# *ANTON PANN AND THE BALKAN SPIRIT*

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**Abstract***: What is more difficult to acknowledge and define when referring to Anton Pann is the main feature of his writing, the so-called 'antonpannism', an equation that involves the writer's role and vision in the Romanian literature. The 'antonpannism' becomes a synonym for Balkan or having Balkan characteristics, as it connects the two main trends, namely the Orient and the Occident. The present study is intended to emphasize a few aspects of Anton Pann's literary work, especially those which exploit the Balkan spirit.*

**Keywords***: Balkan, culture, antonpannism*

By getting closer to Anton Pann, to the miraculous and fascinating world depicted in his books, the reader goes back to a fabulous past, where imagination replaces historical events and the thought - idled by the slow motion of time - search for a boundary of certainty and clarification.

Anton Pann is a poet who dedicates himself to another kind of literary craft, supported not so much by his general education, but by his temperament and personality. He is different from other poets of his time due to his vivid and attractive way of writing and to a better understanding of the poor and their inner world and basically due to that unique atmosphere he introduces to the reader. This atmosphere is specific to a certain category of Romanian people, i.e. the ones who used to live on the outskirts of the towns, the mob of the suburbs with their typical Oriental morals and manners.

The one who introduced this particular feature into our literature was a wanderer, a traveller who came to our country from abroad, being only half Romanian. On G. Bogdan Duică's opinion, *Pann was not a Romanian who was made Bulgarian, but a Bulgarian who was made Romanian.* His nature was neither Bulgarian, nor Macedonian, nor Greek. It was precisely that of a Romanian peasant and a lower town inhabitant living on the Romanian bank of the Danube.

His educational background provided him only with the ability to read, but the journeys he had been taking throughout the country and the mingling with the people living on the outskirts of towns during his lifetime allowed him to get to know the customs and traditions of the lower people, to understand and learn the language they used while telling their stories or singing their songs. He ended up by writing everything that he had learnt, seen or heard in his books. If we analyze the titles of his books, the notes and the explanations from them, we shall be able to notice the way the author wrote them and how varied they are – a mixture of all the things and details that he could capture from one person or another, from one place or another or mere ideas that had just crossed his mind and tempted him to put them into verse.

As he had spent his childhood in some foreign environment, he brought along certain reminiscences that later on were to be presented to the reader in the Romanian language: some of the stories and poems which he published are echoes from the Bulgarian,

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Turkish and Greek popular literature, reflections of those aspects of Balkan folklore that he knew so well, which were used as reading material *at parties*. Besides their intrinsic exotics, we can also find here the Romanian keynote, namely a genuine mixture of the popular, peasant-like and town-like characteristics. Anton Pann felt attracted to life and folk literature, to all those aspects that resembled his own nature. Therefore he is among our first writers who praised the benefits of simple living, as we may read in *Popular Poem*s, where he was comparing and contrasting life in a town to life in the country: 'Happy and happy again/A thousand happy years,/Of rustic life, I could say…/'Though we call it peasant-like…/He who actually lives it/ Feels grateful for it./…Whereas we, town-born people,/And highly educated,/Food is not food for us…/Vice is all around us/And worries kill us…' (*Popular Poem*s, 1846)

That is why Anton Pann used the language of the people living on the outskirts of Bucharest. It is a clear and simple language which flows without being burdened with too many foreign words which would be hard to understand. Although many of his books are transcriptions of some old manuscripts, he changed them with the stroke of a pen. There are a few examples of such language in *The Story of the Word* – the second edition: *imitate, retire, abundant, arm, fashion, clubs, boarding school, generous, eminent, luxurious, duel, conversations. (*Gaster, 1983, pp. 107-111).

At the time a new literary movement was at the beginning of its evolution, without being under the influence of foreign writers who lived beyond the border of the Carpathians. Later on the representatives of the movement were going to change the Cyrillic alphabet with the Latin one, letter by letter, enrich the vocabulary and alter the Romanian language up to the point where it sounded and looked more like Latin. After Anton Pann had become an autonomous writer, this literary period became stronger and developed into the so-called Balkinism. The influence of the Occident determined a decisive breaking-off with the past. It meant more than changing the Cyrillic alphabet, as more and more new and original ideas were being introduced into the country from the West. Youths such as *Poteca* and *Gr. Pleşoianu* were sent to Paris to study at schools and universities over there and a new period started - that of the literary translations from French authors of all kind. Some Romanian writers, i.e. *Ion Heliade Rădulescu*, had been trying to enrich the vocabulary using as many Italian words as possible. The upper classes had already forgotten about the Greek culture and books, about poor quality poems and songs. Although attracted by the new literary movements, Anton Pann was still much indebted to the old ones, mainly to the manuscripts he had brought to light and presented to his readers – common, ordinary people. That was his manner of writing: he would choose certain texts and modify them. He would only choose those literary genres – poetic or prose forms – that suited him best, for instance: fables, anecdotes, satires, epigrams, parables, Christmas songs dedicated to the Star, popular drama – *Herod, Bethlehem*, carols, stories and popular love songs. This is a fact which is essential to our study because it turns Anton Pann into *the leading representative of the ethical-religious popular movement. (*Papadopol, 1941, pp. 3-5-6).

In addition to the Balkan and completely satirical nature of his books, there was another - external one - referring to loan words, adapted texts, translations, models that appeared in the books, which made him one of the most diligent finders and collectors of artistic treasures. In this context, he wanted to continue his work, as he confessed himself, *in*



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*order to get rid of boredom or because I got used to being active and writing something gives me the impression that I do not spend my time without working.(Ibidem).*

When he was not able to find what interested him in the Romanian literature, he would turn to others - still popular - especially the Oriental ones, whose secrets he could easily understand due to his linguistic knowledge. This resulted in some unexpected works, such as: *Arabic Story, in 1839, Wise Argyros and his nephew Anadam, a book comprising wise advice, in 1850, The Cunning Crafts of Nastratin Hogea, in 1853*, this one presenting the example of a unique type of Oriental educator, which came to be incredibly well-known and was to become a model of genuine and precious inspiration for both ordinary people and well-known writers. This proves that the popularity and the talent of this writer cannot and should not be separated from the folkloric character and the moral - often religious - aspects of ordinary people which his book displayed. His work could not be crystal clear, as it is a meeting point between oral/popular and well-known literature, village and town settings, suburbs and town people, the Balkans and the Carpathians, the Orient and the Occident, the spirit of the laity and the clergy. On the one hand he differentiates between the Orient and the Occident, between the language and literature of the lower classes, and those of the upper classes, of the learned people; on the other hand, Anton Pann always kept in mind his parents and ancestors' way of living, the treasure of Oriental wisdom – the Oriental stories. Because of Anton Pann our literature was not deprived of the past literary heritage; he was the one who made the connection between the Oriental past of our literature and its new future opening towards Western cultures. From this point of view, his presence in the Romanian literature is remarkable, as he is the unique representative of a whole aspect of our development, the only window that we may open onto the East, across the Danube and the Balkans, the final link between popular sensibility and the riches of the Oriental wisdom.

Consequently, Anton Pann was a great forerunner of our folklore and popular traditions. He seems to have been destined to connect the Orient to the Romanian folk spirit, which confers charm and originality to his works. Due to his Balkan origin, the writer had had right at hand the wealthy popular wisdom concentrated in proverbs, sayings, allegories and short stories which had been created on this side of the earth, where so many cultures had met, those of ancient Greek, Byzantium, the Turkish folklore and everything that this one had assimilated from the old Asian cultures - fact that left deep traces within the Balkan folklore. All his main works were published during this period of his life (without taking into consideration the numerous religious books and hymns and the renowned calendars enriched with numberless stories in verses), namely the collection of party songs: *The Singer of Drunkenness* (1851), epitaphs: *The Triumph of Drunkenness* (1852), *Fables and Anecdotes* (1841), *The Hospital of Love* (1850), our first Anthology of love poems, comprising poems collected from ordinary people and well-known poets of the time (D. Bolintineanu, Gr. Alexandrescu and so on), *The Cunning Crafts of Nastratin Hogea* (1853), translated from Turkish, but where Pann was able to give life to a character who looked and talked like the legendary Romanian Păcală (seen as a Turk) in an Oriental background and atmosphere, making him a famous character in the Romanian literature as well; *An Evening Sitting of Village Women* (1852), probably his most original writing, *the most accomplished*



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*of his work (*Pillat,1943, p.141-144*),* as professor N. Iorga stated, where we may recognize the father of the future Romanian folklore.

If we also think of other works which were not published or were scattered in the calendars, Anton Pann's work consists of almost 100 volumes, booklets or brochures, out of which a fourth represent music collections/medleys and sermons. Originality is the main characteristic and the secret ingredient of Anton Pann's artistic works.

The quasi-folkloric circulation of manuscripts placed at peoples' disposal a whole collection of wonderful texts dating from the beginnings of world greatest literatures and it was all at hand for Anton Pann. Let us not forget that the main part of these manuscripts, which he intended to publish, was created on a millennial pattern, where proverbs interrelated with stories, an unpleasant narrative event ended with a moral, a wise saying was illustrated by a misadventure, all originating in Asia, in Buddha's parables and teachings turned into Christian stories.

This whole Oriental wisdom is the main characteristic of the Balkan folklore. The fictional world of our writer suggests a certain type of Balkan nature, one belonging to Byzantium but having Islamic characteristics, too. Anton Pann is an archetype, an inspiration and a guiding principle of the Balkan literature. In his works we may find elements from the old Indian, Byzantine and Occidental literatures. It is an outstanding combination of stories and proverbs found at Balkan fairs and the ones coming from Byzantium - over the centuries, all refined in those found in the popular books coming from the Occident. All these prove that Anton Pann was directly involved in different cultural circles and, without being a modern scholarly educated man, he had the solid knowledge of some old kind of education and he was an erudite of his own times.

He was, wrote G. Călinescu, *a Balkan whose family had instinctively chosen a country where they did not know a soul.* (Cornea, 1964, p 108.)

The anachronistic Orient meets the civilizing Occident and results into some interesting mixtures written in Anton Pann's creative verse, coming to life from a background that makes him an Enlightenment representative who describes *the middlemen's humanity typical for a society that had not been segregated profoundly yet and where the capitalism was starting its triumphant marching through tears and sweating. (*Călinescu, 1941, pp 206-207.)

As Mozes Gaster notices, of all the ethnical entities, the Turks *gathered all the Arabic wisdom in thousands of proverbs, the Persian one, just as rich in proverbs and sayings and their own, the Turanian one. That means that the Turks had in the same place the Semitic, the Arian and the Mongol wisdom, and they were ones of the greatest peoples of the Oriental world. (*Călinescu, 1941, pp. 206-207).

Vladimir Drîmba, who had good knowledge of the Turkish language, found in Anton Pann's works some *Romanian resources for the Turk dialectology. He had assimilated an infinitely rich treasure of an Oriental-Balkan origin which carries the mark of time and of its creator's personality. Pann's version needs another comparative study, extended to the whole work where the way from the Orient and that from the Occident end at a crossroad. (The Story of the Word*, 1936, p. 36-37).



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Dimitrie Popovici considers that Anton Pann's work consists of *reflexions from all the Balkan types of literature*[1] and Ovid Densușianu speaks about *some aspects specific to Bulgarian, Greek and Turkish literatures, to the Balkan folklore that seemed so familiar to Pann and which preserved its spoken character, being read at parties. (Drimba, 1962, vol. IV)*

P. Cornea, taking into account the issue of the Balkan nature of Anton Pann's works, goes further and discusses about the miraculous influence of this poet upon the authors that followed him. *In fact,* states Cornea, *this Balkan nature is a myth. And like any other myth it implies a certain obscure character and various possibilities of creating intellectual and affective impulses. It is likely that the attraction which Pann exercises on other authors may reside, more than anything, in this mythical existence, situated at the border between two different worlds, an existence which does not settle anywhere, offering as many hypotheses as possible so that the reader could really pay attention to the texts and the critic could invent some other kinds of reading.* (Cornea, 1964, p. 108-110.)

Anton Pann finally becomes the product of both folkloric books and the Balkan oral character. He had emerged from the Eastern folklore and his literary creation is in keeping with the Danubian-Pontic coordinates of Romanian sensitivity, these coordinates related to restlessness, wanderlust and inconstancy. His work is a paremiological treasure. Anywhere we look we shall find anecdotes, short narrations, aphorisms, proverbs and other literary forms of folklore. An incredibly complex literary, philosophical and moral universe, the influence of the Orient came to Anton Pann in two ways: an Eastern, traditional and oral one, and a new Western one, which resulted in two different ways of receiving it in a creative manner: the Oriental one and the other related to the Occidental Romanticism in development at the time. In his books, our writer proposes *the image of an Orient dominated by traditions, a realm of proverbs and wisdom. (*Cornea, 1964, p. 108-110).

The world Anton Pann introduces to the reader is not a pastoral one. It is a rather complementary, Balkan one, if not a more Oriental one. An exceptional contribution had, in this case, poetess Greta Tartler (having a BA degree in Arabic languages) who observed a number of similarities between the structure of the Arabic stories read at literary parties, the so-called *magamat,(Tartler,1981,p.165-183) Al Hamadhani, Al Hariri, Arabic Literary Parties,* and *The Story of the Word*, also between the main character types in *magama* (the false beggar - the secretive philosopher and the officially recognized wise man) and Pann's heroes of the fables or allegories, between the style of the *magama*, with its own rhythm and rhyme and the same prosody of our author's most important works: *An Evening Sitting of Village Women, The Story of the Word* and *The Cunning Crafts of Nastratin Hogea, between the moralizing character of the magama and the same meaning (rather implied than clearly stated)of his writing. (Ibidem)*

Leaving out the fact that he had read any Arabic *magamas* and being the author of the *Dialogue in three languages: Russian, Romanian and Turkish*, Anton Pann had perceived a pre-existing Oriental cultural background circulating at the time in oral and written traditional forms of literature and then he assimilated it to his creative genius through Turkish and Arabic cultures, much older and stronger than the others, as G. Tartler



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observed. We may find in his work fundamental characteristics, for example *Anton Pann is an erotic poet up to certain extent. In fact, he is an ethicist of the Eros* – this feature denotes an essential intrinsic movement of the poet towards ethics and morals, namely towards *the story of love, the story of the word.* Nevertheless, as far as we know, Pann's connection to the Arabic culture was an indirect one, so that a question may come up - whether this writer's creative way was also specific to any kind of classical work and first of all to folklore. The answer is *yes*, and *An Evening Sitting of Village Women* had an authentic setting that was typical for the folkloric classicism, symbolizing a contest among the tellers of sayings, anecdotes, riddles or the singers. This is a typical feature of Anton Pann's nature that we may find in his entire work. Therefore the continuity that he established with the previous genres of traditional literature and the discontinuity with the writers that followed him indicate not only the exact place Anton Pann has and the role he plays in the spiritual correlation East-West, but also to what extent he was an erudite and proved his literary creativity. It also allows us to see the universe of his modern literary works, *right between good and evil, within the eternal city* which joins the Bacchic or Dionysian to the Apollonic, the profane to the sacred, the Occident to the Orient.

Antonpannism or typical of Anton Pann becomes synonym to Balkan, his work representing the meeting point between the East and the West, the natural and picturesque world between reality and fiction, containing archaic and folkloric motifs, magical-Oriental events which he made local. Anton Pann is the writer who introduced in the Romanian literature an authentic Balkan thrill of wisdom, humour and exotics. His universe is a simple, peasant-like one, a fabulous Oriental one and a Balkan one, where Anton Pann proves to have been a good psychologist, clever in observing the people and ridiculing their vice. He mocks their shortcomings such as stupidity, hypocrisy, the vices of masters and servants, of young men and women, of bakers or vagabonds, of petty traders, a whole world of lazybones and gapers as opposite to another kind of world – the cosmopolitan one, that of the market and trade, of little business and commerce.

Anton Pan becomes a huge source of motifs and topics that are to be fond all over the world and represent a link of a chain which connects the old Asian cultures to the ones of Europe. He is a writer at a crossroad: on one hand stands the patriarchal and rural Orient, with a peaceful life, full of customs and traditions and on the other hand stands the Occident, with its accelerated rhythm of evolution, with its division of labour and the entrepreneur spirit of the bourgeoisie. On one side we find the religious authority, with its restrictions, on the other side we can see the suburbs of Bucharest, with its passions and vices, with its thirst of owing as many material things as possible, and the desire for partying. In his works we discover a whole range of crafts and trades of simple, ordinary people.

Economical life had a very important part in this world and the careful eye of the writer recorded the noisy traders of the towns still in development, seen as semirural centres. Here is an example of how realistically the market and its atmosphere was depicted by the poet: *In a town of no importance, /As large as our Bucharest, /Where people go to the market/Rushing to and fro, /Among those who sell products/ Or just various fruits, /Where cesspools reverberate/When hitting the tin plates, /Where some take or give or count/ While*



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*others burden arms, hands, shoulders, /Where numberless mouths and voices/Will not wait or listen/But speak aloud about no matter what.../ (The Story of the Word, 1847).*

Generally speaking, Anton Pann introduces the characters of his anecdotes and stories into an exotic background, which he adapts to the morals specific to our country in the first decades of the XIX century. This is the way the world looked like in his *Fables and Anecdotes* (1841): the upper classes are represented by the boyars, by arrogant town people who want to be considered little boyars as well, they have servants whom they torture, their guests get broth as a meal whereas the poor worker eats corn bread and his woman does all the household work; going to the fair becomes a real adventure, as the woods hide lots of thieves and beggars; the old autarchic relationships have disappeared and money is now the utmost ambition of people: *This kind of things make money, /Money is the reason, the enemy, /It gets people married, /It catches the eye, /When it comes first, /Fools become wise/And wise men get mad, /It is the only reason to live.* (*Fables and Anecdotes*, 1847)

We should not forget that the writer, working as a psalmist and a teacher of religious music, had a permanent connection with the clergy and was bound to a certain kind of restrained vocabulary and expression. The originality of the fables and anecdotes that Anton Pann wrote stands not so much in the topics he took from foreign sources, but in adapting them to the social and psychological structures of the people he lived with and created for. Anton Pann's craft *lies in the ingenious way of observing people's character and their background, the outskirts of Bucharest from 1810-1850, a place where peasants meet merchants, a picturesque world of mixed costumes, the Balkan world, the one of the Danube and the Archipelago, a world of tradesmen, craftsmen of all sort, horse dealers, drinkers, bad women, gossip old ladies, sergeants, tax collectors, gipsies, coppersmiths, shepherds who came here to sell the products they used to sell freely in the markets, the noisy fairs, where printers brought their merchandise, which was the most lasting of all. (*Rotaru, 1979, p. 89-105).

In this way we could speak of two different worlds: the world depicted in Anton Pann's books and the living world, the one that he himself lived in, distinct and yet united by the writer's existence. *We should have a righteous appreciation* of Anton Pann's world, *a thing of beauty in* the way the author of Isarlîk created it, and which generated a whole literature of the Balkans, *subtle in its flavours and full of the charm that enchanted Mateiu I. Caragiale, exerting a unique attraction on today's spiritual beings who - being seduced by it - recompose kaleidoscopically, narrate or re-read about an époque that still requires a systematic, careful study.* (Muthu, 1976, p.131).

The real world that the poet lived in could neither release those subtle flavours, nor seduce the beholder the way that the fictional one could, unless it is analyzed with the critical tools of the contemporary literary critic, who is willing to rediscover new aesthetical theories of the human qualities kept in all elementary and archaic shapes and forms. Anton Pann's literary world appears as a wonderful creation due to his incredible talent to perceive the significance and the burlesque charm of the past expressed in an archetypal language. Consequently, we may come to the conclusion that Anton Pann's universe has got its own autonomy, becoming *the equivalent of a prodigious work, which is worth being read, thought of, dreamt of, understood, interpreted and re-created now and again, and the more*



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*elementary his art seems here and there, the more suitable for life the world described by him was going to become.* (Dinu Flămând, *Critical References)*

Anton Pann appeared as a writer in our literature at the moment when education in the Romanian language was starting to develop and the readers of literary works (though few at the time) was beginning to increase. There was a new, changing phenomenon, referring to the larger number of educated people whose interest in reading determined the publishing of new books and brochures. At the same time, the content of the books played its role in the rather increasing appetite for reading and the incredible attraction that town people felt for the written word. Popular literature was the most wanted by the readers. Anton Pann was the most faithful source for his readers who in their turn became both affectionate readers and propagators of this kind of folklore. His public was made up of craftsmen, traders, teachers, educators, parish clerks, little boyars – all in all a crowd of people who lead a life that was slowly but surely separating from the old feudal forms and intended to get used to the new, modern pattern of society coming from the Occident. Although this new world was constantly and decisively evolving and improving, the poet enclosed himself within his miraculous and mysterious universe, accepting suggestions from the outside as long as they did not alter his way of thinking.

*He had long hair like Eminescu, was wearing a Kamelovkian like Ion Creangă and a moustache (inspiring Ion Barbu to do so later on). He knew Greek, Slavonic, Bulgarian, and Turkish, met all the scholars of the time and modestly considered he had very little knowledge, 'because a man keeps learning all his life and he dies an ignorant'. He was very child-like and seemed as old as the time or as old as the world itself. (Marin Sorescu Luceafărul)*

Transcending his poor social condition due to his talent and to his unusual occupation, he is the heir and representative of the oral culture specific to the South-Eastern part of Europe and the Near East, which he renders in a written form for the public to use it, saving it from the irreversible passing of time, collecting it in anthologies and turning it into an everlasting treasure. We could finally describe Anton Pann as an artist by seeing him as a creator of the topics he chose for his readers, and of a whole literary universe *situated between good and evil, the eternal city* which brings together the Dionysian and Apollonic character, the profane and the sacred, the Occident and the Orient.

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