A Romanian Literary Topic – The Baragan Plain

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"The world axle is
passing through Baragan"
(Fanus Neagu)

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The Romanian Steppe – the Baragan Plain

If you ask the Romanians about the geographic specificity of their country, the answer would refer commonly to the diversity of the relief and especially to what the poet-philosopher Lucian Blaga called "the undulatory space".

Even though we usually define ourselves according to what Blaga called "the mioritic space", "the undulatory space", the matrix-space with the alternation hill-valley, we have to take into consideration the other geographic areas of the Romanian territory. Besides the Carpathians and the hills, a vast plain lays in the south, the Danube Plain, which includes the Baragan. This is the Romanian prairie that reminds us of the Russian steppe, of the Hungarian pusta, but also of the unlimited sea or ocean: the same immensity, and the same illusion of no boundaries.

This vastness of plain, reminiscent of the immensity of the sea or of the ocean, was described in different manners and from different point of views by the Romanian writers such as Alexandru Odobescu (1834-1895), Panait Istrati (1884–1935**)**, Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), George Calinescu (1899–1965), Marin Preda (1922-–980), Stefan Banulescu (1926–1998), Fanus Neagu (1932–), Constantin Toiu (1923–), etc.

In Romanian, the word comes from Turkish and means "gale", "snowstorm". The Romanian Baragan is a unique territory, a weird and wonderful area, a combination between "desert and no desert", as one of the most important Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga (1871–1940) described it.

The classic example of the Baragan picture (being at the same time a model of a literary description) could be found in one of the most singular and interesting books in Romanian literature, the essay called *Pseudokynegeticos*, by Odobescu. An inedited literary formula, taking as a pretext "the hunting", this essay is a kind of literary journey in the history of arts, of music, of literature, in folklore and traditions, it is "a mosaic" (in George Calinescu's terms), but it is above all a journey in time and space. "I started scouring the ages and spaces, looking for sounds and hunter's emotions with my eyes, my ears and my heart", wrote Odobescu in the Preface.

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1.a. The Baragan – a Romanian *Arcadia*

"Et in Arcadia ego!" – exclaims Odobescu in the beginning of his description of the Baragan plain, the space where the hunters can find their Paradise. The whole description is framed between that exclamation and a Gogolian expletive – "Damn you, plains, you are so beautiful!" (Odobescu 1990: 15). Recognizing that his description is almost a kind of translation of a fragment from Gogol's *Taras Bulba*, the writer implicitly suggests the similarities between the Romanian Baragan and the Russian steppe.

Odobescu, Calinescu and Fanus Neagu described the Baragan as an *Arcadia*, a rich territory in grain and also an attractive space. "Out of what Baragan really is, my flesh withholds […] the everlasting fragrance of the wheat", confesses Fanus Neagu in the Postface of his book *Under the Moonshine* (Neagu 1979: 355). The wheat is the real richness of the Baragan, the wheat made this land famous; the wheat is "the human law, just the horse's is the grass", adds Fanus Neagu. "The world's axle is passing through Baragan, because *the beginning and the duration of all the worlds is getting through each and every wheat-ear stalk"*, the writer continues metaphorically his confession.

On the other hand, in his book of short stories – *An Imaginary Kingdom* – Stefan Banulescu describes "the yellow land with the abundance of corn; when the sun sets, *daylight goes on because of the corn*" (Banulescu 1997: 35). Both wheat and corn give the impression of an "immensity of the field's solar tint", and an isolated village seems to have "sun in the right, sun in the left".

The seasons influence the man's life in the Baragan. His life is coordinated by the time of year. In summer, the plain gives to him the crop, the real purpose the countryman works the whole year. "In July, *wheat is active in every action of life*, including the memorial of the dead". This is the Baragan, the plain whose "*lung's breath wheat*" (Neagu 1979: 357).

1.b. *My village props its bone on the false acacia trees* (Fanus Neagu)

The Baragan, this "miraculous" plain, as many Romanian writers felt or wrote, this "edge of infinity", this rich and poor territory, a strange mélange of wilderness and richness, where both hunter and peasant find their reason to live, can be branded through some specific plants. Besides the thistles, in this vast territory, where – in winter – the snow is abundant, and in summer the sun is shining so hard, the only tree that could resist to the aggressive weather is a species of the acacia, the false acacia. In the village of the Morometes "the place was full of acacias and of tall grass". "A *giant acacia … very leafy and tall*" becomes an important part in the plot of the novel. Moromete, the peasant who tries to avoid paying taxes because he (as the majority of the others) has no money, cut the acacia and sold it: "as they had nothing else to sell, the acacia had to be cut down" (Preda 1957: 111), the narrator comments. It was "*a some tough tree*", Moromete himself will notice later, sad and proud at the same time.

> The acacia had to be standing there, with its majestic height and its leafy crown like a sentinel above all that part of the village; now everything seemed to have

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> shrunk in size. The garden, the horses, Moromete himself, looked as if they had been dwarfed. The open sky and the fields now seemed to dominate the neighborhood (Preda 1957: 111).

Fanus Neagu remembers also many times (in *Under the Moonshine)* about the dead acacias and describes them as some phantoms.

1. c. *The country of the flock of bustards* (Odobescu)

The Baragan is at the same time "the country of the flock of bustards": „In July the bustards […], like the Danube flamingos, walk their chicks through the wheat field…", wrote Fanus Neagu (Neagu 1979: 358). It is a very strange bird, very difficult to see or to catch – as we learn from other Romanian writer, born in the Danube Plain, Stefan Banulescu. In his novel entitled *Dropia (The Bustard)*, this bird is not only a metaphor, but also a reality of this part of the country. This rare bird is "hard to catch sight of, not only to be grasped. The bustard can't be caught either in summer or in autumn, it is difficult to get a glimpse of it, it stands in the sun at the edge of the stubble. And one can't look at the sun. It is only on the glazed frost in winter that one can touch it, when its wings get heavy hindering into fly and making its walk looks like a hen's. Even then it's a hard job", explains allusively Victoria to a "stranger", Miron, who was looking for his former love from his youth. "Rarely can anyone catch the right moment. Many times, when it is glazed frost, there is no buster in sight, and when there is one, there is no glazed frost", she continued in the same metaphoric and allusive style (Banulescu 1997: 43).

2. The Baragan - the country of the thistles

Paradoxically, the Baragan, "the country of grain", is also a wild field, "the country of the violet thistles" that inspired the Romanian-French writer Panait Istrati[1] in his well-known novel *The Thistles of the Baragan*. In this book, Istrati chooses the first sentence of the novel, the incipit of the story a time projection and space delimitation: "When September dawns, for one month, the vast, wild plains of Danubian Wallachia settle down to their millenary existence" (Istrati 1930: 9). Therefore, the fall and "the millenary existence" suggest the repetition that means an endless time and a boundary space (the vast plain). The second sentences refer again at "the endless steppe" and gradually the author introduces the place – "Muntenia" (Wallachia), "the woeful Ialomitza" river and "the grumbling Danube", the adjectives being a special projection of the feelings of the inhabitants. The type of relation between man and the Baragan is stressed also from the very beginning: "It loves him not." (…) Like a desert, "the Baragan is solitude itself" (Istrati 1930: 11). The narrator transfers the human characteristics to the territory: "At first the Baragan does so *passively, like a man* who lies down, buries his face in the ground and refuses either to rise or die. The Baragan *is a giant*" (Istrati 1930: 10).

[1] A. Gide wrote in his *Journal*, Univers Publishing House, 1970: 551): „It was with great pleasure that I read *Kira Kiralina*, the particularly lively story of Panait Istrati's, a narration of a genuine fragrance redolent of some stories from *Thousand and one nights* or maybe of any other picaresque novel".

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"An important narrative presence are the Danubian and Deltanian emptiness or the Baragan prairie", writes the critic Aureliu Goci in his Preface at the Romanian version of *The Thistles of Baragan* (Istrati 1992: 14). In this novel it takes place a continuous fight between the plain and the man, and the winner is, almost always, the Baragan:

> Stretched out, since all eternity, over all the sun-scorched lands between […] Ialomitza and the Danube, the Baragan wages a sly war, throughout spring and summer, against the hard-working peasant [...] For the Baragan is solitude itself. Never a tree on its back; and between one well and the next, a man has time aplenty to die of thirst. Nor is it any business of the Baragan's to shield you from hunger, either.

When the fall is coming and the storks are going to the warmer countries, "the Steppes of the Baragan assume complete mastery" (Istrati 1992: 10, 11).

In Baragan, the man is under mastership of the geography, and he has to accept this and learn how to survive according to the rules of this special territory, "that land that knows no master" (Istrati 1992: 29), where you cannot find "a tree on its back; and between one well and the next, a man has time aplenty to die of thirst" (Istrati 1992: 11). Undoubtedly, from time to time, the writer cannot forget that there are also parts of the Baragan where the land is seemed to be "an Arcadia" and describes the both sides of the Ialomitza river where "the land is fertile, the farms numerous. There the Baragan *gnaws with broken teeth"* (Istrati 1992: 58).

3. The Baragan – a legendary land

Moreover, Mircea Eliade, the well-known scholar and writer, saw the Baragan Plain as a legendary territory, where *space is stronger than the time*.

Therefore, almost everywhere, in every Romanian literary work, the reader can detect – in parallel or in interference – both the real geographical elements and the utopian perspective. The different scale makes the difference. In Banulescu's *The Millionaire's Book (Cartea Milionarului),* according to another Romanian critic, Ion Negoitescu, the plain is "the Utopia in a large sense, like an imaginary topos, in a perfect opposition with the real, even though it borrows different elements from it" (Negoitescu 2004: 36). One of Banulescu's books was named exactly *An Imaginary Kingdom* and many stories seemed to come from the fairy tale ("A Man with no Night", "The Gold Knife", "The Sun, a Golden Raven", "The Man and the Death").

For Fanus Neagu, the Baragan is "the gateway into the timeless joy" (Neagu 1979: 355). The old stories, the legends, the people from the plain themselves were constant subjects and background for his books. All these gave him also that special gift of dreaming, allowing him to make a bridge between past and present, between myth and reality, and (as himself considers) made him a writer ("The Baragan plain, the bodies of water, my parents' and my grandparents' stories made me born within myself the to be writer" (Neagu 1979: 356). In other sense, the Baragan is a "fata morgana", the miracle created by the vastness and the immensity of the desert.

For the novelist George Calinescu, for example, following his characters – Felix and Otilia – in their way as the guests of the rich farmer, Pascalopol, to his farm in Baragan, the plain seems a very strange place with no limits (like a desert) being at the same time beyond the time. With a lack of proportions or with a "mad"

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proportion, the Baragan looks like a wasteland where the civilization has no meaning and seems to be unhistorical "scythic deserts":

> It was only one hour since Felix was getting off the train, but he felt lost for hundreds of years in the places where any trace of civilization was destroyed long time ago by the sun and the vegetation (Calinescu 2000: 78–79).

So, in Baragan, the absolute "master" are the sun and the vegetation. The time and even the space lost their real dimension: "Felix couldn't realize if they were far at two hundred meters or a few kilometers" (Calinescu 2000: 77). Thus, from a literary description of the real geographical place to the identification of the plain with the Utopian region, this is the "road" between the descriptive fragments (in the classical manner) and the mythical and symbolical stories or novels.

4. The Baragan – the fickle ocean

In Odobescu's essay regarding the hunting, the potential hunters scour "the desert of the Baragan", and in front of them is always "the boundless space" with "the *waves* of grass" like a "fickle *ocean*". In *The Morometes also* – "the light morning breeze… *transforms* the wheat into *sea-waves.*" This kind of comparison, with many words from the same lexical field Calinescu uses, too, in a memorable description of the Baragan in his novel *Otilia's Enigma*. Some isolated trees in the empty field seemed "dead block stems on the *waves of the sea*". The warm wind was "massive like a *marine wave*". The travelers – Felix and Otilia – "were floating on a yellow-green *sea*, where the too much high *waves* hinder the eyes to put the horizon line in its place" (Calinescu 2000: 77–78).

5. *The Baragan* – and its connotations

A proper name (a certain place), but also a qualification – the word "Baragan" has a special connotation in the Romanian language. Panait Istrati, an "expert" in the Romanian plain, explains one. According to him, "everywhere in Romania, when a man is taking too many liberties in public", he is apostrophized: "where do you think you are: *on the Baragan?*" Thus, the lack of boundaries is transferred to the people, to their behavior and way of understanding the world. In the same direction, but with a plus of connotation is another commonly used phrase: "It's the end of the world, children. They are doing as they please with us. *It's like the Baragan.*" Let's do not forget that *The Thistles of the Baragan* is dedicated to "the Romanian people; to its eleven thousand sons murdered by the Romanian government" in the revolt from 1907!

6. The Man and the Plain

If Lucian Blaga invented the concept of "the mioritic space" as a philosophical manner to explain the Romanian soul and spirit through the Romanian landscape ("the undulating and infinite landscape" of hills and valleys), there are also other writers who described the behavior and the spirit of the peasant from the south of Romania through the mark of infinity and the monotonous relief of the plain. Marin Preda, considered one of the best Romanian contemporary writer sees the peasant from the Danube Plain as a thinker, a contemplative, in a "Socratic"

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manner, and less as a practitioner. "Down in the plain of the Danube", at least "a few years before the Second World War", the time when the Moromete family is seen as a model of a Romanian peasant family, "time seems to have been very good for the peasantry; life went on there without too much trouble" (Preda 1957: 7). It was a life of a family in the Baragan, and Moromete, the father and the prototype of the peasant from the plain, who has his own philosophy over life, is seen from the very beginning of the story "seated on the rail of the plank-bridge" and "looking across the bridge. *He just sat there*, at a loose end, looking at nothing in particular." Even "the smoke of the cigarette in his hand was rising straight up, *without haste or purpose*" (Preda 1957: 8).

No "haste or purpose" appeared to characterize the whole life in Baragan. The people of the large spaces seemed to borrow from the plain the special feeling of vastness and eternity. "If you are armed against these two twin ailments of the flesh" (thirsty and hunger), wrote Panait Istrati, "and if you wish to walk alone with your God, go out to Baragan; it is precisely the place the Creator allotted to Wallachia for the Romanian *to dream* away at this leisure" (Istrati 1930: 11). The former inhabitant of the plain stressed out the special feature of the "Baragan-man", his tendency to dream and to contemplate the world. "There are places in the world destined for contemplation" (Istrati 1930: 11). The man who dwells on the Baragan has "a rather grave character. […] Dreams, meditation, aspiration and a hollow belly are what give man gravity" (Istrati 1930: 12). The people "prefer to listen differentially. That is because their lives are hard and because they live in the hope that someone may appear to teach them what to do so as to wrest the best possible advantages from their steppes" (Istrati 1930: 12).

Conclusion

For many Romanian writers the Baragan plain has always been geography beyond real, or rather a utopia and a myth.

The Baragan has a millenary existence, and the people who live there know that it is sometimes "lazy and disobedient" and they have the feeling that "life takes its form from sleepiness and gets its continuity from mirage" (Istrati 1930: 133). This "mirage" is – in a metaphorical way – the endless dream of "walking the line", of crossing the "borders" toward the civilization, toward the city where its inhabitants "have some bread to eat".

In Lucian Blaga's opinion,

> Romania's lowlands are imbued with longing for the high mountains meadows. The people from the fields do not have such meadows, so *their soul and mind made up for its atmosphere* – through their songs (Blaga 1999: 56).

Can we find "the longing for the high mountains meadows" in the novels where the characters live in the Romanian plain? I cannot find it, at least in the authors cited above. Can we depict the same kind of "Mioritic's sense of destiny" in the folklore of the population who live in the plain? It is a topic that can be studied with another occasion. Now, let's go back to the Romanian writers who saw man living his destiny as an inhabitant of the boundless space of the field. This field, like the ocean, gives him a different perspective. The writers described this territory and

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tried to understand both the life of the Baragan regions inhabitants and their particular viewpoint about life.

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Un « topos » littéraire roumain – Baragan

L'espace-matrice roumain avec ses alternances colline – vallée, défini par Lucian Blaga comme « espace mioritique », n'est pas le seul ayant attiré l'imagination créative des écrivains roumains. Au delà de nos montagnes et de nos collines une vaste vallée s'étend au sud. Il s'agit de la Plaine du Danube qui inclut aussi la Plaine de Baragan, une plaine que nous pouvons associer à la préerie mais nous fait aussi penser à la steppe russe ou à la Puszta hongroise de même qu'à l'infini de la mer ou de l'océan – la même immensité et la même illusion impossible à limiter.

La vastité de Baragan a été décrite en différentes manières et de plusieurs points de vue par des écrivains comme Alexandru Odobescu (1834–1895), Panait Istrati (1884–1935), Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), George Calinescu (1899–1965), Marin Preda (1922–1980), Stefan Banulescu (1926–1998), Fanus Neagu (1932–) etc.

Dans notre ouvrage nous suivons dans quelques chapitres (dont le titre reprend des phrases significatives des romans en discussion) les différentes facettes de la présentation de Baragan faites par les écrivains mentionnés.

C'est comme ça que nous découvrons la plaine de Baragan comme une « Arcadie roumaine », un espace qui « soutient son corps sur des acacias », c'est « le pays des volées d'outardes », mais aussi le territoire des « chardons »; l'espace étendu vers l'horizon rappelle l'infini de l'océan, c'est un endroit riche en légendes dans lesquelles l'homme devient frère de la plaine ayant le sentiment de vivre dans un lieu qui transfère les sens, au delà du réel, dans le mythe.

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