Across Shallow Time

The Romanian Rural Novel in the "Short Twentieth Century"

Emanuel Modoc

I will preface my study by noting the inherent metaphoric nature of the concepts I am about to discuss. Both "deep time" and "shallow time" are originally metaphors used in science to describe and convey seemingly complicated processes. Many scientists argue that these metaphors are a way of dumbing down the technical and scientific jargon in order to make it more approachable for general audiences. However, within the uses of these metaphors lie the very pitfalls that they entail. As Stephen Happel notes in a study on the metaphorization of scientific discourse,[1] in the case of "deep time," the metaphor of depth describes a temporality so vast that "its very presence among us in rocks and fossils seem quite alien."[2] Moreover, in astronomy, deep time refers to a period spanning over thirteen billion years. Against that number, our own recorded history looks like the shallows of a fathomless ocean. At the other end, Happel notes "shallow time" and its use in evolutionary microbiology as a metaphor to describe the relatively recent history of living entities. Set particularly against the backdrop of "deep time," "shallow time" describes the timeline of processes that in far-from-equilibrium situations, become developmentally unpredictable until the system makes a choice that "settles it" into a new pattern.[3]

In recent World Literature studies, there has been a surge of metaphors, images and concepts borrowed from natural and social sciences. World systems, networks, deep time, geolocation, data mining, stochastic processes are all abstract models used in the analysis of literary and cultural phenomena. Similarly, "shallow time" is another useful model. Much like living organisms, national literary systems self-organize through discourse, self-replicate through literary production and then settle into patterns that legitimize its core tenets, i.e., the national literary canon. While Wai Chee Dimock's use of "deep time" does not conform to a national timeline or a national map, shallow time is a unit of temporal length added to the width of national space, within a host of different processes that shape the development of the literary system. The "short twentieth

This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research, CNCS–UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.1-TE-2019-1378, within PNCDI III.

century," the time span between 1914, the start of World War I, and 1991, the fall of the Soviet bloc (according to Eric Hobsbawn) is, I believe, a fruitful period for a discussion related to "shallow time." Although chronologically short, this period remains a highly productive and intellectually rich phase in the history of the Romanian literary culture. Moreover, it represents the birth and the peak of the modern Romanian novel. As such, my paper will focus on the interwar development of the Romanian novel within a space built on the foundation of "shallow time." While Wai Chee Dimock refers to "deep time" as, among other things, "denationalized space," a space "not entirely predicated on the temporal and spatial boundaries of the nation-state,"[4] "shallow time" is, inversely, a "nationalized" space that shapes and influences the development of literary forms. In other words, deep time is a retrospective metaphor that enables us to build theoretical models of what *was*, while shallow time describes the temporal background of dynamic systems that work towards achieving equilibrium in an isolated environment.

If a literary system strives for stability through carefully curated, systematically debated sequences of dynamic processes, then it is worth seeing which these processes are. Literary prestige, for instance, is merely a facet of a system's evolution toward self-organization. The canon is another. Whether national systems reach out to the world through translation, import literary trends or adapt to epistemological changes, they do it in a way that harmonizes with internal imperatives. Within certain literary micro-phenomena, the same pattern seems to emerge. To illustrate this, I will attempt to investigate one of the most relevant (for what I call "shallow time," at least) novelistic subgenres of the twentieth century: the rural novel. This subgenre is not dominant in the Romanian literary production by any stretch of the imagination. On the contrary, rural novels are quite in the minority from a quantitative standpoint, as some of the most recent studies point out.[5] However, these are the novels that I believe shaped the literary canon decisively; either by enabling localizing processes that marked the shift from imported literary forms to more domestic configurations or by playing the scapegoat in cultural policies that later shaped the Romanian literary canon, as we know it. Another feature of the modern rural novel stems from the recursive patterns that govern them. Far from being a generational phenomenon (as scholars such as Franco Moretti viewed short-lived genres) or displaying signs of gradual consolidation, this genre reoccurs whenever the Romanian literary system requires it.

At the same time, I will investigate this genre through the lens of what has recently been called, by newer researchers of modernist studies, "rural modernism." In a paper dedicated to William Faulkner's work, Jolene Hubbs offers one of the most practical definition of rural modernism:

> *Rural modernism, this sociopolitically significant aesthetic form, facilitates a rethinking of literary modernism on several fronts. First, . . . attention to the symbiotic relationship between rural content and innovative form . . . Second, identifying the country as a modern locus affords a fresh perspective on works . . . that cannot be accounted for by city-centric studies of American modernism. Finally, recognizing rural modernism . . . by explicating the ways in which ostensibly un- or even anti-modern textual elements—slow-moving wagons and sweating farmers—work in the service of the modern.*[6]

By applying these elements *outside* the realm of American modernism, it is easily observable that there is a certain universal applicability to them. Much like in the case of Faulkner's "poor whites," the Romanian peasant, and, by extension, Romanian rurality, has a unique status in the national cultural imaginary, one made more apparent when its role in the sociocultural development of the country is considered. As an identity construct, the rural has been capitalized and misused in different ways, starting from the Herderian conception of the peasant as keeper of a nation's "soul," continuing with his later evolution into an active participant within the working class,[7] and ending with the communist exploitation during the socialist realist era as an exponent of socialist greatness. Beyond the sociocultural politics underpinning its many facets, the rural can be seen as a *local*, *regional* space, through which a given culture can be defined outside the realm of what Even-Zohar called "cultural interference."[8] The role of rural literature, for instance, which was systematically undermined and underestimated in the Romanian literary historiography, was essential in the configuration of an autochthonous modernity. In actuality, rurality is part and parcel of the Romanian culture's development and consolidation. Engaged in what could be called a state of "combined and uneven development,"[9] rurality, through role of substantiating a diverse spectrum of reactions to the challenges of modern life, is more than an alternative to modernity, it is its asymmetrical—yet wholly complementary—facet.

Besides the rural novel, another subgenre—closely related to it in terms of spatial preference, its role in plot development, and social background of the protagonist—seems to display the same characteristics and is in many ways easier to trace throughout its defining moments. The Romanian hajduk novel appears in a reoccurring sequence throughout Romanian literary history. Initially a commercial offshoot of 19th century sensation novel, marrying imported elements of Newgate novels with autochthonous figures stemming from urban legends or popular ballads, the subgenre was later reused throughout the twentieth century at very specific moments in history. In the first part of the 20th century, up until the start of WWI, hajduk novels embodied an identitary prerequisite, specific to most projects of nation building. Then, during the 1930s, the subgenre found its first internationalization thanks to Panait Istrati's *Adrien Zograffi* saga. Finally, the subgenre reappeared during a period of re-emerging nationalist sentiment (the 1970s and the 1980s) in the context of Ceauşescu's national socialism. Looking at the general characteristics of this genre we may find some telling clues that point to its recursivity. It features a socially marginal hero with a mandatory Romanian ethnicity. This hero is defined by freedom and spirit of justice, generosity towards the downtrodden and courage in the face of danger, but also the moral ambiguity specific to highwaymen. Central themes revolve around justice and social redistribution. This subgenre has its variants in all of the Balkans and Eastern Europe (the Russian Cossacks, the Greek *klepths*, the Hungarian *betyár*, the Ukrainian *haidamaky*) and are historically placed in periods characterized by a lack of local administrative stability (the Phanariote period in the case of the Romanian cultural space). I believe that it is in this latter feature that the strength of the genre lies. Having been born in an extremely early phase of the country's nation building, then appearing recurrently in periods of consolidation (so consolidated, in fact, that it becomes an attempt at literary export thanks to its presumably "exotic"

nature, in the 1930s, via Panait Istrati) and then over-consolidation (the national socialist period of Romanian exceptionalism—the so-called protochronism). The shallow time patterned by hajduk novels points toward the overcompensating nature of a marginal literary culture, one marked by what Mircea Martin called "the periphery complex."[10]

Similarly, the rural novel has a very complex history behind it in Romanian literary historiography, and the label itself was used outside any theoretical discussion surrounding it. An offshoot of the social novel, the rural novel is a reactive form towards the themes of urbanization and industrialization, characterized, according to scholars such as Cosmin Borza, by rural protagonists (this includes peasants, shepherds, the village teacher, the village medic, but not boyars or civil servants), a rural setting and primarily rural themes.[11] Probably the most relevant aspect in terms of how the subgenre was discussed in Romanian critical discourse was its false ubiquity, the idea that Romanian literature is primarily rural. This presupposition holds true for most of the interwar period, when the critical consensus was that Romanian literature mirrors its dominant social class, and in doing so, it creates an imbalance in the literary system, thus creating the need to put forward a literature that better reflects the emerging modernity. This dominant critical trend discriminated against the literary representativeness of the social group dominant in the nation. While it is true that ruralists, in the form of "sămănătorist" and "poporanist" ideologues, have been in the forefront of ideological debates in the first part of the 20th century, giving rise to powerful counter-discourses that seemingly[12] went against the country's attempts of cultural modernization, this has been done in part by the very cultural faction that undermined rurality. Whatever the initial causes, we can now retrospectively see that the strategy of scapegoating a theme that is perhaps most representative of Romanian identity did not have its intended effect.

On the contrary, rural literature is well represented in the national canon, and its main titles are now considered to be at the core of what we call "modern Romanian literature." There is nonetheless a striking difference between the historically perceived backwardness of rurality and its crucial role in the modernization of Romanian literature. Seemingly paradoxical, this idea has been refuted by recent developments in the field of "rural studies." This field addresses the idea that, rather than considering rurality a phenomenon opposed to modernity, it is in fact one of the main modes of *understanding* it. Rurality is not merely a geographical backdrop to be used in opposition to the city, it has a sociocultural significance for understanding the impact of industrialization or urbanization. By the same token, the peasant is not just a foil against whom the cultured urban socialite is defined, it is the protagonist of some of the most coherent critiques of modernity.

I would add to this the fact that rural literature's modernity is made even more obvious by its inherent attitude towards temporality. Through its relation with shallow temporality, rural literature legitimizes a very important hallmark of modernity. Take for instance the novel *Ion* by Liviu Rebreanu. Regarded—without much reluctance—as the first modern Romanian novel, its relation with temporality is significant for my idea of shallow time. The novel's narrative strategy employed at its beginning and end is one of the most well-known literary devices in the Romanian literary canon. So well known, in

fact, that it is taught in schools across the country as a feature of what makes a literary work *modern*. The novel begins thus:

> *The main road from Cârlibaba winds along by the Someş River as far as the city of Cluj, then branches off just above Armadia; there a narrower* ***white road*** *[emphasis added] crosses the river by an old wooden bridge under a worn shingle roof; it cuts through Jidoviţa village and runs down towards the Bistriţa River where it joins the main road that descends from Bucovina through the Bârgău Pass.*
>
> *After Jidoviţa, the road clings to steep slopes then rolls smoothly along amongst young beech-trees in Domneşti woods, passes the Dead Man's Well where cool water bubbles from the spring, then suddenly swerves under the Devil's Ravines and down into Pripas village hidden in a hollow.*[13]

and end with the following:

> *At the Devil's Ravine the old people turned their heads back. There were just a few houses visible in the village. The gleaming tower of the new church rose above the rest like the triumphant head of a conqueror. Zăgreanu was still standing in the road, in front of the shrine, bareheaded, as though he were pledging a sacred troth.*
>
> *The road turns a bend, then meanders for a while, to straighten itself again, like a* ***grey ribbon threading its way in the cool dusk*** *[emphasis added]. On the left, the Dead Man's Well is left behind, whilst on the right in the faded fields, the plots of land rise, split into smaller areas that mingle again, reaching as far as the skirts of Vărarea forest. Then come Domnească woods that swallow up the rumble of the rolling carriage, whirling it afar in loud-sounding echoes . . .*
>
> *The village is left behind, the same as ever, as though nothing had ever changed.*[14]

The novel begins and ends with the same road, smooth and white at the beginning, hardened and drab, "like a grey ribbon," at the end. Its state suggests some temporal shift, two beats between which a slurry of tragedies and personal failures happened, but against the multiple stratifications inherent to deep time, it displays a form of temporal stasis. Moreover, it speaks to the characters' lack of social mobility.[15] The apparent cyclicality of rural life is undermined through the use of a temporal ambiguity that is nevertheless deeply modernist, to be sure, but the salience of temporal stasis as a corollary to the social stagnation that lies at the center of the characters' fates suggests an even more intricate engagement with time. Even though, as Cosmin Borza aptly puts it when discussing the paradigm shift engendered by Rebreanu's novel, "the peasant decisively escapes his traditional/museal immobility, turning out to be a full-righted protagonist of modern literature,"[16] this does not necessarily change his socioeconomic experience. The final rumination of the objective, omniscient narrative voice supports this:

> *The village is left behind, the same as ever, as though nothing had ever changed. Over the torments of life, time sweeps on indifferently, wiping out all traces of what has gone before.*

Woes, passions and aspirations, great or small, are lost in a mysterious stillness, unfathomable in its infinity, frail trembling leaves in a gigantic hurricane.[17]

Following in Rebreanu's footsteps, the rural novel has evolved into a powerful instrument for social commentary, paving the way for later works such as Marin Preda's *Moromeții*, another cornerstone in the evolution of the subgenre. In the interwar period of consolidation, when *rural protagonists* took center stage in the development of the subgenre, it is worth mentioning that *space* was not necessarily indicative of a certain novel's rurality.[18] However, in universes such as Rebreanu's depictions of rural life, *time*—shallow time in particular—becomes an operating agent within them, not simply a by-product. An important offshoot of the rural novel is the one dedicated to the 1907 peasant uprising, which had two major roles. On the one hand, it brought about the rediscovery of historical truth with respect to the exploitation of peasants and their subsequent uprising, which was a compensatory critical act necessary for the shift in perspective when it comes to all things rural. Cosmin Borza considers that this subgenre had "a decisive role in the differentiation between *the rustic* (the idyllic, picturesque, ornamental and museal setting) and *the rural* (the socially engaged, realist, anti-'sămănătorist', revolutionary landscape)."[19] On the other, it shed light on the necessity of transposing national problems through the lens of modern narrative devices. As a type of prose dedicated to a very distinct temporal bubble, the novels of uprising single-handedly undermined a series of clichés regarding the rural labor economy. They showed that previous depictions (coming from pastoral and idyllic narratives) regarding leisurely labor, peaceful relations between classes, were false representations. One striking excerpt that illustrates the internal cultural shock of grasping the harsh realities that led to the uprisings can be found in N. D. Cocea's *Fecior de slugă* (A servant's son):

For forty years they had known their flock to be humble, obedient, speechless as they walked about flanked by the gendarmes' bayonets without uttering a word ... What had changed it? Who had drove it mad? Where were ***the 'young sowers' praised by the poet?*** *. . . Like rabid dogs they now bit the hand that fed them, the hand that praised them in admirable parliamentary discourses and in somber treaties of political economy. 'The downtrodden' crushed everything in their path. The budding Rodica carried barrels of tar instead of jugs of water on her lily-white shoulders.*[20]

By laying bare the level of ignorance displayed by the country's urbanized populations in regard to social justice and economic inequalities, the rural novels dedicated to the peasant uprising engage in a sociopolitical critique that differs from the familiar polemical activity seen in the public discourse of urban modernists. It is a type of commentary that is neither regressive nor militant, but documentarist. It aspires to chronicle the sufferings of the oppressed by fusing naturalist realism with modernist innovation. Moreover, it uses shallow, nationalized time as an active organizer. Rural novels have self-governing

temporalities, in which their respective *presents* inform both the plot and the socio-political commentary underpinning it.

Whether they are used to reinforce and legitimize Romanian identity or as something to transcend in order to adapt to an ever-growing modernity, the rural novel, with its relation to the temporal and spatial boundaries of the nation-state, attests to the fact that the concept of "shallow time" is useful for the discussion of short, but decisive cultural dynamics. The shallow time embedded in the evolution of the modern Romanian novel characterizes a relatively short time span in which different competitive themes, motifs and forms are confronted in order to reach a state of equilibrium. Finally, shallow time describes the phenomenon of growing by leaps and bounds, which is a characteristic of minor cultures that are faced with the need to adapt to the accelerated development of modernity (see for instance Lovinescu's *synchronism*).

❑

Notes

1. Stephen Happel, "Deep Time and Shallow Time: Metaphors for Conflict and Cooperation in the Natural Sciences," *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 1, 5 (1996): 1752–1763.
2. Happel, 1752.
3. Happel, 1752–1753.
4. Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton–Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 5.
5. Cosmin Borza, "How to Populate a Country: A Quantitative Analysis of the Rural Novel from Romania (1900–2000)," in *Ruralism and Literature in Romania*, edited by Ştefan Baghiu, Vlad Pojoga, and Maria Sass (Berlin etc.: Peter Lang, 2019), 21–39.
6. Jolene Hubbs, "William Faulkner's Rural Modernism," *Mississippi Quarterly* 61, 3 (2008): 473.
7. Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, translated by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA–London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 277.
8. Itamar Even-Zohar, "Laws of Literary Interference," *Poetics Today* 11, 1 (1990): 53–72.
9. I refer to this phenomenon in its employment within World Literature studies, see WREC (Warwick Research Collective), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 6: "Our ambition in this book is to resituate the problem of 'world literature,' considered as a revived category of theoretical enquiry, by pursuing the literary-cultural implications of the theory of combined and uneven development. This theory has a long pedigree in Marxist sociology and political economy and continues to stimulate debate across the social sciences. But the *cultural* aspects of Trotsky's initiating formulation concerning the 'amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms' . . . has received less attention, even as what it highlights draws attention to a central—perhaps *the* central—arc or trajectory of modern(ist) production in literature and the other arts worldwide; and this aesthetic dynamic is, in turn, complexly related to histories and conceptions of social and political practice. It is in the conjuncture of combined and uneven development, on the one

hand, and the recently interrogated and expanded categories of 'world literature' and 'modernism,' on the other, that our project looks for its specific contours. All three of these terms, it seems to us, need to be thought together."

10. See Mircea Martin, *G. Călinescu şi "complexele" literaturii române*, 2nd edition, with an Argument of the author, Afterword by Nicolae Manolescu (Piteşti: Paralela 45, 2002).
11. Borza, "How to Populate a Country," 24: "The only prerequisites the genre has to fulfil—there is a broad consensus on this matter, shared by all the aforementioned critics—can be summarized in the following manner: a. the protagonists belong to the peasant social class; b. the narrative's setting is the rural space; c. the literary conflict/themes are tightly bound to or typical of rural existence."
12. Seemingly because, as Cosmin Borza shows in the case of ruralist stances on translations, "the manner in which 'poporanism' and 'sămănătorism,' the most nationalistic cultural-ideological trends in pre-World War I Romania, approach foreign literature challenge and even refute at least three myths concerning the Romanian translation policy: 1) that the Romanian rural/agrarian traditionalism—often deemed chauvinistic—of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries blocked or delayed the natural evolution of Romanian literature, a theory supported by all Romanian modernists including Eugen Lovinescu; 2) that Romanian interest in 'minor,' 'peripheral' literatures seeks merely to satisfy 'a sort of anthropological curiosity'; and 3) that minor/peripheral literatures escape the colonizing pressures exerted by larger cultures only by forging relations with other central cultures." See Cosmin Borza, "Translating Against Colonization: Romanian Populists' Plea for Peripheral Literatures (1890–1916)," in *The Culture of Translation in Romania/Übersetzungskultur und Literaturübersetzen in Rumänien*, edited by Maria Sass, Ştefan Baghiu, and Vlad Pojoga (Berlin etc.: Peter Lang, 2018), 38.
13. Liviu Rebreanu, *Ion*, translated by A. Hillard (London: Peter Owen, 1965), 9.
14. Rebreanu, 409.
15. Even if merely suggested, the class conflict present in Rebreanu's novel is indicative of what Raymond Williams calls "ideological rural fiction": "The long struggle over rent and leases, between owners and tenants; the long struggle over prices, and the relation of home production to exports, in a developing free trade economy." Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 187.
16. Borza, "How to Populate a Country," 30.
17. Rebreanu, 409.
18. Daiana Gârdan illustrates, in a study on spatiality in the Romanian novel of the interwar period, how the dominant space in this age is neither urban nor rural, but "interstitial": "Against the backdrop of all the period's polemical discussions of the novel, the predilect space for novelistic narratives is neither rural (as the exponents of Lovinescu's modernism would have you believe) nor the urban (as the same representatives of the emancipated civility may have rejoiced to discover), but rather in spaces that we would call, in lieu of a more suited terminology, in-between or interstitial spaces." Daiana Gârdan, "Interstitial Spatiality in the Romanian Novel of the Interwar Period: Mute Rurality and Subverted Urbanity," in *Ruralism and Literature in Romania*, 74–75.
19. Borza, "How to Populate a Country," 30.
20. N. D. Cocea, *Fecior de slugă* (Bucharest: Cultura Naţională, 1932), 168.

Abstract

Across Shallow Time:
The Romanian Rural Novel in the "Short Twentieth Century"

Although chronologically short, the interwar period remains a highly productive and intellectually rich phase in the history of Romanian literary culture. Moreover, it represents the birth and the peak of the modern Romanian novel. Following Eric Hobsbawn's proposal of "the short twentieth century" as the time span between 1914, the start of World War I, and 1991, the fall of the Soviet bloc, my study will focus on the development of the Romanian rural novel within a space built on the foundation of "shallow time." While Wai Chee Dimock refers to "deep time" as, among other things, "denationalized space," "shallow time" is, inversely, a "nationalized" space that shapes and influences the development of literary forms. Applying this concept to the Romanian literary space, I will attempt to systematize a theoretical model for understanding modernity through the lens of temporality and the relation to the nation-building projects underpinning it.

Keywords

deep time, shallow time, short twentieth century, Romanian novel, rural novel