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Neoextractivism, or the birth of magical realism as world literature

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, literary criticism has shown increased interest towards the manner in which fiction depicts (neo)extractivism as a set of practices whereby large quantities of natural resources are exploited for export. However, scholars have overlooked the manifestation of this phenomenon in areas and epochs other than post-1945 Latin America. Based on a close reading of two Romanian interwar novels – Cezar Petrescu's *Pământ și cer* and Mihail Sadoveanu's *Noaptea de Sânziene* – this article aims to demonstrate that extractive fictions played a decisive role in the emergence of magical realism as a narrative mode whereby the peripheries have left a distinctive mark on the configuration of world literature. My argument follows three consecutive steps: first, I explore how the two novels represent neoextractivism as a mechanism for the destruction of the biocoenosis and the othering of natives; then, I show that the magical, mythical, and supernatural distinguish themselves in the two works as the only instruments able to stop capitalist commodification; lastly, I show that the particular mode of representation the two novels deploy (which I label 'proto-magical realism') turns them into the missing link, on a transnational scale, between interwar social and regional fictions and early postwar magical realist works.

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Introduction: (neo)extractivism as practice and discourse

During the past decade, literary scholars have shown increased interest in what can be called 'extractive fictions', by studying the modalities of representing (neo)extractivism in narrative works, exploring their ideological, economic, and ethical premises, and advancing critiques of this practice and the (neo)colonial conditions which support it.¹ Certainly, this surge of interest can be linked to the concerns raised by the ever-growing and irresponsible exploitation of the natural environment,² which has manifested itself in the climate change associated with pollution and global warming,

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the depletion of several categories of natural resources, and the damaging of numerous ecosystems, triggering the extinction of multiple species of plants, insects, and animals. And yet, despite literary academics' preoccupation with (neo)extractivism, research into this topic is still very much in its infancy; moreover, studies appear to have narrowed their scope down to two specific avenues, which may very well prove restrictive: on the one hand, the corpus of fictional works under scrutiny tends to be associated exclusively with Latin America (it is, indeed, not coincidental that El Dorado as an extractivist heaven is located there); on the other hand, its investigation focuses particularly on 'contemporary' works, i.e. on works written after 1945, a period known as 'the Great Acceleration'.³

In other words, recent literary studies devoted to (neo)extractivism often overlook fictional representations of the phenomenon that originate in pre-World War II (semi)peripheral cultures and societies, whose subservience to various metropolises cannot be reduced to instances of modern colonialism. One of these cases, atypical in terms of status, albeit highly indicative, is late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Romania, a formally independent state whose subordinate position within the capitalist system of the period was nonetheless described by sociologists through terms such as '(national) dependency'⁴ and '(neo)colonialism'.⁵ Studying the representation of neoextractivism in these societies does not merely add new empirical details to an already charted background of literary history; in fact, in many cases, their exploration may lead to a large-scale rethinking of the very processes governing this history. This is precisely what I hope to achieve in this article, which sets out to demonstrate how an analysis of two novels published in interwar Romania – Cezar Petrescu's diptych *Pământ și cer* (*Earth and Heaven*, 1931–1934) and Mihail Sadoveanu's *Noaptea de Sânziene* (*Midsummer Nights*, 1934) – can help to support a broader discussion of the relationship between the intensification of neoextractivism and the emergence of magical realism as a specific narrative form whereby (semi)peripheral cultures make their entrance onto the scene of world literature.

Before embarking on this study, a concise overview of the instruments it uses and the contexts it targets is in order. First and foremost, what is extractivism (as a generic term)? The word does not denote the mere 'exploitation of nature and labor',⁶ but rather names a more specific phenomenon. Economists employ the concept to indicate 'those activities which remove large quantities of natural resources that are not processed (or processed only to a limited degree), especially for export'.⁷ Notwithstanding the fact that there is no consensus in place amongst specialists with regard to the content of extractivism, the use of the word seems all the more legitimate as the resources to which it refers are not easily renewable. In other words, 'extractivism' is widely accepted in discursive contexts tackling the processes

of extracting resources like diamonds, minerals, oil or lumber, while its application to fishing and farming is still quite controversial.

Apart from its definition, extractivism tends to evince three features. First, the possibility of shipping considerable amounts of natural resources over great distances implies a degree of technological development which is usually associated with 'modernisation', a process which has governed the dynamics of human civilisation for the last 500 years, and, in no lesser degree, to 'the myth of modernity', which has served the former phenomenon as guide and justification.⁸ It is still debatable whether extractivism begins with colonialism, yet it is certain that the former persists in the aftermath of the latter. Therefore, a crucial distinction must be made between (colonial) extractivism and neo- or postcolonial extractivism or neoextractivism;⁹ for the moment, it suffices to say that, given the epoch and culture in which the two Romanian novels mentioned above were written and published, the present essay refers exclusively to neoextractivism. Second, extractivism entails that states and/or organisations undertaking to extract resources located at a great distance not only possess the necessary technology, but also have also depleted these resources in their own territories (or that their extraction has become unprofitable, for whatever reason). Consequently, extractivism corresponds not only to the process of modernisation, but also to the stage of capitalist expansion on a global scale – to be more precise, to the stage in which capitalism has taken on the form of a world-system asymmetrically divided into core (which can extract, ship, and process resources by mastering technology) and peripheries (which can only supply unprocessed resources, since they lack technology).¹⁰ Accordingly, extractivism is most often present in the peripheries, although these do not necessarily coincide with certain countries or geopolitical areas and may include territories within countries otherwise not regarded as peripheral per se, such as the boreal forest of Canada or the Arctic areas of Norway. Third (and most importantly), extractivism is not limited to an economic *practice* nor to an ecological one, but it 'traverses economics, nature, and culture'.¹¹ As for the last aspect – that of the 'culture' of extraction – it is not confined to either an 'extractive view'¹² or to an 'extractive mentality' or 'mind-set',¹³ but it also materialises as extractivist *discourse*, based on a number of philosophical, biological, economic, and ideological assumptions: that the planet's resources are (virtually) unlimited; that the right to benefit from these resources belongs first and foremost to those countries/organisations capable of using ('extracting') them best; that the (non)human environment can be ignored to a greater or lesser extent during this process of extraction; that native populations are (as yet) undeveloped and that they should follow a certain path of development; and, last but not least, that the most efficient path is, at least for the moment, exploiting and exporting local natural resources.

Romania and its paradoxes of development

Neoextractivist discourse often pervades the two novels I will explore in what follows. Yet in order to better understand the relationship between this discourse and the historical practice it tries to legitimate, a geopolitical and economic detour is necessary. Dealing with the 'extraction' of oil (*Pământ și cer*) and lumber (*Noaptea de Sânziene*), the two novels mentioned above outline a radiography of the socioeconomic situation of Romania in the 1920s, a period which most contemporary historians perceive as the country's 'golden age'.¹⁴ For Romania, the interwar period indeed represents the pinnacle of a series of political, social, and economic triumphs, which seemed to warrant the hope for a very bright future. In political terms, this series was marked by the union between Wallachia and Moldavia (1859), by Romania's War of Independence (1877) and, above all, by its allegiance to the alliance that emerged victorious from World War I. This last circumstance allowed the Romanian State to effect a 'Great Union' in 1918, following which it increased its territory by 120 percent (from 138,000 to 304,000 square kilometres) and its population by 135 percent (from 7.5 to 17.6 million inhabitants).¹⁵ Moreover, the Romanian government initiated a series of agrarian reforms between 1917 and 1921, and adopted a new Constitution in 1923, which provided for a number of democratic rights and freedoms.¹⁶

Nonetheless, the Romanian process of accelerated modernisation has also been the object of justified critique. Thus, a cursory analysis of the available data shows that, though it did not impede economic growth, the interwar period enhanced the existing disparities between Romania and the rest of Europe (including the Balkans); in other words, the country's economic evolution in this period was 'rather unfavourable', both in terms of its rank in the hierarchy of European countries and with regard to the world average.¹⁷ Some of the causes that have led to this development are the devastating effects of World War I, the incompetence of local elites, and the competition resulting from the international capital. Furthermore, an important factor in this series of setbacks seems to have been Romania's blockage in an economy based on the production of primary goods. For instance, if until World War I Romania's main economic sector and provider of export goods was agriculture, after the formation of 'Greater Romania', grain crops were superseded by other raw materials, especially oil and lumber.

The extraction of the former had a long tradition in Romania, a country regarded as 'one of the cradles of the modern petroleum industry',¹⁸ since it was here that the first oil refinery in the world was founded in 1857. However, notwithstanding the fact that a significant increase in production had been recorded until World War I, it was limited by the reduced domestic needs, as well as protectionist legislation restricting foreign investment. The real boom took place in the interwar period, when, stimulated by legislative changes such

as the mine law of 1929, which posited an equality of rights between domestic and foreign capital, petrol production increased eight-fold, from 1.034 to 8.384 million tons.¹⁹ This was a major increase in relation to both other countries and other sectors of the Romanian economy. Thus, the value of oil in Romania's exports first superseded that of the grain crops in 1928, and it retained its supremacy until the end of World War II, reaching ratios of over 50 percent in the mid-1930s.²⁰ On the other hand, by 1935, when Romania reached the above-mentioned peak, it had become 'the fourth largest oil producer in the world, after the United States, the USSR and Venezuela'.²¹

As for lumber extraction, a new opportunity arose from the country's territorial expansion, as Romania's forests increased by 165 percent due to the 'Great Union'.²² Under these circumstances, the industrial processing of wood grew rapidly, with a considerable share meant for export. Thus, the 1922–1931 decade saw an increase in the ratio of lumber in Romanian exports, from an average of 5 percent (in the prewar period) to values between 10 and 20 percent.²³ Moreover, this process was not accompanied by reforestation attempts and the state took action relatively late; it was no earlier than in 1930 that a law of the forests was adopted, which provided for the founding of a woodcutting enterprise, meant to exploit and increase the state's stock of wood.²⁴ However, private exploitation had already reached too great an extent to be regulated, so that 1.3 million hectares were deforested in Romania between 1918 and 1938, which amounted to almost one-fifth of the country's forest surface.²⁵

The impact of the two extractive industries on the Romanian economy was crucial: they established the country's subaltern status, in which it was relegated to a mere supplier of natural resources and rendered incapable of becoming a producer of technology. In return, this peripheral role within the capitalist world-system gave rise to at least two types of adverse reactions in Romania. One relates exclusively to the source of capital and to the destination of the extracted resources, taking on the form of an 'economic nationalism'²⁶ which shaped Romanian state policy in the interwar period to a certain extent. The other, however, relates to the process of extraction itself, and has been represented mainly in literary works, manifesting in a sort of anti-modernism with social and environmentalist overtones.

Fictions of modernisation: othering the natives

For the Romanian fiction written in the provinces of the 'Old Kingdom' (Wallachia and Moldavia), this anti-modernism was not a novelty. On the contrary, the process of capitalism's penetration into a patriarchal society constituted the main theme of novels published here up to World War I, of which Nicolae Filimon's *Ciocoii vechi și noi* (*Upstarts Old and New*; 1863), Duiliu Zamfirescu's *Tânase Scatiu* (1895) and Constantin Sandu-

Aldea's *Două neamuri* (*Two Nations*; 1906) are worth mentioning. All these works depict the rise of the new class of the tenant farmers, representatives of the modern capitalist spirit, often of non-Romanian origins, which lead to a breach in the old alliance between the autochthonous landlords and peasants.

Nevertheless, the social and economic aftermath of World War I gave rise to new challenges for Romanian writers, as the two novels under scrutiny show. Thus, the diptych *Pământ și cer* (*Earth and Heaven*) narrates the story of the modernisation of a rural community in Piscul Voevodesei, a Moldavian village 'lost somewhere, at the periphery of civilisation',²⁷ where reserves of fossil oil are discovered. The novel seems to be symmetrically organised: while its first volume (*Comoara regelui Dromichet; King Dromichaetes's Treasure*) depicts the erosion of traditional social relationships as a result of capitalist commodification, the second volume (*Aurul negru; The Black Gold*) presents the triumph of transnational over local capital. However, the sense of symmetry is deceptive, as things are in fact more complicated. For instance, a considerable share of the first volume is taken up by the peasant Zaharia Duhu's obsession with finding the mythical treasure of the Dacian king Dromichaetes. Yet Duhu's quest is far from that witnessed in adventure novels; it rather reads like a series of discussions the protagonist has with two former school fellows: archaeologist Alexandru Opriș, who takes great interest in the past and the legacy of the ancestors, and engineer Dinu Grințescu, who is future-oriented and advocates progress. The result of the polemic between these two narrative voices, which incorporates the main ideological dilemma of interwar Romania (traditionalism versus modernity²⁸), is a paradoxical one: although Duhu prefers to hide the treasure when he does find it (thus seemingly favouring Opriș's view), he then sells his land to the oil company, thereby fulfilling, in fact, Grințescu's dream.

Parallel to this narrative arc, Petrescu describes the way in which tenant Ilie Săcară, prefect Emil Savu, and banker Iordan Hagi-Iordan drive boyar Boldur Iloveanu to bankruptcy and take over his estate. This is the point where a first significant divergence from the novels published before the war occurs: even though *Pământ și cer* applies the traditional pattern of the defrauding of an old boyar by the new upstarts, Iloveanu is far from embodying any ancestral virtue; on the contrary, estranged from his estate and having lived for decades in Paris, he symbolises the decline of a class, if not of an entire world. It is significant that Săcară and Savu are also part of this declining world, with which Hagi-Iordan breaks shortly after the defrauding of Iloveanu. However, it is perhaps more significant that Petrescu's novel no longer traces solely the socioeconomic effects of modernisation on human communities, but also highlights the impact of the process on the entire biocoenosis. For instance, the narrator minutely describes the ecocide caused by the eruption of the first oil well in Piscul Voevodesei:

The water of the Voevodesei river was flowing black, with metallic reflections.

In the viscous grass, on gravel and dust, the field bugs, dragonflies and butterflies, grasshoppers and locusts, crickets and ladybugs, squirmed with sticky wings; they died as if glued to an enormous fly paper. There were also pigeons that had been caught in flight, had fallen, and were now crawling on the ground. The white feathers, the coral feet, the round comb, and the velvet jowls: all were transformed into a disgusting lump, like crow's offspring fallen from their ugly twig nests.

Now they were crawling.

The cattle had been frightened away, mooing, stumbling, slipping, and falling. They returned, warily skirting the place, with pricked ears and failing to recognise their old gates. Some had swollen and were bursting.²⁹

Although Petrescu's disdain of the mass exploitation of natural resources cannot be overlooked, his description of the impact of neoextractivism on nonhuman life forms evinces a certain symbolic subtlety. The novelist deploys here what could only be called a *rethoric of transspeciation*, which applies, in fact, to all life forms, from the simplest to the most complex of organisms – the water of the river, too, seems to have turned into oil (it is 'black') and to have lost its liquid properties in favour of 'metallic reflections'. The narrator appears to suggest here that neoextractivism subjects the living world to some sort of reverse evolution, whereby species are stripped of their distinguishing features and regress to inferior life forms, with gruesome appearances and toxic behaviours. It is for this reason that all insects resemble flies, doves become as black as crows, and cows lose their sense of orientation and capacity to provide the resources with which they contributed to the 'natural' economy of the village. Viewed as a whole, Petrescu's description evokes a biological apocalypse.

The impact of neoextractivism on the villagers is explored in yet more detail. In just a few years, their lives are profoundly transformed: 'they all lived in a cult of machinery, of speed, pumps, of playing, talking, writing, calculating devices'.³⁰ The village takes on the proportions of a small town, with a cinema, a confectionery, an American Bar, and a drug store. However, the changes are far from complete: with the involvement of transnational capital, the town becomes the target of a new wave of immigrants, mainly foreigners. They are epitomised by the new director of the company, the English businessman Reginald Gibbons, who, notwithstanding his apparent tranquillity, deeply detests the natives:

With his insular disdain for the rest of the peoples on five continents, he employed the tactics of colonial governments towards native populations of diverse inferior and suspect complexions, with their absurd traditions, obtuse prejudices, confused notions, impossible languages, and their ridiculous, even aggressive egos.³¹

Gibbons's cynicism reaches its climax when, in order to satisfy his sexual needs, he literally buys himself a Romanian wife, after he sends to her father an offer with 'spelled out conditions' and a 24-hour 'deadline'.³²

Despite this caricaturising portrait, Petrescu is not a chauvinist. Telling proof is the fact that the harshest critique of neocolonial capitalism is delivered not by the locals, but by Dutch engineer Jan van den Vondel, who denounces the hypocrisy of neoextractivism and points out the devastating effects it has on premodern societies:

We, serving progress? [...] For the time being, we are extirpating the harmony of a life balance the natives gradually created in hundreds and thousands of years, like geological deposits; the life balance of the indigenous peoples of Sumatra, Baku, Venezuela, Mexico, of the ones living here, in Piscul Voevodesei.³³

Van den Vondel is also the one to show, in terms similar to those employed by contemporary theorists of postcolonial studies,³⁴ that neoextractivism is based on a mechanism of othering which dispossesses the natives not only of their property, but also of their identity:

I know the cruel law of oil in this world of speculators and oil lords! [...] It transforms the environment, the native cannot endure it. [...] He suddenly feels himself to be exotic in the village where he was born. [...] He is exotic, alien, he dies. One way or another, he still dies.³⁵

In addition to the neoextractivist theme, Sadoveanu's *Noaptea de Sânziene* bears numerous affinities with *Pământ și cer*, differing from the latter, however, by its dealing with the wood of Borza forest instead of oil. The novel's plot is set in the same period (the late 1920s) and in the same province depicted by Petrescu (Moldavia). The landlord is once more a local boyar (Lupu Mavrocosti) and the main agent of exploitation is a foreigner (French engineer Antoine Bernard). As with *Pământ și cer*, there is talk of a 'treasure' which could save the place from exploitation in *Noaptea de Sânziene* as well; the exploiter is once more attracted to a local woman (here, it is the boyar's sister, 'princess' Kivi); and both novels feature a village witch who seems to have access to ancient and occult forces.

There are, of course, differences between the two novels, some more relevant than others. For instance, unlike Iloveanu, Mavrocosti is not alienated from the community living on his land, but seems to lead it with an iron fist, according to a quasi-feudal rationale: not only the Gypsy tribe under his patronage, but also other local employees address him as 'your highness', and a fugitive is assured by the estate's administrator that within the 'boyar's dominion', he will not be manhandled by 'either the [...] judge [...], or the mayors, or the gendarmes'.³⁶ Moreover, Mavrocosti does not reject modernity; on the contrary, his financial problems stem from his devouring passion for helicopters: 'the man was touched by the mania for

aeronautical discoveries and was keen on the realization of vertical movement by flying machines'.³⁷ Nonetheless, this passion is a mere detail, which does not necessarily indicate a constancy of temper: in fact, Mavrocosti is, like Iloveanu, of an unpractical and idealist nature, a figure for whom modernity is a mere hobby (proof of that is the fact that numerous agricultural machines his father has purchased are ironically nicknamed 'Germans'³⁸ and are rusting in a barn). On the other hand, Bernard can by no means be construed as an equivalent of Gibbons. Although the Frenchman makes a deliberately and deceptively cynical show of his materialist mentality ('I have great interest in local poetry, though only in extension to my financial interests'³⁹), he never equals his English counterpart's degree of dehumanisation. Not only is Bernard not contemptuous of the locals, but 'these primitives, knowledgeable in many things civilised people had forgotten, were particularly agreeable to the engineer'.⁴⁰ Additionally, he tends to be contaminated by the slow rhythm of Moldavian life, as he discovers that 'the pleasure of living in this country is almost a vice'.⁴¹

However, we can assume that, had the woodcutting business grown to industrial proportions, the events of *Noptile de Sânziene* would have evolved similarly to those in *Pământ și cer*. The demographic structure of the region already begins to diversify, as Bernard has hired workers from Czechoslovakia, 'woodcutters since the beginning of time',⁴² who were led by a 'very skilful Pole'.⁴³ The natives already perceive their way of life as threatened, which is why a bailiff warns the estate's administrator that 'the Gypsies deprived of their forest will lay themselves on the ground and die'.⁴⁴ As for the nonhuman component of the Borza ecosystem, Mavrocosti himself 'apprehensively considered the growing menace threatening that beauty, that grandeur of life, that paradise of our smaller fellow creatures'.⁴⁵ Fortunately, however, the narrator will not have to explore these aspects in detail, as Bernard, confronted by the determined resistance of places and people alike, finally decides to give up on his exploitative plan.

Fictions of modernisation: the Gaia hypothesis

As we have seen, in Petrescu's and Sadoveanu's novels, the traditional social classes – the aristocracy and the peasantry – have ceased to act as efficient forces opposing neoextractivism: the former because it has become obsolete, the latter because it becomes itself corrupted with the illusion of 'development'. And then, is there any solution for this? The two novels seem to provide similar answers to this question: each of them makes a display of its own repertoire of 'magical' events, behaviours, and beliefs, which thus suggest a series of alternatives (economic, technological, cultural, and ethical) to the process of modernisation, albeit with different results.

In *Pământ și cer*, the most obvious supernatural element is anthropomorphising the cranes who periodically fly over Piscul Voevodesei (before World War I; after the war; after the eruption of the first well; at the height of oil extraction; and after the depletion of the reserves), and who formulate increasingly pessimistic reflections on the transformations the village has undergone, through the voice of their ‘captain’. Apart from this leitmotif, the novel is dappled with various episodes of a mythical and/or magical nature: the halfwit Oarță, who accompanies Duhu in his digging expeditions, prays in front of a prehistoric altar, and thereby seems to put an end to a storm;⁴⁶ people throw red egg shells into the river to let their ancestors (*blajini*) know Easter has arrived;⁴⁷ a shepherd tells the villagers that, if there were a treasure in Piscul Voevodesei, its place would be indicated by a ‘green flame’;⁴⁸ the village witch amplifies this superstition by claiming the existence of a ‘law of treasures’ which shows what the treasure consists of, how deep it is buried, and how well it is guarded;⁴⁹ and two strangers come to the village, one of whom claims he has a magic wand for discovering treasures, the other – ‘the beasts’ herb’ which unlocks them.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, the novel’s magical core remains the legend of Dromichaetes’s treasure. The plot debuts with a dream of Duhu’s, which evokes the fragment from Greek historian Diodorus Siculus’s work recalling the story of the Dacian king: attacked by Lysimachus, one of Alexander the Great’s successors (*Diadochi*), who pursued his supposed treasure, Dromichaetes defeats the invaders, and he not only spares them, but accommodates them as his guests and then sends them home bearing numerous gifts.⁵¹ In the discourse the Dacian king delivers during the feast held in honour of his former foes, Petrescu introduces an original fragment which equally explains the ‘barbarian’ power and wealth: ‘We are people of the forests and fields. We have nothing to share with anyone! [...] We are content with our place under the sky. And it is the sky that protects us from unwanted guests with violent intentions.’⁵² Consequently, by contrast to the Macedonians, who own ‘priceless goods’, the Dacians own only their ‘shirt and soul’.⁵³ They do not envision themselves as *owning* nature, but as *belonging* to it (‘of the forests and fields’); for its part, nature is not indifferent to the wants and needs of the Dacians: it protects them from enemies and presents them with more riches than they could ever wish for.

This is the principle that determines Dromichaetes’s victory and his sending his enemies home laden with gifts. And the same law seems to direct, at least for a while, Duhu’s behaviour. For the ambiguity which the narrator deliberately maintains throughout the novel with regard to the meaning of the word ‘treasure’ – which alternately designates Lysimachus’s shining gold and Gibbons’s black gold – is at one point enriched with a third meaning. This occurs on a spring day when the insects (‘winged gems’) are coming back to life and the treasure is revealed as being nature itself:

[Spring] has awakened from the moist deposits of the earth a perpetually new and eternally inexhaustible treasure. It unleashed it into the sun and the light; living gold and gems, emeralds and rubies, diamonds and sheets of silver, jaspers and topazes, all spread towards the four corners of the world, fistfuls of them, to gladden the eyes and give beauty to the world.⁵⁴

However, the pact between the Dacians and nature can only work as long as it is observed by both parties, and when he sells his land to the company, Duhu does not just betray his old ally, he also interrupts a millennial cycle. As Van den Vondel lucidly remarks, without its (super)natural protection, Romania's situation tends to resemble that of the countries in Latin America, in a capitalist world in which neocolonialism promises to be even more noxious than overt colonialism:

There is legend at Romanians about the treasure of Dromichaetes, as there is legend at Mexicans about the treasure of Montezuma. [...] What the dogs and soldiers of Bernal Díaz and Cortez's armies didn't destroy is now destroyed by oil! What Lysimachus's armies couldn't destroy is now destroyed by oil! This is one terrible symmetry! [...] The history at century twenty is much, much more cruel than the history of Bernal Díaz and of Lysimachus.⁵⁵

In *Noptile de Sânziene* as well, the bond between community and nature plays a crucial role. The supernatural is concentrated here in the myth of 'Midsummer' (*Sânziene*, or Saint John's Eve), the only moment of the year when the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman are blurred:

For that fateful hour, God has ordained peace amongst all animals, beasts, and birds. For that hour, he also gives them the light of understanding, so they can talk as humans do. Wherever they are, they all gather into a synod and put their heads together.⁵⁶

As a matter of fact, the novel's plot develops between two midsummer nights. During the first of these, badgers, herons, squirrels, martens, wild cats, eagles, wolves, snakes, owls, and heath cocks confer and decide that they have to unite their forces to save the Borza forest from Bernard.

A seemingly naïve narrative device, the synod of the animals is one of the novel's key scenes, since it both accounts for the successful resistance of the biocoenosis in Borza against neoextractivism and reveals how life forms ought to interact within a sustainable ecosystem. The beasts' conclave is an upside-down image of the biological apocalypse in *Pământ și cer*: the different species of animals featured therein are so clearly distinguished that they even exhibit a speciophobic behaviour (birds despise mammals, snakes are afraid of birds, and, of course, all animals consider themselves superior to humans because they are 'older kinds'). What is even more important, however, is that despite their arrogance, none of the animal species question the existence of other species, and most importantly, none of them attempt to exploit another. On the contrary, as evinced by

the serpent's speech, every species plays a crucial role in the natural order, and this applies to humans, too: 'It is we who removed man from paradise, so he could know joy and sorrow, and it is we who take him back to the place where there is neither joy nor sorrow'.⁵⁷ If something lives, then its existence is necessary. This is the ethos of the biocoenosis in Borza, which makes this community invincible over time.

In the end, both animals and human inhabitants have a quasi-mystical respect for the Borza forest itself: they not only believe that it is 'protected by God',⁵⁸ but they also treat it as a living being that has 'a right'⁵⁹ and is capable of agency. From the very moment when Bernard encounters the first difficulties in extracting wood, Sofronie Leca warns him 'to look for enemies not in people, but in things'.⁶⁰ He clings to this conviction even when it becomes obvious that people, too, oppose Bernard: '[P]eople appearing here and there play an entirely secondary role. The main role is played by Borza, with everything that is inside it, indefinite and inexplicable'.⁶¹ At last, Bernard himself comes to accept the fact he will only be able to cut the ash trees in the forest 'if Borza changes its hostile attitude [towards him]'.⁶² This attitude encompasses more than the naïve belief in the existence of divine protection for the forest: Borza has 'rights' first and foremost because humans recognise them as such. In the locals' animist conception, it is not just humans and animals, but also plants and minerals, water, and air that form an ecosystem which works according to a principle not very different from what biologists of the second half of the twentieth century termed 'the Gaia hypothesis'.⁶³ In fact, the 'magic' of the place, such as it is, showcases no more than the fact that all of Borza's living organisms interact with each other and with the biotope to form a harmonious and self-regulating system.

This behaviour is best observed in the succession of 'hostilities' between Bernard and Borza. The first confrontational episode is a storm which lasts for several days, and which is caused by a 'darkness' with reptilian features: 'An enormous cloud developed speedily, like a dragon of changing menace. It was alive; it blinked every now and then with one eye, which exploded like a fireball. More closely, claws of fire flashed'.⁶⁴ The second episode apparently consists in a 'dubious joke'⁶⁵ (during a hunt, a bullet flies past Bernard's head), which only camouflages a more dangerous gesture: the shelters of the Czechs are set on fire by a criminal hand. Finally, a group of supposed bandits periodically blocks the wood carriers' way and forces them (by armed threat) to leave their cargo on the side of the road. The lesson conveyed by this concentration of forces seems to be that neither humans nor nonhuman 'nature' can do anything on their own: only their cooperation is truly efficient, and only by a concerted action can Bernard be forced to give up on cutting the forest. The Gaia hypothesis manifests itself here as solidarity of the entire 'environment' in its struggle against neoextractivism.

Conclusion: the missing link

Notwithstanding their differences, *Pământ și cer* and *Noaptea de Sânziene* tell a common story: that of premodern communities which, caught in the whirlwind of modernisation, materialising in the expansion of transnational capital and in intensified neoextractivist practices, attempt to resist it by rallying themselves around their ‘primary’ and constitutive elements and values, including – or rather especially – those of a mythical and magical nature. As humans are themselves either agents of the modernising process or else easily seduced by its temptations, it is self-evident that they cannot stop the wave of commodification on their own. However, as *Pământ și cer* shows, neither can nature alone oppose it successfully. Only by a consistent application of the Gaia principle, i.e. by the cooperation between humans and nature, as enacted in *Noaptea de Sânziene*, can neo-colonial capitalism be stopped.

Nevertheless, the two novels also tell another story: not only the story of the capitalist world-system, but also the story of the world literary system. The supernatural, mythical, and magical attempt to stop the phenomenon of neoextractivism as practice; but they simultaneously seek to undermine the modern (not necessarily modernist!) aesthetic order – the order which, according to Franco Moretti, has established itself with and through ‘the wave of diffusion of the modern novel’, i.e. with and through the proliferation and establishment of the realist novel as canonical fiction, throughout the world, across two centuries (c. 1750–1950).⁶⁶ In fact, the establishment of this model coincides with the moment in which world literature *qua* ‘world literary system’ is born, since the reign of the modern/realist novel produced not only a unification of the ‘international literary market’, but also a specialised division of the latter into core, semiperiphery, and periphery.⁶⁷

Magical realism was one of the most violent and efficient reactions to this imperialist process. On the one hand, it constantly sabotaged the geometry of the realist novel by unleashing a plethora of premodern narratives: myths, legends, fairy tales, and oral histories, i.e. all those vernacular stories that modern literary ‘development’ has sought to leave behind. On the other hand, magical realism has disrupted the syntax of the realist novel through discontinuity, montage, monologue, polyphony, and intertextuality.⁶⁸ In this view, magical realism is, like its main corollary (myth), ‘the sign and instrument of a *symbolic resistance* to Western penetration’, as such a movement itself indicates ‘the resistance to the “disenchantment” that modernisation tends to carry with it’.⁶⁹ This is also the reason magical realism has become, in a relatively short period of time, not only the ‘literary language of the postcolonial world’⁷⁰ (and thereby the peripheries’ main contribution to world literature), but also one of the latter’s defining genres, a ‘world literary genre’ which certifies the particular logic of a world literary system.⁷¹

Nonetheless, magical realism denotes a more circumscribed phenomenon than the genesis of the world literary system and even of world literary genres, as it originates not only in the generic expansion of transnational capital, but in the very process of neoextractivism as such. Scholars have often remarked on the ex-centric nature of this style,

a revitalising force that comes often from the “peripheral” regions of Western culture—Latin America and the Caribbean, India, Eastern Europe, but in literary terms a periphery that has quickly become central and yet still retained the intriguing distance of that periphery.⁷²

Concurrently, as we have previously seen, the causes of neoextractivism’s occurrence in the peripheries are yet more obvious. However, not even the studies emphasising the environmental dimension of magical realism have so far established its direct connection to neoextractivism.⁷³ For, after all, how could such a connection be demonstrated? How can we show that the emergence – be it simultaneous – of neoextractivism and of magical realism in the peripheries is not a mere coincidence?

One way of approaching this issue is to retrace the archaeology of magical realism and show not only that it was designed with the intended purpose of combating neoextractivism, but also that its emergence would have been impossible in the absence of this catalyst. If, for instance, we agree with Stephen Slemon, who argues that, in magical realism, ‘a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other’,⁷⁴ then we must also admit that such a confrontation is exponentially stimulated within the social systems which neoextractivist practices configure as neo- or post-colonial. The prefix ‘neo-’ is crucial here: it testifies to both the functional existence of a capitalist mechanism which is developed enough to support a ‘modern’ culture (and its full spectrum of institutions, from print to the realist novel) and the formal existence of a bureaucratic apparatus at the level of the nation-state, whereby an ideological perspective other than the one promoted by the imperial power can be disseminated. In short, magical realism can only emerge in those (semi)peripheral societies where realist fiction and the entire capitalist apparatus necessary to support it are about to impose themselves to the detriment of the (former) premodern cultural forms and economic structures. In fact, the oppositional force ‘magic’ exerts on the rationalist, scientific, capitalist, and/or modern paradigm stems primarily from the fact that capitalist modernity itself emerged largely in opposition to magic.⁷⁵ Therefore, what magical realism does is to turn neoextractivism against itself: it does not necessarily show that there are facets of reality (‘the magic’) that escape the capitalist logic, but rather, it deploys the very same logic to point out that, in reducing certain assets to amorphous masses, neoextractivism undervalues them.

The link between magical realism and neoextractivism can also be demonstrated with the tools of morphology. In the history of Latin American literatures, there is a significant difference between social and/or 'regional' novels published in the interwar period – for instance, José Eustasio Rivera's *La vorágine* (*The Vortex*, 1924), César Vallejo's *El tungsteno* (*Tungsten*, 1931), and Jorge Amado's *Cacau* (*Cocoa*, 1933) – and the magical realist ones published in the first postwar decades – Arturo Uslar Pietri's *El camino de El Dorado* (*The Road to El Dorado*, 1947), Alejo Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of this World*, 1949), and even Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1967). Although both groups of works mentioned above thematise, in one way or another, neoextractivist processes, it is obvious that they pertain to different paradigms. This does not mean merely that the latter group contains magical elements, whereas the former does not; but, by comparison to later magical realist works, the social and regional novels (with the exception of *La vorágine*) seem significantly less concerned with their own *mode of artistic representation*, regardless of whether we view this concept as 'technique', 'voice', or 'style'.

Nevertheless, the two groups of works are part of the same historical series. The missing link – or at least one of them – which restores this evolutionary chain to wholeness is made up of the novels by Petrescu and Sadoveanu which I have discussed above. By contrast to the works of Rivera, Vallejo, and Amado, they capture the hatching of the magical within neoextractivism, although they continue to do so in the old-fashioned manner of the realist novel, without attempting to team it up with any new form of expression, as Uslar Pietri, Carpentier, or Márquez would later do. Moreover, the fact that *Pământ și cer* and *Noaptea de Sânziene* were published not only in a different geocultural area, but also in one having, at the time, no contact whatsoever with the literature of Latin America,⁷⁶ only serves to strengthen my argument. For, once the hypothesis of 'influence' is excluded, the only explanation remaining is the one of socio-economic conditioning: magical realism was indeed born as a reaction to neoextractivism, both as alternative *ethos* and as aesthetic 'mode' of denouncing the latter's devastating effects.

What, then, of the two Romanian authors? Are their works part of world literature? This depends on how we define the term. If we attribute to it a 'hard', canonising acceptance, then it would be fair to admit that Petrescu's and Sadoveanu's novels stop short of it, not necessarily because of their excessively biased perspective, but due to the fact that, although they seem to have correctly intuited the aesthetic and ideological effects which the eruption of the magical might have on neoextractivism and on the poetics of the Western novel, they continue to represent this phenomenon with/in the same paradigm of modern realism. Therefore, the works of the two

Romanian authors might at best be said to pertain to a *proto-magical realism*. However, paradoxically, this very feature makes them indispensable to a concept of world literature viewed not so much as a canon, but as a planetary network of forms, techniques, and modes: for a history of narrative genres in the modern era, *Pământ și cer* and *Noaptea de Sânziene* are an essential piece, one without which the big picture cannot be grasped.

Notes

1. I use here Matthew S. Henry's definition, whereby 'extractive fictions' are envisioned as the 'literature and other cultural forms that render visible the socio-ecological impacts of extractive capitalism and problematise extraction as a cultural practice' (Matthew S. Henry, 'Extractive Fictions and Postextractive Futurisms: Energy and Environmental Injustice in Appalachia', *Environmental Humanities*, 11.2 [2019], p. 403).
2. The term 'environment' is here, as in other places throughout the essay, synonymous with the more technical 'ecosystem'. It denominates both the biotope (habitat) of a given space and the biocoenosis inhabiting it (including the human population, insofar as their activities within the ecosystem are limited to ensuring their livelihood without interfering with the balance of the system). As a matter of fact, this harmonious ('organic') coexistence between inhabitants and their ecosystem gave rise to one of the most widespread ideological arguments of neoextractivist discourse, which divorces biocoenosis (human populations included) from their biotope in order to elude any debate on the former's rights.
3. See Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, 'The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?', *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment*, 36.8 (2007), pp. 614–21.
4. Kenneth Jowitt, 'The Sociocultural Bases of National Dependency in Peasant Countries', in Kenneth Jowitt (ed.), *Social Change in Romania 1860–1940: A Debate on Development in a European Nation*, (Berkeley, CA: Institute of International Studies, 1978), pp. 1–30.
5. Daniel Chirot, *Social Change in a Peripheral Society: The Creation of a Balkan Colony* (New York: Academic Press, 1976).
6. Héctor Hoyos, *Things with a History: Transcultural Materialism and the Literatures of Extraction in Contemporary Latin America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 3.
7. Alberto Acosta, 'Extractivism and Neoextractivism: Two Sides of the Same Curse', in M. Lang and D. Mokrani (eds.), *Beyond Development: Alternate Visions from Latin America* (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute and Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2013), p. 62.
8. See Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: The Eclipse of 'the Other' and the Myth of Modernity*, trans. Michael D. Barber (New York: Continuum, 1995), pp. 136–7.
9. Acosta, 'Extractivism and Neoextractivism', p. 72.
10. See Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), vol. 1–4.
11. Hoyos, *Things with a History*, p. 3.

12. Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 5–9.
13. Charlotte Rogers, *Mourning El Dorado: Literature and Extractivism in the Contemporary American Tropics* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2019), pp. 8, 15.
14. Bogdan Murgescu, *România și Europa: Acumularea decalajelor economice (1500–2010)* (Iași: Polirom, 2010), p. 212.
15. Derek H. Aldcroft, *Europe's Third World: The European Periphery in the Inter-war Years* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), p. 85.
16. Keith Hitchins, *A Concise History of Romania* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 178–81.
17. Murgescu, *România și Europa*, pp. 303–14.
18. Marius S. Vassiliou, *Historical Dictionary of the Petroleum Industry*, 2nd edn (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), p. 400.
19. See Alina Dana Tulucan, Lucia-Elena Soveja-Iacob and Csaba Krezsek, 'History of the Oil and Gas Industry in Romania', in J. Craig, F. Gerali, F. MacAulauy and R. Sorkhabi (eds.), *History of the European Oil and Gas Industry* (London: The Geological Society, 2018), pp. 191–200, 198.
20. Victor Axenciuc, *Evoluția economică a României. Cercetări istorico-statistice 1859–1947*, vol. 3: *Monedă-Credit-Comerț-Finanțe publice* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 2000), p. 368.
21. Aldcroft, *Europe's Third World*, p. 90.
22. Axenciuc, *Evoluția economică a României*, vol. 2: *Agricultura* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 1996), p. 47.
23. Axenciuc, *Evoluția economică a României*, vol. 3, p. 368.
24. David Turnock, 'Woodland Conservation: The Emergence of Rational Land Use Policies in Romania', *GeoJournal*, 17.3 (1988), p. 418.
25. Constantin C. Giurescu, *A History of the Romanian Forest* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei RSR, 1980), p. 97.
26. Murgescu, *România și Europa*, pp. 250–60.
27. Cezar Petrescu, *Aurul negru* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1974), p. 333.
28. See Zigu Ornea, *Tradiționalism și modernitate în deceniul al treilea* (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1980).
29. Petrescu, *Aurul negru*, p. 212.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 324.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 429.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 492.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 438.
34. See Ritu Birla, 'Postcolonial Studies: Now That's History', in Rosalind C. Morris (ed.), *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 87–99.
35. Petrescu, *Aurul negru*, pp. 465–66.
36. Mihail Sadoveanu, *Noaptea de Sânziene*, Afterword by C. Stănescu (Bucharest: Minerva, 1979), p. 79.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

43. Ibid., p. 154.
44. Ibid., p. 16.
45. Ibid., p. 67.
46. Petrescu, *Aurul negru*, p. 46.
47. Ibid., p. 58.
48. Ibid., p. 95.
49. Ibid., pp. 102–4.
50. Ibid., pp. 119–21.
51. See Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, vol. 11: *Fragments of Books 21–32*, trans. Francis B. Walton (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 17–23.
52. Petrescu, *Aurul negru*, p. 12.
53. Ibid., p. 12.
54. Ibid., pp. 23–24.
55. Ibid., p. 463.
56. Sadoveanu, *Noaptea de Sânziene*, p. 33.
57. Ibid., p. 38.
58. Ibid., p. 31.
59. Ibid., p. 66.
60. Ibid., p. 123.
61. Ibid., pp. 162–63.
62. Ibid., p. 174.
63. As the scientific validity of ‘the Gaia hypothesis’ has been lately increasingly contested by specialists (see Toby Tyrrell, *On Gaia: A Critical Investigation of the Relationship between Life and Earth* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013]), in the present article I consider the concept not as a biological ‘law’, but only as an ethical principle.
64. Sadoveanu, *Noaptea de Sânziene*, pp. 125–26.
65. Ibid., p. 147.
66. Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 50.
67. Ibid., pp. 126–35.
68. Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to García Márquez* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), pp. 234–36.
69. Ibid., pp. 247–48.
70. Homi Bhabha, ‘Introduction: Narrating the Nation’, in Homi Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 7.
71. Mariano Siskind, ‘The Genres of World Literature: The Case of Magical Realism’, in Theo D’haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 345–55.
72. Wendy B. Faris, ‘Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction’, in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (eds.), *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 163–90, p. 165.
73. See, e.g. Ben Holgate, *Climate and Crises: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), where the terms ‘extractive’ and ‘extractivism’ do not even feature.
74. Stephen Slemon, ‘Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse’, *Canadian Literature* 116 (1988), pp. 10–11.

75. See Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 4–9.
76. The first Latin American novels were translated into Romanian as late as 1948 (see Ștefan Baghiu, ‘Translating Hemispheres: Eastern Europe and the Global South Connection through Translationscapes of Poverty’, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 56.3 [2019], p. 500).

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