Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, **1**, 1 (2009) 145-163

The Possibility of Narratorial Irony in the Novel *Ion* by L. Rebreanu

Béla BÍRÓ

Sapientia University
Department of Humanities
bbela@planet.ro

Abstract. Liviu Rebreanu is one of the greatest Romanian writers. The theme of his novel *Ion* is the life of the Romanian community in Transylvania at different levels of the social structure. Traditional Romanian literary criticism considers this novel to be the foundation of Romanian nationalism on the whole. The paper will demonstrate, by multilevel narratological analysis, the idea that despite of those above, the writer does not himself represent nationalist thinking as his narrator employs very sophisticated methods for distancing himself from the nationalistic heroes of the novel. The narratological attitude suggests a fine irony against all kinds of nationalistic prejudices.

The analogies with the personal life of the author, the base of earlier analyses, lead to misunderstanding.

The study presents an interpretation of the novel that may help Romanian and Hungarian communities in the reciprocal understanding of the problems confronted.

Keywords: the problem of the narrator, fictional signals, the reader's contribution, the case of the epithet „nationalist," points of view, nationalism as annihilation of empathy, true empathy, the public man and the writer, empirical writer, abstract writer, fictitious narrator, a possible mise in abyme

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

The narrator of the novel *Ion* is a heterodiegetic authorial one.[1] It does not form part of the narrated world and represents the fictionalized ego of the author. This type of narrator usually narrates in all forms of the past tenses and in the third person, but quite often it makes use of the first person as well, in order to comment, evaluate and explain the actions and even the thoughts of the heroes.

However, the narrator of *Ion* starts telling the story in the present (in the first three subsections—numbered with Arabic numerals—of the first chapter), it is only in the fourth subsection that it turns to the simple perfect ("Ion trecu încet pârleazul de lângă grajd . . ." ["Ion slowly passed by the ladder near the stable . . ."]). But also this simple perfect rather fulfills (and will fulfill also in the following chapters) the function of a continuous present, open towards the future, about which neither the narrator seems to have more information than the heroes of the novel themselves. The (apparent) simultaneity of observation and narration creates the permanent impression that the narrator closely follows its heroes. Their gestures, words and thoughts are rendered from a position of strict temporal and spatial proximity. The distance is minimal, and it is exclusively determined by the basic requirements of the act of narration. The narrator does not distance itself from its heroes, not even from an ideological point of view. It does not want to be present in the story as a person (as an explicit "ego"), on the contrary, in a perfect agreement with the basic idea of the novel, in fact it represents itself in all the characters of the novel (not being totally identified, as we will see, with any of them).

This essential identity much complicates the narrative situation. Since, at a first analysis, it might seem that we have an authorial narrator, with many possibilities of making use of the various forms of the narrative discourse: the metanarrative-commenting, the explanatory, the evaluative, the abstract, the emotive, and even the modal one. The narrator seems to still be capable of returning into the past of history and of making firm anticipations, of changing, in accordance with the requirements of the narration, the focalization and the perspectives of diegesis. However, Rebreanu's narrator renounces these possibilities almost integrally (including also the corresponding devices), coming closer to a narrative version which is popular also today, namely, the one with an authorial heterodiegetic narrator, of neutral type. With a single significant difference: besides the "unlimited" external perception (external "omniscience"), the narrator also makes use of the "unlimited" internal perception (internal "omniscience"). However, also in this case, the narrator adapts to the level of knowledge and consciousness of the heroes. It never seems to know more about the

[1] In the present analysis I make use of the terminology initiated and improved by Genette (1990), Stanzel (1993) and Eco (2002), especially in their form systematized by Lintvelt (1989).

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

characters of the story, more than what they know about themselves, or more than what they know about one another.

In this way, the narrator refrains from directly making ideological appreciations about the words, actions or thoughts of his heroes. The advantages of this narrative modality manifest themselves especially when the expectations of the readers do not totally coincide with the author's intentions. Thus, the created narrative ambiguity has very important consequences at the level of reception, more precisely, in decoding the text and in the mental assimilation of fiction.

This objective, "labored" style (as it was characterized by traditional criticism) urges the reader himself/herself to make the coordination of the pieces of information at the various levels of the narrative text, coordination which the narrator refuses to make. The abstract reader—disguised as fictitious reader (that is, as the "dialogical" partner of the fictitious narrator, also placed into the world of the novel)—is constrained to complete the narrative text with the missing discourses, as a response to the urge launched by the narrative voice through the trasmitted information. However, the success of this operation presupposes the awareness and analysis of the objective relations between the fictitious signals transmitted by the abstract author on the one hand[2], and between the discourse of the narrator and that of the heroes, on the other hand. This is extremely complicated, as in the given narrative modality, the three "discourses" are melted to such an extent that they seem to be inseparable.

If the reader does not follow the narrative text with great attention, he/she might easily fall into the trap of diverse misinterpretations, no longer being capable of comprehending the true meanings involved in the words, gestures and even thoughts of the heroes.

Narratology makes a relatively clear difference between the abstract author (U. Eco's "model author") and the fictitious narrator (which in our case is itself authorial). The abstract narrator is the one which, on the one hand, creates the person of the narrator and the narrative situation, and, on the other hand, conducts from behind the narrator the process of unfolding of the narration. In the case of the authorial narrator, even the narrator is an alter ego of the author, though disposing of an autonomy to which many times even the abstract author has to surrender (not to mention the empirical one).

In the case of the novel *Ion,* the division of the novel into volumes, chapters and subsections can surely be assigned to the abstract author. Through this the abstract reader (corresponding to the abstract author on the side of reception) is transmitting the fictitious signals which help him/her disclose the deeper meaning. The fictitious signals can be transmitted, besides the so-called paratext (which in the case of *Ion* also includes—together with the title, preface and chronological

[2] In Umberto Eco's terminology, the "model author".

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

chart—the recommendation "Celor mulţi umili!" ["To the many humble ones!"], as well as the dating "March 1913—July 1920", placed to the end), also by the narratorial discourse.

As the competence of the narrator decreases, these fictional signals deriving from the "subconscious of the narrator" (a possible name of the abstract author) become more and more indirect, acquiring at the same time an increased importance. Given the fact that the model author proposed by Rebreanu deprives the narrator of a very important part of the narrative competences, which in the given model would be its due, in the narratorial text of *Ion* these signals cannot be but more or less indirect.

As there is no explicit ideological viewpoint, the exploration of the implicit ideological viewpoint—based on the fictitious signals transmitted through the temporal, spatial and ideological organization of the narratorial text—gains a more and more crucial importance.

The historical-philological method, predominant in the Romanian literary discourse for several decades, proves to be fatally misguiding in the case of Rebreanu's novel. Even to an incomparably greater extent than in the case of other Romanian realist novels. Due to the similarities (at first sight, startling indeed) between the author's and Titu's biographies, the readers and the critics have considered (usually tacitly) that Titu would be a kind of spokesman of the author. Starting from this hypothesis, the novel could be interpreted in a purely nationalistic manner, and from this point it assists in an "ideal" way the nationalistic education of the "young generations", the formation of the so-called "national consciousness". Today's Funars[3] are to a great extent the products of these nationalistic interpretations, in the Transylvanian nationalist political discourse the "influence" of the presupposed "unmediated authorial discourse" from *Ion* can be textually pointed out.

And all these despite the fact that in the case of *Ion* this interpretive practice does not seem to have much real support in the actual narratorial discourse. The epithets "nationalist", "great Romanian", "ardent Romanian" etc. are never defined by the narrator. We do not have direct indications to clearly decide the ideological overtones with which they are used. The more the narratorial discourse containing these appreciations is permanently contaminated by the elements specific of the characters' interior monologue, the more complicated the clarification of the overtones gets. Many times the two modalities of discourse merge, causing confusion. We cannot know for sure who the appreciations belong to: the narrator, the heroes, the reader or the public opinion? Many times the only thing we can be sure about is the fact that Rebreanu's model author itself is extremely careful so that we should not know anything for sure. At least from direct sources. The only

[3] Proeminent leader of the national-extremist Great-Romania Party.

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

modality to point out the overtone of these appreciations is offered, on the one hand, by the personality of the heroes who the epithets refer to, and on the other hand, by the minutely elaborated connexion of the interpersonal relations.

What we can also point out at first sight is that the mentioned epithets occur in the narratorial discourse only and exclusively in connection with heroes whose personality traits immediately put them in quotation marks.[4] In this way, the epithets always acquire an implicit ironical, sometimes even satirical overtone.

Which are the characters that are labeled by the narrator as being "nationalist" ones?

First of all the priest Belciug. Although his character is taken out of the negativist quotation marks at the end of the novel. At least apparently. (The final chapter, entitled *Sfârşitul* [*The End*]*,* constitutes a separate problem, which we will discuss at the end of the present analysis.) However, it is sure that in most part of the narration (even in its key moments) he is the most sombre character of the novel (even repugnant sometimes). Belciug's doubtful personality is also evidentiated by the fact that he is the source of most of the misery which comes upon the Herdelea family, and especially upon the most sympathetic character, schoolmaster Herdelea.

The first characterization of Belciug is made from Titu's perspective: "Popa îl lua cu trăsura ori de câte ori se ducea la Armadia sau la Bistriţa şi trăgeau câte un pui de chef*, ocărând* împreună pe unguri, căci Belciug era *mare naţionalist*, deşi nu prea arăta a fi, de frică să nu-şi piardă ajutorul de la stat, fără de care n-ar mai fi putut trăi în rândul oamenilor . . ." [5] ["The priest took him in his carriage whenever he went to Armadia or Bistriţa, and they were carousing a little, *slandering* the Hungarians together, as Belciug was a *big nationalist*, though he did not really show it for fear he might lose the support from the state, without which he could no longer have lived among the people"] (emphasis mine, B.B., 102). The quotation clearly reveals that nationalism is a sort of synonym of the anti-Hungarian sentiments, which manifest themselves also in the attitude towards the Hungarian language. In front of the judge "Preotul roşi şi rosti câteva vorbe pe ungureşte. Deşi ştia binişor ungureşte, avea oroare să vorbească mai ales în faţa autorităţilor, vrând astfel să dovedească tuturor că românul nu renunţă niciodată la drepturile lui" ["The priest was uttering a few words in Hungarian. Although he spoke Hungarian quite well, he had a dread of speaking especially in front of the authorities, by this he wanted to prove to everybody that a Romanian never renounced his rights"] (113).

[4] For a more detailed presentation of the plot of the novel, see Júlia Vallasek's paper in the present issue of Philologica.

[5] The quotations are taken from the 2006 edition of Rebreanu's *Ion*.

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

However, when he is led by his own interests or those of the church (in his case the two are identical) Belciug can be malevolent, even ruthless also with his Romanian fellows. He thrusts "his friend", Herdelea, to the bottom of despair with a fanatic satisfaction. He is rude also to the peasants who intersect his way. In his blind passion against Herdelea, Belciug is ready to send Ion to jail as well, after offending him in the church, in front of the whole village. These outbursts are enough to place also the value of his "nationalism" within ironical brackets. And to generate a shadow of lack of trust also at his "definitive" "transformation" at the end of the story.

The other character directly labeled as being an ardent Romanian is Grofşoru, the lawyer esteemed not only by the Romanian community, but also by his Hungarian colleagues. He too, similarly to Belciug, "chiar în vârtejul visurilor naţionale nu uita realitatea" ["even in the whirl of nationalist dreams he did not forget reality"]. At the same time he does not forget to use the occasions which may raise him in the eyes of his electors. On the day of the election a minor incident takes place, a peasant from among those who try to break the line of the gendarmes, is stabbed (accidentally, rather than in a premeditated way) by a zealous gendarme. Grofşoru immediately turns the event in favor of the electoral success, shouting theatrically: "–Cetăţeni, a scurs sânge nevinovat! Teroarea . . ." ["Citizens, innocent blood was spilt! Terror . . ."]. After the officer draws his attention to the fact that he is not permitted to make electoral propaganda, Grofşoru changes the record, but the melody does not change. Even the narrator feels obliged to draw attention to the manner in which this character usually manifests himself, by using the noun ciorovoială ('row'): "–Protestez împotriva acestei noi încălcări de lege!—strigă Grofşoru deschizând o nouă *ciorovoială* cu ofiţerul." ["I protest against this new violation of the law!—Grofşoru cried, starting a new *row* with the officer"] (emphasis mine, B. B.).

In general, Grofşoru's strategy is a well-thought and efficient one: through Herdelea he wants to win the votes of the Jews from Jidovița. The failure does not make him lose his temper at all, on the contrary, he continues to behave in a "strategic" way, helping Herdelea with respect to the following elections: "era într-adevăr hotărât să mulţumească pe Herdelea când i se va prilejui. Astfel câştiga un partizan şi în acelaşi timp se ridica în ochii întregului ţinut . . . Cum să nu se aleagă deputat acela care întinde o mână de ajutor chiar şi adversarului de ieri?" ["he was indeed determined to express his thanks to Herdelea when an opportunity offered. In this way he won a partisan and at the same time he rose in the eyes of the whole region . . . How should one who offered a helping hand even to his yesterday's enemy not be elected as a deputy?"] (271). He courts Herdelea :"–Am auzit că pătimeşti cu ungurii . . . Foarte trist . . . Foarte, foarte trist . . . Nu-ţi închipui cît te compătimesc!" ["I have heard that you are expiating with your Hungarians . . . Very sad . . . Very, very sad . . . You don't imagine how much I sympathize with

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

you!"] (271). However, a little later, under the influence of Herdelea's honest and naïve reactions, we find out what hides behind his compassion: "simți toată emoția acestui suflet muncit şi bun şi fu cuprins de *compătimire adevărată*." ["he felt all the emotion of this elaborated and good soul and was overwhelmed by *true compassion*"] (emphasis mine, B. B.). The epithet "true" reinforces the reader's suspicion (also based on other phraseological indices) that the previous manifestation was a theatrical "compassion" (272), though the character is a "pious soul" ["suflet milos"] indeed (283). The calculation seems to be reinforced also by nationalist sentimentalisms ("Ş-apoi, mai ales, suntem români, aşa-i?" ["Then, above all, we are Romanians, aren't we?"]). All these also question the uninterested character of his nationalist sentiments. Not at all by accident, the narrator also reveals his supreme dream, that of reaching "Camera de pe malurile Dunării". ["The chamber on the banks of the Danube"]. "Victor Grofşoru era om deştept şi şiret ca toți politicienii, între care râvnea să ajungă." ["Victor Grofşoru was a clever and cunning man as all the politicians, among whom he wished to reach"] (271). The idea occurs again in the toast held on the occasion of the consecration of the church (360). Otherwise, Grofşoru's honesty is also questioned by Mrs. Herdelea (220).

The schoolmistress also belongs to the group of characters who are not only labeled as nationalists, but who also declare to be as such: "Pricep eu ce ziceți—spune ea avocatului maghiar—, dar nu vreau să vorbesc ungureşte! Nu-mi place mie să mă strâmb trăncănind într-o limbă străină, când nici n-am nevoie! sfârşi dăscălița cu o superioritate zdrobitoare şi strângând din buze, parcă numai gândul c-ar putea vorbi ungureşte îi strepezeşte dinții" ["I understand what you say—she told the Hungarian lawyer—, but I don't want to speak Hungarian! I don't like struggling ridiculously to chatter in a foreign language, when I don't need to! the schoolmistress ended with a sweeping superiority, tightening her lips as if her teeth got chipped only to the thought of speaking Hungarian"] (312). However, she has prejudices against everybody. Doamna Herdelea "nu-şi ascundea disprețul [nici] față de proşti, cum zicea dânsa țăranilor [români]" [Mrs. Herdelea "did not hide her contempt [even] towards the dumb, as she called the [Romanian] peasants"] (180).

Otherwise, as far as national prejudices are concerned, the novel abounds in diverse examples: prejudices against the Jews ("ovrei", "jidani"), against the Gypsies ("cioroi"), against the Hungarians, the Saxons etc. As concerns the Hungarians and the Jews, the image is a little more nuanced, there occur also positive characters, which are considered as decent people both by the heroes of the novel and by the narrator. There can be found respectable personalities even among the gypsies . . .

However, the basic tone is contempt towards everything that is "alien". It is no wonder that Belciug, when he wants to deeply offend the schoolmistress, taking away their only table won at the previously organized auction, enters her home

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

with the help of an old gypsy. The schoolmistress, losing her temper, throws them out with a gesture that Belciug comments on by using the terminology of the common prejudices, saying: "m-a ocărât dăscălița țigănește" ["the schoolmistress slandered me filthily like a Gypsy"].

The fact that the members of the Romanian community do not condemn the nationalists—despite the fact that the peasants (Ion, Ana, George, Baciu, Florica) do not give evidence of being nationalists, and among the majority of the intellectuals the natural national sentiment does not lead to manifestations of intolerance—, is explained by the more and more nationalist policy of the Hungarian state. The men of the power, like the judge, who in the narrative text mostly occurs (of course, from the viewpoint of the heroes) as "the Hungarian", the inspector Horváth, who persecutes the children who simply do not have the possibility to learn Hungarian perfectly (not to mention the fact that in the given environment they might not even need to *perfectly* know the Hungarian language), the lawyer of the company, which the Herdeleas got indebted to, also present a degree of intolerance and arrogant pretention of national superiority, which inevitably stirs adverse reactions. However, in the manifestation of resentments there is a large diversity of reactions.

Besides Spătaru, who manifests his irredentism without any constraint (134), the main representative of nationalism based on resentments is the most complex and at the same time the most contradictory hero of the novel: Titu Herdelea. As far as he is concerned, the narrator does not label him directly as nationalist, still, Romanian nationalism is especially embodied through and in his character. The novel assigns to him phrases and attitudes which could not be considered "EU-compatible" (with a fashionable term nowadays) even in that age. Unfortunately, his considerations, many times *puerile,* were later taken seriously by the nationalists between the two World Wars and in Ceauşescu's era. And by many nationalists in our days as well.

Traveling by train towards Sibiu, Titu states: "Pretutindeni aceiaşi țărani, umili, voinici, răbdători: pe şosele albe, alături de care silitoare, pe câmpiile galbene, răscolite de brațele lor şi udate de sudoarea lor prin satele sărace, stoarse de vlagă. Unde era munca, erau numai ei. Pe urmă veneau gările mari, anticamerele oraşelor şi țăranii nu se mai zăreau. În schimb, apăreau surtucarii grăbiți, gălăgioşi, nerăbdători, vorbind poruncitor numai în grai străin.

–Noi muncim ca să benchetuiască ei! se gândea Titu înecat de o revoltă din ce în ce mai mare. Asta-i ilustrația nedreptății şi oropsirii noastre! . . . La Cluj schimbă trenul. De-abia izbuti să se cațere într-un vagon ticsit de oameni, să-şi aşeze geamantanul pe coridor. Atâta vorbă ungurească îi înnegrea sufletul. Se simțea de parcă s-ar fi oprit deodată într-o mocirlă." ["The same peasants everywhere, humble, brave, patient: on the white roads, along which they were working industriously in the yellow fields grubbed by their arms and watered by

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

their sweat in-between the poor, languid villages. Where there was work, one could see only them. Then the big railway stations, the anterooms of the towns followed, and the peasants could no longer be seen. But then the hurrying, noisy and impatient townspeople appeared, speaking, in a commanding tone, only in a foreign language.

–We work so that they can have fun! Titu thought, choked with an ever bigger revolt. This is the illustration of the injustice and oppression exercised on us! . . . In Cluj he changed trains. With difficulty he managed to climb up into a carriage crowded with people and to place the suitcase in the corridor. His soul was blackened by so much Hungarian talk. He felt as if he had suddenly stopped in a slough."] (335-336)

The reader may ask in fact: what would be revolting in the fact that the peasants live in villages (a big majority of the Hungarian population of Transylvania being peasants too, just like many Swabians and Saxons), and the working class and the bourgeoisie (which was indeed of German and Hungarian majority) live in the towns? Was not that so in Romania too?

Titu's indignation has a national purport, but the coin has two sides in this case too. The narrator seems to see both of them, though Titu is not aware of their consequences. "Îşi aduse aminte cum în Săscuţa, acum vreo zece ani, când a trecut spre Bistriţa, singur văcarul era român şi stătea într-o hrubă în capul satului, pe când azi, fără şcoală şi fără biserică jumătate comună e românească" ["He remembered that in Săscuţa, about ten years before, when he had gone to Bistriţa, only the herdsman had been Romanian, he had stayed in a hut at the end of the village, however, then, without school and without church, half of the community had been Romanian"] (174). It is true that at the edge of the linguistic border, there was a Romanian village (Vireag, in which the congregation would have Pintea, Laura's husband as priest), which became Hungarian under the influence of the Hungarian speaking environment.

The misery of the Romanian peasants from a locality with rich Hungarian peasants (Gargalău) raises in Titu not only the natural national sentiment and the instinct of solidarity, but (separated from Rozica and constrained to the collection of the pawns also from the miserably poor peasants) it also thrusts him towards nationalist nonsense. The absurdity of this would come to light especially if we transposed it into the mouth of a Transylvanian person of Hungarian ethnicity, living in our days, belonging to the Székelys (maybe one in Titu's situation): "deseori se visa în fundul unei temniţe, legat în lanţuri şi totuşi fericit în inimă, simţindu-se martir, care prin jertfa sa trebuie să smulgă izbânda tuturor. . . . Şi închipuirile acestea îi umpleau fiinţa de plăceri sufleteşti nebănuite. . . . Avu o bucurie când îi dădu prin gând să rupă orice relaţie cu toţi ungurii şi să nu vorbească decât româneşte . . . Îi era ruşine însă când îşi amintea că i-a declarat dragoste [Rozicăi] în ungureşte şi că întâia iubire pătimaşă e o unguroaică" ["he

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

often dreamt that he was staying at the bottom of a prison, tied in chains, still happy in his heart, feeling like a martyr, who had to acquire others' victory by sacrifice. . . . And these imaginations filled his soul with unsuspected pleasures. . . . He was happy when it crossed his mind to break all relations with the Hungarians and to speak only Romanian . . . He was ashamed when he remembered that he had confessed love [to Rozica] in Hungarian, and that his first passionate love had been a Hungarian woman"] (187). Later he is consoled by the thought that still, Roza is the wife of a Jew, and otherwise "ura niciodată nu poate cuprinde pe femeile asupritorilor. Spre a fi cu totul liniştit, făcea legământ că o va învăţa şi pe ea româneşte" ["hatred can never be extended to the oppressors' women. In order to be totally reassured, he swore to himself to teach her to speak Romanian, too"] (188). It would be hard for someone to invent phrases whose content should exhaust more completely the idea of thinking contaminated by prejudices. Now all the Hungarians—without discrimination—are overwhelmed by Titu's "hatred", including the decent people, like Madarasy, who sympathizes with the Romanians without reserves, or Csernátoni, the lawyer, who had been protecting his father for a lifetime.

From this time onwards, Titu becomes insensitive not only in connection with the possible Hungarian considerations, but also in connection with the tragedy of his father: "trebuie să fii mândru pentru că suferi fiindcă ai apărat pe un român, chiar dacă românul s-a întâmplat să fie un mişel . . . E o faptă superbă! Cu cât vor fi mai grele, cu atât te vei ridica mai sus în faţa tuturor! zise tânărul invidios că nu el este în locul învăţătorului, să se poată lăuda pretutindeni cu sacrificiile lui pentru cauza neamului" ["you must be proud that you are suffering because you have defended a Romanian, even if he happened to be a villain . . . It is a great deed! The greater the sacrifice, the higher you will rise in everybody's eyes! the young man said enviously because he was not in the schoolmaster's situation, to be able to boast everywhere with his sacrifices for the cause of the nation"] (195).

It is no wonder that from the discussions with the schoolmistress Virginia Gherman (who, ironically, will get married to a Hungarian gendarme), the Hungarians simply disappear from his point of view: "Când românii vor stăpâni pe pământul strămoşilor, când toate lumea va crede ca dânşii, când . . . Vorbele îmbătau pe amândoi." ["When the Romanians will reign over the land of the ancestors, when everybody will think like them, when . . . They were both intoxicated by the words"] (247). The narrator does not make comments on the margin of these considerations, however, the verb a "îmbăta" ["to get drunk"], qualifies, indirectly and discreetly, the nature of these "outpourings of hope" ["depănări de nădejde"].

Remaining alone, the dream gets even "sweeter": "Iată-l în Cluj, unde a fost o singură dată cu câţiva ani în urmă. Pretutindeni numai grai românesc . . . Şi ce grai! Parcă toată lumea vorbeşte 'ca în ţară,' mai dulce ca inginerul Vasile Pop din

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

Vărarea, care a colindat România întreagă . . . Firmele magazinelor, străzile, şcolile, autorităţile . . . tot, tot e românesc . . . Statuia lui Matei Corvinul zâmbeşte către trecători şi le zice: 'Aşa-i c-a venit ceasul dreptăţii?' . . . Judecătorul, care a fost atât de obraznic cu Herdelea în Armadia scoate pălăria până la pământ dinaintea lui. Titu vrea să fie mărinimos, să-i arate că stăpânii români sunt nobili şi iertători." ["There he is in Cluj, where he was only once a few years ago. One can only hear the Romanian language everywhere . . . And what language! As if everybody were speaking 'like in the country,' sweeter than the engineer Vasile Pop from Vărarea, who has wandered all over the whole territory of Romania . . . The firms of the shops, the streets, the schools, the authoritie . . . everything, everything is Romanian . . . The statue of Matthias Corvin smiles to the passers-by, saying: 'The time of justice has come, hasn't it?' The judge, who has been so rude to Herdelea in Armadia, bows to the ground in front of him. Titu wants to be generous, to show him that the Romanian lords are noble and forgiving."] He asks himself: "Ce-i cu mine? Aiurez?" ["What's with me? Am I talking nonsense?"]

However, not only that this "nonsense" was taken seriously later and in reality, but it was also put in practice. Several times.

If these texts are not put between ironical quotation marks, the readers, who are not influenced by nationalist ideas (that is, all the pro European Romanians, and all the foreigners, even the pro Romanian ones) will be able to ask in fact: if this is the way things are, what is the aversion against the methods of the representatives of the Hungarian state based on? If the Hungarians are the oppressors (and they are, without doubt!), then what will be (or what are) the Romanians like, who will take over the methods of the oppressors (and it is known that they have taken them over many times), even improving them?!

Nationalism annihilates any empathy. On the side of the Hungarians, the representatives of the power become more and more incapable of putting themselves in the situation of the Romanians. They no longer ask the question: how would I feel if I were in their position? As such a question involves, in the vision of the nationalists, the betrayal of their own nationality. Titu himself gets closer and closer to the vision of the Hungarian nationalists. That is why he has no other choice but to leave the country. However, his puerile state of mind manifests itself even in this crucial moment: "–Nu mai plec nicăiri!—strigă seara înainte de somn în euforia serbărilor de la Astra—Rămân aici! . . . Ar fi o trădare să plec de aici! . . . Aici avem nevoie de oameni! Aici e nevoie mai mare ca oriunde!" ["I won't go anywhere!—he shouted in the evening, before going to bed, in the euphoria of the celebrations at Astra—I will stay here! It would be a betrayal to leave from here!
. . . We need people here! There is a greater need here than anywhere else!"] However, in the morning he seems not to remember these things: "–Cum să rămân

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

aici . . . Dincolo e fericirea adevărată . . . Acolo trebuie să fie!" ["How should I stay here . . . True happiness is on the other side . . . There it must be!"] (342).

In the given state of affairs, the reference character of the novel is not, cannot be Titu, but rather his father, schoolmaster Herdelea. But irony (this time explicit) cannot avoid him either. At Sîngeorz Băi "După prânz, stând cu toţii de vorbă într-un chioşc, la umbră, Herdelea povesti amănunţit rudelor câte a păţit. Voind să-şi pregătească mai frumos ieşirea la pensie, o întoarse pe coarda naţională, arătându-le cum toate i se trag din faptul că a luat apărarea unui biet ţăran român faţă de samavolnicia unui magistrat ungur, apoi stăruind mai ales asupra examenului când inspectorul i-a cerut să nu mai lase pe copii să crâcnească pe româneşte, şi sfârşind melancolic:

–Dar decât să-mi unguresc sufletul la bătrâneţe şi să-mi vând conştiinţa, mai bine s-ajung salahor muritor de foame! Mai bine! . . . De aceea mă şi bate capul să ies la pensie curând, curând . . ." ["After lunch, having a conversation with everybody in a kiosk, in the shadow, Herdelea related, in details, to the relatives all the troubles he had gone through. He wanted to carefully prepare his retirement, so he continued in a national tone, telling them that all his troubles derived from the fact that he had defended a poor Romanian peasant from the tyranny of a Hungarian magistrate, then dwelling especially on the exam when the inspector had asked him not to let the children open their mouth in Romanian, then ending in a melancholic tone*:*

–But instead of Hungarianizing my soul and selling my conscience at an old age, I'd rather become a starving day-labourer! I'd rather! . . . That is why I want to retire soon, soon . . ."] (320). A bit later he also changes the record: ". . . sosi apoi şi Comunicarea inspectorului că ministerul a binevoit să-i încuviinţeze trecerea la pensie, mulţumindu-i pentru serviciile aduse statului. Herdelea tremură citind adresa şi se îngâmfă de mulţumirile ministrului. Fireşte că, până seara, toate Armadia află regretele guvernului de-a fi pierdut un învăţător atât de harnic ca Herdelea şi toate lumea se minună de asemenea distincţie rară . . ." ["then the inspector's Communication also arrived, with the ministry's approval of his retirement, thanking him the services he had done for the state. Herdelea was trembling while he was reading the address and the ministry's thanks made him proud. Of course, by the evening the whole Armadia found about the government's regrets about having lost a schoolmaster so diligent as Herdelea had been, and everybody wondered at such a rare distinction . . ."] (354).

In spite of all these, he is the only character of the novel capable of true empathy. He cannot be defeated by the insulting negligence of Laura either, who, by marriage, is now enviably well-off. He puts himself in her place, and immediately realizes the relative normality of her gestures: "avu o clipă de mânie, dar şi-o stăpânii repede. Aşa-s copii, când cresc mari şi se înstrăinează. Parcă el n-a fost aşa? S-a dus la înmormântarea tatălui său, dar nu s-a deranjat niciodată cât a

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

zăcut, şapte săptămâni. Şi doar era colea, al patrulea sat. Pe maică sa, de câte ori vine pe aici, o cinsteşte cu rachiu dulce. Încolo parcă nici nu ar fi. Grijile şi dragostea le păstrează cu zgârcenie pentru căminul lui. Atunci ce să se mire, că pe Laura n-o mai dor durerile lui. Asta-i viaţa. E tristă. Cine să-i schimbe rostul? Viaţa trece peste cei bătrâni, peste cei slabi. Viaţa e a celor tineri şi puternici. Egoismul e temelia vieţii" ["he had a moment of anger, but he tempered himself quickly. Children are like that, when they grow up and become estranged. Wasn't he like that too? He went to the funeral of his father, but he never bothered as long as he had been staying in bed, seven weeks. And it was not far off, the fourth village. Whenever his mother comes here, he honours her with sweet brandy. On the other side it is as if she didn't exist. He keeps his concerns and love for his home. Then why should he wonder that Laura no longer cares about his problems? Life is like that. It is sad. Who could change its sense? Life overcomes the old and the weak. Life belongs to the young and strong. Selfishness is the basis of life."] (258-259).

And we can be sure that even the words of the schoolmistress, who "potriveşte părerile după împrejurări" ["adjusts her opinions to the circumstances"], come from him in fact, from their everyday discussions: "–Lumea ştie că suntem români, dar şovinismul nu-i bun niciodată. Adică ce-o fi, dacă să-i înveţi ungureşte! Lasă-i să înveţe că-i bine azi, când ştii o limbă străină, să vezi bine că fără ungurească nici nu te poţi mişca din loc . . . Dacă-s vremurile aşa, noi să le schimbăm?" ["–Everybody knows that we are Romanians, but chauvinism is never good. That is to say, what if you taught them Hungarian! Let them learn it, for it is good if you know a foreign language today, you see, without Hungarian you cannot make a single move . . . If these times are like that, why should it be us who change them?"] (326).

Rebreanu, both in the roles of model author and fictitious narrator, seems to share the opinion of the schoolmaster, rather than Titu's opinion. In spite of the fact that it might be relatively easy to prove about Rebreanu, the empirical person, that he also cherished considerable nationalist sentiments, and around the 1940s he was often thinking even in the ideological categories sacrificed by the German national socialism (*Blut und Boden*, *Lebensraum*), without identifying with the fascist ideology, continuing to remain loyal to the liberal ideas. "Spaţiul vital românesc, în cuprinsul frontierelor noastre nu e rezultatul unor cuceriri samavolnice, ci expresia curată a fiinţei neamului românesc . . . Pământul acesta ne-a zămislit pe noi după chipul şi asemănarea lui" ["Within our frontiers, the Romanian living space is not the result of some tyrannical conquests, but the clear expression of the entity of the Romanian nation . . . This land created us in its image and likeness"] (305).

Even the famous reception speech held in front of the members of the Academy seems to us surpassed by the post-nationalist history of the new millenium. Many of Rebreanu's considerations seem to us almost shameful today: "Oraşele noastre nu sunt expresia specificului naţional . . . Oraşul nostru înfiinţat şi

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

dezvoltat în multe cazuri din alte necesităţi decât cele româneşti, nu s-a adaptat încă deplin, spre a fi aievea, ca duh şi civilizaţie izvor de românism curat . . . Ţăranul e serios şi naiv, orăşanul e ironic şi sceptic" ["Our towns are not the expression of the national character . . . Our towns, in many cases founded and developed out of needs other than Romanian ones, were not yet fully adapted to be forever, as spirit and civilization, the source of pure Romanianness . . . The peasants are serious and naïve, the townspeople are ironical and sceptic"] (313).

In his laudation I. Petrovici states with good reason: ". . . substanţa concluziunii discursului ascultat, nu este deosebit de nouă, ba am putea spune, că e astăzi foarte răspândită, uneori chiar pe cale să alunece în primejdioase exagerări" ["the substance of the conclusion of the discourse that we heard is not very new, on the contrary, we could say that it is widely spread nowadays, sometimes even on the verge of sliding into dangerous exaggerations"], namely, into "fărămiţarea unităţii şi universalităţii adevărului în compartimente naţionale distincte" ["crumbling the unity and universality of truth into distinct national compartments"].

As if he had wanted to offer support to his opponent, in an article from *Familia* entitled *Transilvania 1940*, Rebreanu wrote: "Dreptatea românească e atât de evidentă, că noi n-am socotit necesar s-o demonstrăm, sau n-am ştiut. Numai cine n-are dreptate trebuie să zbuciume, să mintă şi să înşele pentru a crea aparenţe împotriva evidenţei" ["Romanian justice is so evident that we did not consider it necessary to prove it or we did not know it. Only those who are not right have to struggle, to lie and to cheat in order to create appearances as opposed to evidence."] (331-333). Obviously, similarly to the Hungarian nationalists, he is also incapable of getting out of the vicious circle of the state-nation logic, and implicitly that of moving the frontiers, because he is not able to see, also similarly to the Hungarian nationalists, the part of truth of the other party.

In his quality of an abstract author, and especially as a fictitious narrator of the events from the world of the novel, he cannot avoid confronting with the alternative truths. On the one hand, and in the absence of explicit confessions, the supposition is imposed that in the process of elaboration of his novels, Rebreanu also takes into account the valuable opinions of the possible Hungarian and German readers, as well as the opinion of those speaking western languages of wide circulation. In his literary heritage we find series of short stories and dramatic texts written in the Hungarian language. These texts demonstrate by all means that at a certain moment he considers it not only possible, but also challenging to succeed in front of a Hungarian public. It is hard to believe that only a few years later this public completely disappeared, even from his subconscious. Not to mention the fact that in the case of a "minority", the wish to demonstrate his value in the public opinion of the "majority" represents a social-psychological instinct which is impossible to surpass.

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

However, in this case his narrator (projected into the "world" of the literary work) must also take into account the values and opinions of the possible Hungarian, German and other readers speaking western languages. But Rebreanu must have been tempted obligatorily by the perspective of a success of universal literature. This temptation as such must also have had its rigorous consequences. His narrator had to "play" in accordance with universal democratic rules well known to Rebreanu as well. Literature is the domain of the integrity of truth. The domain in which, owing to the very mediality of the literary phenomenon, the artistic truth cannot be unilateral (as in the "national" historic sciences) or of an "absolute" objectivity (as in the natural sciences), on the contrary, it has to be shaped in a complex unity of the various significant viewpoints.

The deeper a novelist shapes the character of an artistic criterion of this complexity, the better chances he will have to become a prestigious writer. Rebreanu—as testified by his masterpieces—is conscious of the importance of this criterion. Even if between the empirical and the abstract writer there appear significant divergences, sometimes even impossible to reconcile.

Similar divergences can be pointed out firstly due to the composition of the novel. From Călinescu and Lovinescu to Săndulescu and today's young critics, a great deal of substantial things have been written about the symmetry of this composition. Still, an aspect, which is crucial in my opinion, has remained unobserved: the complex connection between the two levels of the novel, the social one and the national one. As in *Ion* we have two "lands" and two "loves". On the one hand, Baciu's land, on the other hand, the land of Transylvania. On the one hand, the love for Florica, on the other hand, the love for the Transylvanian people. In order to acquire the land, in both cases, true love must be betrayed.

Ion's tragedy entirely takes place within the Romanian community, the Hungarian oppression does not influence at all the unfolding of the events. This tragedy would not change at all if its heroes (Baciu, Ana, Ion, Florica, George) lived beyond the Carpathians.

Why did Rebreanu mix the two "novels", practically separate, the fate of the Herdelea family and Ion's story? Rebreanu is a writer too conscious to juxtapose them purely accidentally, based on exclusively biographical considerations. The fact that the title of the novel comes from the name of the peasant hero, who excels by his individuality, and not from the most sympathetic hero of the history, the old Herdelea, suggests, as clearly as possible, that Ion's figure has a strong symbolic character, that he represents more than what can be represented only within the "sentimental novel".

What is more, this sentimental novel seems to be a mise en abyme, which would have the primary function of directing us in the more complex interpretation (see Dällenbach 1980) of the national novel, that is, in filling the empty spaces

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

(*Leerstellen*), left by Rebreanu (whether consciously or subconsciously, it seems to be impossible to decide) to the disposal of the reader free of biased attitudes.

In this way, Ion would become also the hero of the national novel, despite the fact that he is not involved in it, not even accidentally. As in the given Romanian community it is not the Hungarians but other Romanians that are the owners of the lands. As a consequence, the conflict of the land and of love would also be valid at the other level of the plot of the novel.

What would this mean?

The answer lies in the analysis of the relationship Ion-Titu. This relationship is—on both sides—very close and especially deeply significant. On the one hand, Ion "gets" the idea to compel Baciu to yield the land to him, only from Titu. The suggestion is subconscious (literally and figuratively), but Ion takes it seriously literally as well. On the other hand, Titu also represents the nationalist idea of yielding the land to Transylvania by force. Metaphorically speaking: with the competition of the Transylvanian intellectuals, the Old Romanian Kingdom "compels" the world public opinion to "marry off", "with land with everything", the (multicultural) population of Transylvania. Since truth (more precisely, the right to self-determination) cannot be reached through a democratic decision of the entire population, that is, by a plebiscite, as it would be right and equitable, but through a war, based on some secret treaties concluded with the forces of the Antant. It seems that Ion's gesture also suggests to Titu the "solution" to his problem. Anyway, the sympathy between the peasant with individualist instincts and the intellectual with collectivist beliefs requires a convincing explanation, as it is almost mystical and explored "consciously" by the abstract author of the novel.

The history related to achieving national truth is no longer dealt with in the novel. However, the reader is aware of the fact that the historic event has already taken place: (see the dates at the end of the text): after the war (very implausible at the temporal level of the "narrated world", but it is a well-known fact of later real history) Transylvania got unified with the country. And the consequences of the event remain hidden. The peasant-sentimental novel ends definitely, Ion will expiate his sins. However, the intellectual-national novel remains suspended. This one, as the open works much later, must be completed by the reader of the book himself/herself, within the occasionally "definitive" process of elaboration of an interpretive reading . . .

The natural question arises: if this unification will be carried out just as Ion's "unification" with Baciu's lands took place, won't there be necessarily tragic consequences too? If the Romanian intellectuals will act similarly to a "reduced entity", like Ion, if national egotism will be their main governor, not taking into account the possible consequences, will it be possible to avoid the tragic consequences? Will Titu be able to betray his Transylvanian identity without the entailing consequences? Will he be able to reduce his personality to the exlusive,

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

even exclusivist "Romanian" identity, without transforming this latter too into a nationalist malformation, self-destructive from a moral and spiritual point of view?

There are as many virtually justified questions, which can be formulated only by today's reader, capable of freeing himself/herself from the secular nationalist prejudices. And if the questions are formulated, the signs become rather clear: "Visurile sunt tot atât de fără preţ aici, ca şi dincolo—*scrie Titu de la Bucureşti* . . . Raiul unuia poate să fie iadul altuia. Fericirea e clădită de închipuirea fiecăruia şi fiecare şi-o potriveşte ca o haină . . . Sufletul meu rătăceşte aici într-un deşert fără popasuri ca o pasăre care şi-a pierdut cuibul" ["The dreams are just as priceless here as on the other side—*Titu writes from Bucharest* . . . One's heaven can be the other's hell. Happiness is built on everybody's imagination, and fitted to everybody like a dress . . . My soul strays here in a desert without a place to rest, like a bird which lost its nest"]. The reader cannot help remembering the discussions with Friedman, the notary who lived for a while in Romania and presented to him the situation from there in rather sombre colors, but which Titu, under the influence of nationalist enthusiasm, did not believe. The quoted sentence represents his last words. And if we think of what followed—the fascist dictatorship, the dismembering of Transylvania, the communist dictatorship, the humiliation of the Ceauşescu regime (even on behalf of a nationalism of an exceptional, and at the same time puerile harshness, of Titu's type)—,Titu's premonitions seem to us perfectly justified.

It is true that at the end of the novel everything "gets settled," the reader already knows that the land of Transylvania "was unified with Romania", the girls get married, the Herdelea couple finds a quiet place, without material difficulties, in the Romanian community from Armadia, priest Belciug "mends his way", Grofşoru assumes the responsibility of George's trial. But it is because of these idyllic arrangements that irony still hovers over this impressive ending, well rounded also from a narrative point of view. As the end also has the value of a beginning. The future is open towards a history which will sweep "*zvârcolirile vieţii*" ["the tossings and turnings of life"]: "Suferinţele, patimile, năzuinţele mari şi mici, se pierd într-o taină dureros de necuprinsă, ca nişte tremurări plăpânde într-un uragan uriaş." ["The sufferings, passions, big and small longings get lost in a painfully boundless mistery, as some feeble tremblings in a huge hurricane."] (365).

The latent irony suggests that nothing is and nothing can be definitive. Things have their temporal dimension. Baciu got married out of interest too, but later he passionately fell in love with his wife, under the auspices of traditional morals it could not have happened in another way, once he knew that he owed everything that he had and that he was, to her, to his wife. His love towards his wife becomes so strong that Baciu simply cannot bear her death any longer. He starts drinking. Ion is no longer capable of such love, with archaic aura. He is already a modern

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

individual, an ego pushed as far as paroxism. Inspector Csernátoni understands the Romanians and does not consider that it would be the interest of the Hungarian state to compel the Romanian children to learn Hungarian perfectly. Horváth, overwhelmed by the zeal of an ardent nationalist, is no longer capable of thinking reasonably to a certain extent.

However, irony presupposes a relatively clear authorial intention (see Compagnon 74-105). In Rebreanu's case this intention seems to be rather *instinctive*, stemming from a born narrative and social sense.

The Transylvanian society, just like the European society at the end of the century, passes through a period of profound changes. The relationships between majority and minority, men and women, peasants and intellectuals change. The peasants increasingly become tools in the hand of nationalist intellectuals. More precisely, of selfish intellectuals, as nationalism is nothing else but the cultural egotism converted into political doctrine. The intellectuals want to acquire political influence by raising the national sentiment. And in this way they betray the real interests of all nations. In our case, it is not the old Romanian Kingdom that will rise to the cultural, economic and political level of Transylvania, but inversely, Transylvania will be lowered to the level of the Balkans.

If we abandon the nationalist interpretation, based especially on the philological-historical parallelism between Titu and Rebreanu, and we risk an interpretation through the prism of the complex of relations among the abstract author—narrator—heroes, unthought-of perspectives open up for us, which do place Rebreanu's novel among the most important masterpieces of world literature. And which—due to today's historical events—gains stringent actuality again. Together with *Pădurea spânzuraților* [*Forest of the Hanged*], which, through the elaboration of the basic ideas from *Ion*, represents aspects of the concepts of cultural and civic nation still unclarified today, Rebreanu's work could offer a firm intellectual basis for the reinterpretation, in post-nationalist terms, of these concepts of primary importance, also aiming at the ideological fundaments of the Romanian state.

(*Translated by Judit Pieldner*)

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)

Works cited

Compagnon, Antoine. *La démon de la théorie. Littérature et sens commune*. Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1998.

Dällenbach, Lucien. "Reflexivity and Reading". *New Literary History* 3 (1980): 435-449.

Eco, Umberto. *Hat séta a fikció erdejében* [*Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*]. Budapest: Európa Publishing House, 2002.

Genette, Gerard. *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1990.

Lintvelt, Jaap. *Punct de vedere. Încercare de tipologie narativă* [*Point of View. An Essay on Narrative Typology*]. Bucharest: Univers. 1989.

Rebreanu, Liviu. *Ion*. Bucharest: Liviu Rebreanu Publishing House, 2006. Preface by Lucian Pricop, chronological chart by Ilderim Rebreanu.

Rebreanu, Liviu. *Jurnal* II (*Journal* II). Bucharest: Minerva Publishing House, 1984. Text selected and settled by Puia-Florica Rebreanu, chronology, notes and comments by Niculae Gheran.

Stanzel, Franz K. *Typische Forme des Romans*. [*Typical Forms of the Novel.*] Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Rupprecht, 12th edition, 1993.

BDD-A7435 © 2009 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:11 UTC)