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FROM CAPITALIST ASPIRATIONS TO THE NATIONAL PROJECT. THE INTER-IMPERIAL TRANSYLVANIAN COMPROMISE

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Abstract: In the present article, I address two novelistic productions set in late 19th century and early 20th century Transylvania, discussing the different intersections of class, ethnicity, and culture underlying the constructed image of Empire in the periphery. Drawing on Manuela Boatcă and Anca Pârvulescu’s work on Transylvanian inter-imperiality – borrowed, in turn, from Laura Doyle –, the paper discusses Ioan Slavici’s *Mara* and Liviu Rebreanu’s *Forest of the Hanged* as stages of imperial downfall. The main argument is that, whereas *Mara* and other similar works present the interclass and interethnic conflict as negotiable compromise functioning as narrative momentum for the novelistic plot, the compromise comes undone in *Forest of the Hanged*, where the capitalist aspirations of the former work is put aside in the forging of national identity.

Keywords: Inter-imperiality, Slavici, Rebreanu, Transylvania, Austro-Hungarian Monarchy

Drawing on Manuela Boatcă and Anca Pârvulescu’s articles, “The Inter-Imperial Dowry Plot: Modernist Naturalism in the Periphery of European Empires” (2021) and “Creolizing Transylvania: notes on coloniality and inter-imperiality” (2020), which constitute the theoretical backbone of their upcoming volume, *Creolizing the Modern. Transylvania across Empires* (2022), this paper pursues the representation of different ethnic groups in the Romanian novelistic production in the late 19th and early 20th century. But, whereas Manuela Boatcă and Anca

Pârvulescu focus on Liviu Rebreanu's 1920 novel *Ion* in drawing the different tenets of Transylvanian inter-imperiality¹, my contribution will pursue how the different socio-economic and cultural tensions underpinning said inter-imperiality come to light in two novelistic productions; I will then corroborate the findings with a materialistic reading of how the entire concept of Empire was naturalized by the strata of Romanian society for whom these tensions were at the forefront of collective – national – and individual – auctorial – identity.

The period I will address stretches from the second half of the 19th century to the First World War, and the considerations are quite simple: not only does the period contain the first international conflagration, therefore comprising a whole set of possible instantiations of Empire(s) owing to the inherent internationalism of war, but it also leads us to the second global conflagration or contains, *in nuce*, the prerequisites for all future representations of imperial power, regardless if based on racial notions of *Kultur* or the equally despised Soviet internationalism. Another aspect is that the immixture of imperial social, economic, and cultural tensions at the heart of the novels and as they unfold *in the periphery* sketch, akin to Hari Seldon's Psychohistory in Asimov's *Foundation*, the tell-tale signs of imperial downfall. How else can we interpret the opaque, multi-ethnic, conflict-laden, cumbersome bureaucracy and arrogance of the Habsburg Monarchy in *Ion*, the decadent oriental turn-of-the-century backbone of Mateiu I. Caragiale's *Craii de Curtea Veche* (1929), or the cold and impersonal reflection of militarised, condescending, idiosyncratic, morally superior German culture in Camil Petrescu's *Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război* (1930)? Albeit it would be extremely interesting to gain an insight into the entire array of (inter-)imperial entrenchment by looking at more than one region, I will not delve deeper into all Romanian provinces but rather concentrate on Transylvania, given its versatility and clear-cut degrees of peripherality, as it was peripheral to "the Austro-Hungarian empire, while the empire itself was politically and socio-economically on the semi-periphery of the modern world-system. Located, moreover, at the crossroads of the Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires, Transylvania exemplifies the

¹ Boatecă and Pârvulescu's articles borrow Laura Doyle's concept of "inter-imperiality" (Doyle). However, Doyle's book, while discussing the great empires that survived up until the 19th and 20th century, does not address the relationship between Transylvania and its core, the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

inter-imperial condition". (Boatcă and Pârvulescu, *Dowry Plot* 572). We therefore encounter not only a regional peripherality within the European world-system (in relation to Austria, Hungary, eventually to their powers combined), but also a global one. To this end, I will present two patterns of how Empire is reflected in the "primitive woodland" (Cioran) of Transylvania; many more configurations are, perhaps, possible, and will most likely be addressed in other articles. For now, it is important to note that the tiny fissures that will break an empire are first seen in the colonies.

Aspirational Empire-making

The first pattern designates the utopian multi-ethnic conviviality envisioned in post-1848 Transylvania, the ambitious dream of peaceful polyglossia wherein one can but faintly glimpse the imperial construct for what it is: a fragile interclass and interethnic "compromise" mirroring the Austro-Hungarian compromise which was to later occur. I argue that it is only in the materialization of this utopian project that the cracks, holes, and dramatic shortcomings of an otherwise feudal construct can be seen. For illustrating this state of affairs, I have chosen Ioan Slavici's novel *Mara*. Published in 1906, but set in the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution, the novel depicts the entrepreneurial spirit of the Romanian widow Mara, who labours for the social mobility of her two children, Persida and Trică, against the backdrop of Austrian absolutism. Despite her best efforts and the fact that both are propelled into better lives than what their initial orphaned status would have indicated (in any case, different from how conventional naturalism would have drawn their trajectories)², Persida secretly marries the son of a "German" (actually Austrian) butcher, a spoiled "momma's boy"³ (Slavici 33), Națl Hubăr. His father, Anton Hubăr, is discontent with his son having disrupted the established family tradition by traveling aimlessly instead of concentrating on learning the butcher's trade in order to conclude his apprenticeship and earn his "master's cut", a challenge meant to test his abilities. For

² In the novel, class struggle melts into broader political, religious, and ethnic issues, and is not addressed directly. Albeit the fatherless family did not start out as utterly dispossessed, the plot still required a narrative catalyst that could tip this fragile wellbeing either towards enrichment/improvement or towards impoverishment/misery. And this catalyst is Mara or, better yet, her class ambition.

³ "He wasn't capable of speaking harshly to anyone and he would tear up whenever he saw his mother upset". [Nu era însă în stare să rostiască o vorbă aspră și se'nduioșa pînă la lacrămî, cînd vedea pe mumă-sa mîhnită.]

the ambitious Mara, however, marrying her daughter off to the skilled worker and future businessowner Națl is, despite the considerable upward mobility this entails, not enough. For her, the real mobility represents breaking the barrier between labour and nonlabour work, as she dreams of arranging a marriage between Persida and Codreanu, the son of a priest and the nephew of a reputed archpriest in the region. Persida herself is “bred” into this higher social class by her mother; her beauty, repeatedly emphasized throughout the novel, is nonetheless dismissed as a misfortune, something that often takes the form of class contempt, as expressed by Națl’s mother: “it’s such a tragedy to be so fresh, so beautiful, and to have Mara as your mother, a mere saleswoman [*precupeață* in the original Romanian, with a slightly more demeaning undertone] and bridge keeper”⁴ (Slavici 40).

Within the enclosed space of the Transylvanian ethnic pool, the Hungarians and Saxons had already comprised a rural aristocracy, replicating, at a smaller scale, the proto-bourgeois wealth division: they enjoyed political representation, yet fought for domination over a barren land; up until 1848, 60% of the Transylvanian population consisted of Romanians, yet they had no representative in the Landtag (Wittstock 166), and were ignored in the *Sprachkampf* as well, as the Hungarian and Saxon authorities each struggled to impose either Hungarian or German as official language of administration in Transylvania.

There were “three nations” (in a premodern sense) in Transylvania within the estate system. One group was constituted by the Hungarian nobility, a fluid nonethnic category, anchored in noble privilege and land ownership. The other was made up of Szeklers, a Hungarian-speaking population in the Eastern Carpathians and closest to the Hungarian nobility. The third were the Transylvanian Saxons, German-speaking and increasingly urban. These three “nations” participated unequally in the exploitation of Romanian- and Hungarian-speaking serfs. (Boatcă and Pârvulescu, *Creolizing Transylvania* 15).

It is only in this passive status quo that the empire could have functioned for the Transylvanian inter-imperial intersection of the second half of the 19th century, namely within a feudal class hierarchy where Romanian ethnics lacked rights – and

⁴ “e mare nenorocire să fii atât de fragedă, atât de frumoasă și să ai mamă pe Mara, precupeață și podăriță.”

possessed no class consciousness as serfs. The emergence of capitalism at the periphery, manifest through the rise of this new social class, the *Romanian* bourgeoisie and petty provincial bourgeoisie, entails the introduction of a materialistic underpinning dismissing any utopian projection of equitable conviviality. The peaceful multi-ethnic – “simultaneously peasant and cosmopolitan in spirit” (Zamfir 330) – collaboration and intersectional social mobility is rendered superfluous by socio-economic tensions: the German butcher Hubăr, a “hardworking and lively Viennese”⁵ propelled to new material wellbeing following the Revolution (Slavici 34), does not accept his son to marry “a bridge-keeper’s daughter”, notwithstanding that “accrued money is a sign of [Mara’s] virtue” and “all the guests understood why she sits in her chair like in a throne, speaking composedly and solemnly”⁶ (Slavici 377) at Națl and Persida’s wedding later in the novel. Once this love story is enacted and its narrative function as purveyor of ethnic and class tensions fulfilled, Națl – hitherto spared by his protective mother and his good overall social standing – proves to be unfit for the realities of labour and least of all for the realities of his trade, as he squanders his chances at an unbothered, wealthy life, injures his father in an altercation while setting off an intergenerational conflict, and ends up in an unhappy marriage with Persida, whom he regards as the reason for his failures. He then takes after his father in the carefree manner in which he manages the married couple’s newly acquired tavern, leaving all affairs in Persida’s hands, while Persida herself starts to show signs of her mother’s authoritarian and determined entrepreneurship. The alleged moral superiority of the Austrian butcher Hubăr is also dismantled, as the mentally troubled factotum Bandi – stepping in during key moments throughout the entire novel, always dismal, always auxiliary, never crucial, yet never forgotten – discovers he is his unrecognized son, whose mother died in misery, and murders him in the novel’s concluding page. A hint of naturalism colours the latter half of the novel, nonetheless.

Therefore, even if the paupers acquire legitimate capital, that is just enough to transgress a class divide as deeply inscribed in ethnicity as the one between the skilled Viennese worker relocated to the peripheral colony and the unskilled, yet cunning and resourceful widow. As we see, the utopian upward mobility inscribed in

⁵ “un vienez harnic și chefliu.”

⁶ “banul agonisit e dovadă de vrednicie, și mesenii toți înțelegeau, de ce Mara șade în scaun ca pușă într’un jeț și vorbește rar și apăsat.”

the peaceful imperial conviviality shows itself for what it really is: a space wherein the successive degrees of Transylvanian peripherality (in relation to Austria, Hungary, and eventually to Austria-Hungary, one the one hand, and in the broader world-system, as mentioned previously) meet the intersections of class, ethnicity, and socio-political power (Collins and Bilge) – the impoverished woman becoming empowered while navigating the hostile waters of early capitalism. As Națl and Persida's child is born, Anton insists on him being baptized in the Catholic religion, in this way officially consenting to their union and acquiescing the interethnic compromise.

What makes the deeply flawed nature of this compromise even more compelling is the fact that Slavici himself was not aware of it or, instead, was a firm believer in the possibility of empire (Călinescu 512): “For years, he will claim, against everyone, that Romanians have ‘the chance of developing freely even in the present Hungarian state’. They have to seek ‘allies’ ‘from their own fatherland’ and be ‘an element of order and culture at the monarchy’s oriental borders’” (Călinescu 508). A subordinate position which seems not only acceptable, but desirable in order to maintain the status quo, since Slavici further cultivated a form of “Philo-Hungarianism” and “increasing contempt” for the “Byzantinism on the other side” (Călinescu 507), i.e., for the Romanian, “Oriental”, Other⁷. The – implicitly loyal to the monarchy, Transylvanian – “element of order and culture” is opposed to notions of “Byzantian” unruliness and “oriental” (sub)culture. However, the disenfranchised Transylvania-Romanian peasants that should ideally come together under the monarchic umbrella and breed solidarity within their own ranks are no better off than those of Wallachia and Moldova, a detail that makes Slavici’s imperial sympathies the expression of some sort of cultural self-colonization, as “the Habsburg dynasty still seemed powerful to the political writer and the thought of all Romanians uniting into a larger state organism wholly premature. He would have rather aspired, for now, for the autonomy of Transylvanian Romanians within the Empire” (Cioculescu 255).

It is only when the similarities between the two social pools – the Transylvanian Romanian peasants and the Wallachian and Moldovan ones – start to disappear through this – rudimentary, yet *inherited*, hence intergenerational –

⁷ For which he was later jailed.

entrepreneurial spirit that the economic tensions develop into ethnic ones, proving that Slavici's model – concurrent with my claim regarding the possibility of empire only in a feudal context – is tenable only as long as Romanians are second-class citizens. Therefore, as the imperial myth materializes in the real economic world of the emerging Romanian capitalism, the impossibility of its effective fulfilment becomes increasingly clear.

[T]he dissolution of the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Tsarist imperial states often lead not to the liberation of the previously occupied provinces in the region but to a shift from imperial systems based on the exploitation of an unfree peasant labor force to systems functioning under the jurisdiction of the Western capitalist powers. These powers were interested in an increase of agrarian production and thus in the re-enservement and overexploitation of rural labor. (Boatcă and Pârvulescu, *Creolizing Transylvania* 13).

Therefore, serfdom, albeit it technically vanished, gave rise to paupers. Paupers, in their turn, further bred the social tensions of the previously existing serfdom, and as Romanians threatened to become (more) socially mobile, class struggle was interwoven with antisemitism, and they were forced to “navigate a bureaucratic system functioning in imperial languages (first German, then Hungarian). Judges, most often Hungarian-speaking, became arbiters of formalization laws. [...] In this inter-imperial predicament, [...] new forms of inequality were produced, intersecting with entrenched forms of injustice.” (Boatcă and Pârvulescu, *Creolizing Transylvania* 21). Understandably, Romanian peasants came to resent imperial bureaucracy, which was not invested with the solemnity it was supposed to inspire but was seen rather as a prolongation of pre-existing forms of exploitation. This is exactly what we see in Rebreanu's *Ion*, where everybody is forced to “learn the language of the rulers” and where Herdelea, the village teacher – the nationalist petty bourgeois rural intelligentsia – bitterly remarks that “the Romanian who has to teach Romanian children to speak only Hungarian is no longer a Romanian, but a downright renegade”⁸ (Rebreanu, *Ion* 73-4).

⁸ “Românul care trebuie să învețe pe copiii români să vorbească numai ungurește nu mai e român, ci renegat sadea...”

In other words, this entire stage of aspirational polyglossia finds itself under the sign of fragile social, ethnic, and religious compromise. Social compromise, for it is only through wealth that Mara can prove her virtue; ethnic compromise, for it is only after resistance that both parties accept to overstep their ethnic caste; and ultimately, religious compromise, as Anton insists on having his nephew baptized according to Catholic tradition.

Compromise undone

The second phase of imperial ambitions takes place during the First World War, some 70 years after the revolution that had benefitted old Anton Hubăr so much and approximately 50 years following the 1867 Austro-Hungarian compromise. The inter-imperial frame of Transylvania has not changed so significantly, yet the international outreach or, better yet, the international *awareness* of novelistic narratives has. What this means is – as proven by a recent article dealing with the changes in the literary geography registered between the 19th and early 20th century in the Romanian novelistic production (Baghiu et al 1-11) – that the plots have become more cosmopolitan, escaping the narrow frames of the local and reaching distant, even exotic locations, as well as a more pronounced presence of the Hungarian element, usually taking the form of ethnic tensions. In this context – and especially in the context of war, with its inherent displacement – we will encounter not only more locations, but also a more *realpolitik* rhetoric of geography, dependency, ethnicity, and conflict. That is to say, the relationship between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its Eastern colony, on the one hand, and that between the dominant ethnic groups and Transylvanian Romanians, on the other, will come into the foreground in explicit terms; after 1867, landownership rights, previously negotiated based on informal exchanges without any proper legal underpinning, were being brought to the attention of imperial bureaucracy, which gave rise to a whole set of issues. However, the start of the First World War moved the conflict from matters affecting first and foremost the peasants – as *Ion* also shows, the problems with which the petty bourgeoisie is confronted, albeit economically anchored, do not have anything to do with land and landownership, the single most important thing for a peasant – to an all-encompassing frame putting the very cultural identity of Transylvania up for debate. In the context of war, anything else

seems trivial, but as we shall see, the encroachment of imperial bureaucracy is insurmountable.

For this stage, I have chosen Liviu Rebreanu's 1922 *Forest of the Hanged*, set during the effective dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the First World War. The novel features Apostol Bologa⁹, a young student whose distant ancestor had been a part of the initial peasant uprising of 1784 against serfdom. His father, a lawyer, was himself arrested in the Trial of the Memorandum, a petition sent to Emperor Franz Josef in 1892, in which Transylvania essentially demanded equal ethnic rights for Romanians living in the region. As it is already clear, therefore, the novel is deeply anchored in a political context as specific as it is obscure outside the Eastern European space. Apostol Bologa lets himself be suffused with the militarist spirit of Austro-Hungary (Rebreanu, Pădurea 16) and falls victim to his own vanity as he enlists as volunteer in fighting against his Romanian co-nationals during the war. He is cosmopolitan and filled with a hesitant imperial admiration at first, rather the expression of the misalignment between him and his fiancée Marta Domșa, the daughter of a wealthy lawyer from his hometown of Parva, Bistrița-Năsăud, who makes no secret out of her admiration for military bravery, uniforms, etc. But the inflamed rhetoric that allows him to self-legitimize as citizen of the empire is cut short as he reaches the Romanian front. His parents, however, are aware of the real-life implications of war and the looming double danger it poses from the very get-go:

- To put your life in danger?! For whom and for what?
 - For the fatherland [...]
 - We have no fatherland! [...] This is no fatherland ... [...]
 - You, our hope? To fight for the Hungarians who are fighting against us, Romanians?
 - When you have a fatherland like ours, you're not obliged to listen to the call of duty, quite the contrary!
 - But still, what about the idea?, Apostol asked without any conviction.
 - What idea? ... When your life's at stake, you don't give a damn about any idea...¹⁰
- (Rebreanu, Pădurea 47)

⁹ The character is supposedly shaped after the author's very brother, for the volume bears the dedication: "In loving memory of my brother, Emil, hanged by the Hungarians on the Romanian front in 1917".

¹⁰ "— Să-ți primejduiești tu viața? Pentru cine și pentru ce?
 — Pentru patrie [...]
 — Noi n'avem patrie! [...] Asta nu-i patrie... [...]"

Precisely like in *Ion*, where the young peasant is torn between the *voice of earth* – represented by Ana – and the *voice of love* – represented by Florica, in *Forest of the Hanged*, Marta represents the cosmopolitan, witty, Hungarian-spirited, conforming, yet superficial *fancy* – mirroring the superficial pro-imperial sympathies of Apostol and of the entire Romanian self-colonizing elites. On the other hand, Ilona, this “warm, simple, untamed”¹¹ (Rebreanu, *Pădurea* 243) Hungarian peasant he encounters later in the novel embodies Apostol’s rediscovered Christian faith, which he had inherited from his late father, lost, and now took hold of again while also rediscovering his *fatherland*, Romania. The fact that Ilona is Hungarian is of great importance, since beyond the predictable clichés that love can transgress all differences, it relays the constructed nature of ethnicity while also conserving Rebreanu’s bias for the possibility of peaceful conviviality within a national body consisting not of an army or an array of institutions but of people, etc. Returning home on leave, Apostol breaks off his engagement with Marta, who is now courted by a Hungarian officer, and is painfully aware of the folly of having tried to gain her heart by enlisting. His seemingly hostile attitude towards the Hungarian language – as Marta tried to justify the failed engagement by spreading the rumour that Apostol disliked her speaking Hungarian – is regarded as a sign of anti-imperial stances and condemned.

This is what the “double danger” actually entails: on the one hand, the hostility of one’s Romanian co-nationals, i.e., the looming promise of indictment following the inevitable annexation of Transylvania by the Romanian Kingdom¹², and on the other, the very palpable danger of military execution. It is here that the intersecting degrees of Transylvanian inter-imperiality become a form of in-between peripherality (Tötösy de Zepetnek 89-110): the region is symbolically disputed between loyalist Hungarian and Saxon ethnics, on the one hand, and conflicted

– Cum, tu? SperaŃa noastră? Să te bați tu pentru ungurii care ne bat pe noi? Dar când ai o patrie ca a noastră nu ești deloc obligat să te îmbulzești la datorie, ba chiar dimpotrivă!

– Și totuș ideea? zise Apostol fără convingere.

– Ce idee?... Când e viața omului în joc, dai dracului toate ideile...”

¹¹ “caldă, simplă, sălbatecă”

¹² There is, however, a second degree of perceived difference between Transylvanian Romanians and those living in the Old Kingdom. When we reframe the pan-Romanian “missionary role as outpost[s] of Latinism and civilization among a sea of (Slavic and Turkic) barbarians”, in the words of Maria Todorova, we cannot help but notice how these “barbaric” influences were delegated geographically to Moldova and Wallachia, sparing Transylvania. It is, therefore, quite understandable that the Transylvanian bourgeoisie would side with Budapest *against* its Latin roots (Todorova 46).

Romanians, for whom an aspiration towards civic emancipation¹³ meets a self-preservation instinct. The territorial conflict forces the “quantum state” of Transylvanian identity to collapse, best expressed through what a captured Romanian sublieutenant tells Apostol while questioned:

If you'd truly be a Romanian, you wouldn't shoot at your brothers – the sublieutenant answered shortly, with so much contempt that his entire expression had changed. Your place would be on the other side, not here, sir ... But Romanians such as yourself...¹⁴
(Rebreanu, *Pădurea* 156)

The regime is one of implacable “imperial culture”: as the entire political turmoil comes to a boiling point through war, the imperial swan song reverberating in the periphery is that of aggressive bureaucracy. “An order is an order!”¹⁵ (Rebreanu, *Pădurea* 261) exclaims a bitter gravedigger while bemoaning how some Romanian peasants found near the front were unrightfully accused of treason and unceremoniously hanged by Hungarian military.

Whereas the higher ranks are conscious of and violently impose the construct of “duty”, the lower ordinances – belonging chiefly to the peasantry – ridicule and despise it. “I did my duty”, says Varga¹⁶ while delivering Apostol to stand trial for desertion, to which the receiving officer “mumbled morosely”: “Duty, duty. [...] Day in, day out, nothing but duty...”¹⁷ (Rebreanu, *Pădurea* 299). This duty is, however, merely the expression of self-preservation: its function is to safeguard “the order of the state and of society as correlative expression of the honour of a specific community (the military class or the bourgeoisie)” (Tudurachi 78). Yet another matter wherein purely abstract, pre-materialistic ideals become infused with class and where words like “duty” are spoken and heard only by the privileged: the idealistic lawyer's son Apostol invokes “the idea” while his parents dismiss it, fully aware of the consequences of such “ideas”. In addition to the excessive emphasis on

¹³ If not for the well-off bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, for the peasantry.

¹⁴ “Dacă ai fi adevărat român, n'ai trage în frați — răspunde repede sublocotenentul cu atâta dispreț încât i se schimbă deodată înfățișarea. Locul d-tale ar fi dincolo, nu aici, domnule... Dar români ca d-ta...”

¹⁵ “Ordin și iar ordin!”

¹⁶ Who had warned Apostol repeatedly and not without a certain sadistic pleasure that, if he were to catch him while fleeing over to the Romanian side, he would show no remorse in capturing him and delivering him to stand trial.

¹⁷ “Datoria, datoria—murmură ursuz ofițerul. Ziua-noaptea datoria...”

Order as purveyor of the status quo, the Empire engages in positive self-representation: “Because we are humane ... we ... our army ... [...] what do you think, Major? Have you ever seen so much humanity in an army since the beginning of time? And still, our enemies accuse *us* of barbarity!”¹⁸ (Rebreanu, Pădurea 135).

This is yet another stanza of the swan song, since Apostol refuses to deny that he had attempted to desert – as advised by his fellow officer and eventually his friend, Otto Klapka – and through this refuses the imperial rhetoric of orderly, serene, civilized compromise; in short, he refuses the condescendence of an army trying to navigate what it regards as petty provincial sensibilities. But the following quote perhaps channels the entire paradox of Empire in the clearest and most bitter terms:

Our anarchist wants an international ... Isn't that so, comrade? ... Well, here's your International! [...] Look, you're a Jew, the Captain is Czech, the doctor there is German, Cervenco is a Ukrainian, Bologa is Romanian, I am Hungarian ...isn't it? What are you, boy?, he asked, turning suddenly to the soldier who took his time in clearing the other table [...] – Croatian, Sir! Mumbled the soldier without blinking. – Croatian, you don't say – said the lieutenant turning to the other officers. And I'm sure that on the other side, in the large hall or on the porch we'll also find Poles, Serbians, and Italians, essentially all peoples, right? ... and we're all fighting together for a common ideal against a common enemy! There's your real International, comrade!¹⁹ (Rebreanu, Pădurea 59).

A wide-ranging collection of ethnic identities gathered under the umbrella of military conquest is engaged *against* other, perhaps equally cosmopolitan and accommodating ethnic groups, representing a vague, collective “common enemy”. It is here that the Compromise is simultaneously enacted and undone: the peaceful cohabitation and collaboration of different ethnicities are seen as an attainable goal,

¹⁸ „Căci noi sântem umani... Noi... armata noastră... [...] Ce zici, domnule maior? S'a mai pomenit atâta umanitate în vre-o armată de când e istoria? Și totuș pe noi ne acuză dușmanii de barbarie!”

¹⁹ “Anarhistul nostru vrea o internațională... Așa-i, camarade?... Ei bine, uite internaționala! Adaogă cu mândrie, ridicând glasul și arătând împrejur cu mâna spre toți cei de față. Uite!... Tu ești ovreu, domnul căpitan e ceh, doctorul de colea e german, Cervenco e rutean, Bologa e român, eu sunt ungar... Așa-i?... Tu ce ești, băete? se întoarce apoi deodată către soldatul care nu mai isprăvea de strâns masa cealaltă. [...] — Croat, să trăiți! murmură soldatul fără să clipească. Ei, va să zică croat — urmă locotenentul către ofițeri. Și sunt sigur că dincolo, în sala cea mare sau în tindă vom găsi și polonezi, și sârbi, și italieni, înșfârșit toate neamurile, nu-i așa?... Și cu toții luptăm umăr la umăr pentru un ideal comun contra dușmanului comun! Iată internaționala adevărată, tovarășe!”

yet the driving force of this collaboration is armed conflict. With his serene acceptance of death – simultaneously of love, God, and long-dormant patriotic feelings –, Apostol refuses not only the presumed superiority of Empire, but also the compromise which seemed to attainable and desirable to Slavici.

The two novels do not necessarily indicate an involution from a long-lost – abstract, nostalgic – possibility of empire to its permanent, messy dissolution, but rather the evolution from the initial emergence of the Romanian capitalistic class to the (tragic) genesis of a national identity. In *Mara*, the compromise is shown for what it is, a tense balance between ethnicities, classes, and religions, whereas in *Forest of the Hanged*, the compromise is undone, the ambiguous quantum state collapses, and Transylvanian identity is forced to “choose” between two national entities hurriedly sewn together after the 1848 Revolution and the Romanian War of Independence, that is to say, between two equally fragile and threatening “empires”.

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