EARLY FORMS OF ROMANIAN SCIENCE FICTION LITERATURE: "OCEANIA PACIFIC" BY ALEXANDRU MACEDONSKI

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Abstract*: The Macedonskian spirit, relentlessly seeking new experiences and ways to learn ever more about this world, to go beyond it and at the same time portray some of its acute problems, ventures into a different kind of fiction, one fathered by Jules Verne and H.G.Wells, namely science fiction. Although there are major differences to be noted between pure fiction and science fiction, the latter does essentially belong to the broader genre of fiction. Oceania-Pacific-Drednough turns out to be a veritable gold mine for its numerous shareholders, as an estimated fourteen million people wished to witness the launching of this world-class wonder of technology.*

Keywords*: fiction, imagination, novel*

"Oceania-Pacific-Dreadnought" might seem like the least lyrical one, but it builds on description, which Macedonski excels at and which is the most frequent repository of his overpouring lyricism. Lyricism is comparatively more toned down in this particular piece, which stands alone among Macedonski's writings due to its scientistic fiction, a field which Romanian writers almost ignored at the time. However, the science fiction story has directly ontological connotations, an underlying irony aimed at society in general, at the world.

It is undeniable that without Al. Macedonski's symbolist prose there would have been no prose writers, such as Arghezi, Vinea or Mateiu Caragiale and the fact that his legacy is carried forward proves both the historical and the aesthetical value of prose. It would be impossible to understand Macedonski himself without it, a false image would emerge in its absence, as prose plays a compensating role by offering psychoanalytic insights that bring the Macedonskian spirit to light.

One of his last pieces of short prose combines elements of fiction with irony, thus underscoring the irony of science fiction utopias (Oceania – Pacific – Dreadnaught)

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As far as intention is concerned, "Oceania-Pacific-Dreadnought" preserves Macedonski's usual ironic tone, but the means used to attain such a level of irony are out of the ordinary for Macedonski's prose and even for his time. The list of noteworthy writers in those days who used the science fiction genre as a vehicle for certain themes and intentions is quite short. Macedonski's story moves away from romantic fiction, in which the protagonist touches the Moon in his dreams, as he does in *Wretched Dionis*. In it the gravity, the seriousness of the issue or topic does not have to do with transcendence, but with the new conquests of science. The novelty which Macedonski brings, mainly through his writings, consists in this scientific elusion which lies at the foundation of imagining the

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building of the giant ship, which from the inside has the appearance of an actual city.

The first instance of anticipation is featured at the very beginning of the story: "It was the eve of 1952". The writer, deceased in 1920, places himself in an unidentified future time, from which he tells about a past that is certain, by using the past tense ("it was") and mentioning the year 1952. We are dealing with a past in the future, a time often employed in science fiction. Three great powers, England, France and America, join forces to build this "dreadnaugh", a cruiser "of peace", as the author points out.

Because of its size, the ship takes twenty years to build. The construction of this colossus required the contribution of all the inhabitants of the planet. Macedonski's story then continues with a hyperbolic description of the ship, in the style of Jules Verne: "In essence, this project materialised not in a ship, but in a mobile bridge, with a deck that looked down on the waves from high above, as it stood 50 metres over them, while spanning a surface equal to that of the whole of Paris. Supported by a forest of steel piers, every pair connected by wheels 20 metres in diameter, placed at deliberate distances, only halfway submerged, as their portly biconvexity contained compressed air, the commanding barge appeared like an apocalyptic beast floating over the waves."

The description goes on in the same vein, giving details as to the structure of the machine and its performance, the number of people it can carry, its bowels "as vast as its surface", all for the noble purpose of "restoring the dwindling spiritual currents that bind peoples".

These meticulous technical details are additional proof that the story pertains to a specific genre within fiction, namely science fiction. Although there are major differences to be noted between pure fiction and science fiction, the latter does essentially belong to the broader genre of fiction. Oceania-Pacific-Drednough turns out to be a veritable gold mine for its numerous shareholders, as an estimated fourteen million people wished to witness the launching of this world-class wonder of technology. Aside from everything happening on shore – crowds, investments and huge benefits – the ship itself "carried joy and welfare – all spiritual and material satisfactions – from one continent to another".

But such an invention, of such magnitude, will only lead to chaos, to disorder in the end. The peace of the world, such as it was, is suddenly troubled by the introduction of the element of technology and thus the people in Macedonski's short story, bewitched by the luxury and thriving on board of this Drednought of peace, refuse to work any more and chaos, disorder become the new attributes of the world. No more trade, industry, art, working the land. Everything vanishes. Even sweepers and lamplighters are not to be seen any more and that is because investing in the Drednought brought everyone prosperity and made them all rich".

Where were they supposed to find any more fools to cook food, fools to serve it to patrons and "even greater fools to go on stage and shout, cry and scream or make faces at the audience? They were all rich".

Macedonski's irony contributes to building a utopia in which there are no more class differences. Levelling people's status would only lead to the disappearance of the spirit of this world, to its values being flattened out. Macedonski's short story is not the only one of its kind in universal literature. It is somehow placed at the beginning of the road of utopical writings. Later on, on the same European stage, Karel Čapec will have a novel

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published that deals more extensively with the same issue tackled by Macedonski. The fiction of "Oceania-Pacific- Dreadnought", like the one of *The Absolute at Large* (1922), is a mere pretext or, more exactly, the metaphorical expression of the debate on man, life and its values. The science fiction of Macedonski's story contributes to approaching the issue of man in a way that is simplistic, but not without substance. Nevertheless, in both cases invention is presented as capable of causing a decisive turn in the destiny of the contemporary world.

An exaltation of the technicity of the modern era gives rise to the deliberately moralising and metaphorical pamphlet-short story **"**Oceania - Pacific Dreadnought", which Romanian sci-fi theorists have received with enthusiasm, seeing Al. Macedonski as a potential precursor of the genre in our country. And they may well be right, given the anticipatory vernian imagination that the prose writer sets into motion. Written around 1910-1911(**3**), the story's action is set in 1952, a year distant enough for the partisans of stupendous technological progress to allow themselves to entertain the most extravagant utopical fancies. And so it comes to pass that "the High Franco-Anglo-American Financial Authority", having subsidised the project of a "mobile bridge" to bind continents across the ocean for two decades, is now in the happy position of inaugurating this "frightful barge" that rises over the waves like "an apocalyptic beast".

The writer gives meticulous technical details about the construction, which is not as shocking through its originality as it is through its proportions ("In the so-called belly of the barge many plants were installed for producing the power of the 10,000 engines put together"; "30 metres high stood another – inferior – platform, its edges enclosed up to the height of 5 metres" etc), thus actually proposing a different existential territory for mankind, called "the *Dreadnought* of peace" – a replica of the continental ambient suspended between sea and sky. "All over the platform, which stretched into the horizon from shore to shore, home construction companies had started building long one-row palaces, made of a kind of light stone called sea foam or of aluminium. Streets had started to unfold on the platform, leading in all four cardinal directions and boulevards interrupted by large stones, gardens and parks set up on land brought in especially for that purpose, through which clear water streamlets ran, while others burst out of pools and powdered the grass and flowers with prismatic dust" etc), where no one wants to hurt anyone, because no one has to do anything, for everything is ready-made, mechanically processed etc, a *platform* which "will bind man to man in the same confederation: that of an incessant march toward progress".

Considering that as much as 12 voyages "that the *Oceania-Dreadnought* would make a year from one continent to another, carrying one million passengers every time" were scheduled, the ship appears as a grandiose replica of the *Titanic*, which shared a similarly violent end, except for the fact that this gigantic construction, "this *Dreadnought* of peace and happiness", which "carried joy and welfare – all spiritual and material satisfactions – from one continent to another", eventually proved to be *immoral*, as "no one wanted to work any more. And since no one wanted to move a finger any more, it soon became impossible to get hold of the slightest piece of bread – for all the money you could have paid – unless you kneaded and baked it yourself". Idleness resulted in "every people slowly sinking into barbarity" and so "a syndicate of bankers", seeking profit, of course,

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"transported an immense quantity of dynamite to various parts of the ship's bowels and set it ablaze one night, blowing it up". The result? People resumed their prior activities: "bakers, shopkeepers, innkeepers, policemen and even apaches appeared once more", as the world "was going to be rich and poor, happy and miserable, just like before".

The technicistic imagination, the anticipatory fiction come together in this story, as one may easily observe, to form a *fable* with an educational, moralising agenda of a polemic vision that Al. Macedonski for that matter excels at.

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