The voice that leads in the book is the voice of Ilie Moromete: "the change of inner life in *Moromeţii* is marked especially by voices. The voice shows the humour, the character and the position of the

[4] Eugen Simion, *Sfidarea retoricii* [Defying Rhetoric], Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing House, 1985.

[5] Idem, *Scriitori români de azi* [Romanian Writers Today], Vol. I. (2nd Edition, Revised and Enlarged), Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing House, 1978.

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individual in the social hierarchy"[6] (Eugen Simion). Along with this compositional symbol, there are three key elements: the table, the porch and the harvest build a circular movement of destinies, giving the work an architectural symmetry. The harvest scene is representative; these chapters in which the deadly fatigue of labour is combined in different proportions with the joy of thriving, are not inferior to the similar pages in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. The writer begins his story from any point in its development. The characters are already formed, they go into action without any prior preparation and they act according to their nature. This method shows a taste for dramatic representation, Marin Preda's artistic vision is often theatrical, creating a strong sense of authenticity.

In the second volume, the book of "the loneliness of the old clan chief and the book of his death" (C. Ungureanu) Moromete retires from the scene, observes events, but can no longer control them. Now the main conflict opposes the old mentality of the peasant. The text is pure epic. Preda narrates slowly, focusing on detail, the gesture and the pantomime. The dialogue and the monologue are naturally assimilated in the narrative, in perfect coherence of the story, giving the text the virtues of the prose of analysis and creation. Realist writer, anticalliphile, like L. Rebreanu, M. Preda is careful to be accurate and precise in the story, correct and concise in style. What stands out particularly in his writing is the presence of free indirect style, alternating with direct style.

"*Morometii* is a novel about family and one of its main ideas (perhaps the most important) is that of fatherhood"[7] (Nicolae Manolescu).

Preda's admiration for Dostoevsky, Balzac, Hugo, Camus helped create a synthesis between typological vigour and a certain interpretation[8] of the relationships between the world and the idea, between mentalities and destinies, in order to talk about the issues, to invite the reader to reflect on the world, man, human values, human authenticity, danger of missing the existential issues and on the boundaries between the sacred and the human.

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[6] Eugen Simion, *Scriitori români de azi* [Romanian Writers Today], Vol. I. (2nd Edition, Revised and Enlarged), Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing House, 1978.

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