

THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL REALITY IN THE NOVEL *THE MOROMETES (MOROMETII)*, BY MARIN PREDA

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Greater Romania is born in internal and international tension. Although all Romanian provinces were inhabited by a majority of Romanian people ever since the nation was formed, the great foreign powers, and also the neighbouring countries, strongly opposed the constitution of an independent and unitary state of Romania. Despite these tensions and conflicts, the dream of a Greater Romania was going to come true. This was for several reasons: on the one hand, because Romanians had been wanting it for hundreds of years; on the other hand, because it was historically uncommon for regions inhabited by people who speak the same language and share the same traditional culture to belong to different states (Western Europe provides the example of Austria and Germany, but the disintegration of Western states in duchies, principalities and small kingdoms is also a complex issue, that is not, however, of interest for our current discussion).

Similarly to other situations of this type (the birth of a new state), the formation of Greater Romania¹, starting in 1918², brings joy³, but also disappointment⁴. We mean that, like many intellectuals have stated, especially the generation of Mircea Eliade, once the ideal had been fulfilled, it left an empty space that was perhaps never replaced.

1 We, the representatives of small nations, have waited impatiently for the reaction of the royal leaders towards these aspects, and the non-Hungarian nations received with tremendous joy the news that the minister of external affairs put forth at Washington the proposal for peace, because in this way it was officially admitted, both by our external representatives and by the Hungarian government and parties, that we are not anymore nationalities, but nations. (Documents of the Union, 1600-1918, coord. Constantin Căzănișteanu, Ed. Militară, Bucharest, 1984, p. 367-369, in *Romanian History in Texts*, coord. **Bogdan Murgescu**, Bucharest, Editura Corint, 2001, p. 281) **It can be observed that, even if it was officially proclaimed at Alba-Iulia, in 1918, the union of all Romanian principalities needed not less than two years in order for its ratification to become possible, for all of the great European (and world) powers of that date, in all of the important treaties, that recognized and ratified the new map of Europe (this remains true today, when international recognition is mandatory for any new formed state that declares its independence).**

2 On December 1, 1918, the Great National Assembly, gathered at Alba Iulia, composed of 1228 delegates, voted for the union of Transylvania, Banat, Crișana and Maramureș with Romania. 100,000 people came at Alba Iulia. Greater Romania was formed, with a surface of 295,049 sq. km (previously 137,000 sq. km) and a population of 16 million. (Marcel Nica, op. cit., p. 94) **The enthusiasm with which the representatives of all provinces participated in this act shows that the union of all Romanian within the borders of a single state was not something imposed from the outside, but a change desired by all Romanians, almost a historical necessity.**

3 *We feel like the blind man who hasn't seen the light of day for tens of years and, through an act of God, has his eyes opened and sees the holy light of the sun. We are here the eyes of the people who see today the light of freedom.* (Iuliu Maniu's speech, Alba Iulia, December 1, 1918, in *Romanian History in Texts*, Bucharest, 2001, p. 285) Although these words may seem exaggerated, they express the enthusiasm and joy, especially of the Romanian people in Ardeal, who had not been seen as a nation in their own country for a long a time. The denationalization politics lead by the Austro-Hungarian Empire was, however, unfruitful and, if we see things from this point of view, Iuliu Maniu's words reflect the historical reality.

4 *In the beginning, the fight was aimed at punishing past mistakes, partly with a view towards future parties. "Responsibilities" held for war disaster and the Peace of Buftea were very common. The ones sought after were I. C. Brătianu and Alexandru Marghiloman, the former accused of letting the country go to war unprepared, the latter of the peace made with Mackensen, the chief of the German army in Romania (...).* (Lucreția Barbu, *Memories of Greater Romania*, in „*Historical Magazine*”, year XXXVIII - new series - no. 5 (446), May, 2004, p. 81) Such a significant event could not have taken place without what C. Noica named “rest”. There were many convulsions and many debts were paid. Those against the union (because, in every historical era and in every country, there were people for and people against) had to suffer because of their opinions. antiunioniștii (căci, ca în fiecare epocă istorică și în fiecare țară, au existat tabere pro și contra). We are saying this because we want to show that, even though the Union seems to be a natural outcome today and, from the historical point of view, easy to come true, it was not devoid of great difficulties and efforts. Entire generations of intellectuals thrived to show the nation how important this act was and, to the rest of the world, “how legit” it was.

The big challenge for the new state consisted not necessarily in the economic changes caused, on the one hand, by the war's depredation (over 300,000 deaths, exhaustion of cereal supplies in 1919, an industrial production that was barely a quarter of what it had been before the war etc.)⁵ and, on the other hand, by the desynchronization caused by the lack of homogeneity of the new state assembly (Transylvania remained closer to Budapest than to the new capital city, Bucharest, while the train network in Basarabia was still strongly connected to Odessa and much less to the “core” of the new Kingdom of Romania)⁶. The challenge consisted rather in the transformation of different provinces into a functional, independent and sovereign state.

On this complex background, the only certainty that shaped Greater Romania became the new Constitution, which was going to be issued through royal decree, on March 28, 1923: *On January 26, the Constitution draft was brought to the Assembly of Deputies.*¹

Eventually, the Constitution was going to be approved.⁸

Despite the deficiencies, drawbacks and shortages of various kinds (the next day after the Constitution was voted, King Ferdinand I sanctioned it publicly), the Constitution of 1923 proved to be one of the most liberal, democratic and progressionist of its time: *The Constitution holds the merit of having enacted, as mentioned in the first article, the unitary and indivisible character of the Romanian state.* (...)^{5***9}

The Constitution of 1923 put forth (for the first time in the Romanian political space) the values of parliamentarianism and the equality of chances for all citizens, and it approved orthodoxy as the state religion of new Romania: *The rough draft of the Constitution mentioned, with reference to the orthodox church, that it was the “national ” and “dominant ” church.*¹⁰

The Constitution proved to be one of the most radical in Europe and the most radical in Eastern Europe in what the agrarian law was concerned. It ratified older initiatives, dating back to 1920, that rewarded the

5 The exact losses for Romania are the following: 339,117 deaths, 299,000 badly wounded, 116,000 prisoners; losses among the civil population - caused by poverty, illness and hunger - were about 650,000 (Romanian Academy, *The Great Union of 1918 in a European Context*, Bucharest, Editura Enciclopedică, Editura Academiei Române, 2003). For a while, the almost hilarious expression *fight for peace* existed. It proved to be so aggressive that it was possible for not much to remain after this noble act took place. This is how things go in almost every war. Whether there are wins or losses for the nation (in our case, after the First World War, all Romanian provinces came together as one state for the first time), people are the ones who lose and suffer. The numbers above show it. On the other hand, we remember the situation after the so-called Revolution of 1989. After the understandable enthusiasm, everybody started calling the "Center", asking for advice. What are we going to do? What needs to be done? Following what laws? Who are the new bosses? etc. After decades or centuries (in the case of Transylvania) of Hungarian administration, it seems almost natural, historically speaking, for old reflexes to still work.

6 During the interwar period, as Romania outlined its expression as a national state, the politic, economic and social movements, already perceptible one century or more before, matured. (Marcel Nica, op. cit., p. 94).

7 Romanian Academy, op. cit., p. 334

8 Mircea Mușat, Ion Ardeleanu, op. cit., p. 344

9 id., *ibid.*, p. 347;

10 id., *ibid.*, p. 333

sacrifices made by Romanian peasants, especially in the greatest world conflagration up to then: *The agrarian issue was at the center of attention for the Averescu government.*¹¹

Of course, there were also organizational measures that were meant to increase cereal production, the main source of income in the country: *After the agrarian reform was enacted, there was a series of measures for technical organization in agriculture.*¹²

Indeed, despite the fact that a big number of peasant families were put in possession of land, the overall cereal production decreased. Agriculture had a decisive impact on the national income, 70%, while industry had only 30%. What was there to be done? What was the cause of this? The main source of this veritable national crisis was the lack of means for exploitation. These are a few facts that certified the technical situation of agriculture, very alarming for a country that aspired to become modern, competitive in terms of civilization with the other European countries.

Under these circumstances, of an exploitation that was behind the times, almost feudal, the fact that agricultural productivity was low in Romania is understandable: *Another aspect that needs to be mentioned is the fact that the effective power per hectare is very low.*¹³

The solution was quite simple: the procurement of a modern, high performance space for exploitation that would eliminate the peasants' tiring work. Easy to identify, harder to implement. Agrarian credits were "expensive" and banks asked for mortgage warranties, things that the Romanian peasant, tributary to conservatory mentalities, avoided: *The explanation was found in the expensive agrarian credit during the economic crisis, in the disproportion of prices between agricultural and industrial products, in the agrarian politics of the governing forces of that time, which imposed the custom tax system, the money lenders' interest etc.*¹⁴

Coming back to power in the middle of the 1930s, the Liberal Party introduces several radical financial reforms. The agricultural producers are offered cheap loans on long term, with an interest of under 3%. Furthermore, the loan doesn't have to be secured with the house or the land anymore, but strictly with the crop: *The enactment of the law of liquidation for the agrarian and urban debt from 1934 put an end to the searches in how the relation between the*

*debtee and the debtor should be brought under regulation, changing the focus towards practicality.*¹⁵

This is another way of stimulating the agricultural production. In addition, bonuses of about 10,000 lei (quite a big amount of money at that time) were awarded for each wagon of wheat that was exported.

11Romanian Academy, op. cit., p. 313; The great landed properties were reduced to 500 hectares. The only entities that were allowed to own more land were The Royal House and The Church (with a little over 3,000 hectares). The truth is that, after this big hit, the Romanian land ownership did not fully recover (until the communist took over and disbanded almost all types of proprietorship).

12id., *ibid.*, p. 365

13id., *ibid.*, p. 366

14id., *ibid.*, p. 366

15id., *ibid.*, p. 375

Consequently, agricultural production increases sharply, building up significant supplies of agricultural products, in the very period when the United States and Europe were haunted by the economic crisis: Agricultural production has also grown, quantitatively speaking (...). The high level of the agricultural production during the first years of the crisis (1929 - 1931) contributed to the accumulation of significant supplies of agricultural and alimentary products.¹⁶

In what the industry was concerned, things were even worse. The Great Union had created more problems than it had managed to resolve: The industry was in a state of economic retardation after the Union in 1918. (...) The agrarian character of the Romanian economy largely persisted.¹⁷

Drastic measures had to be taken in this respect and they were not delayed: Romania had to evolve, from a country that was exclusively agrarian, into an economically developed country, in which the industry weighed reasonably. It can be said, from all points of view, that this period, the one right after the Great Union, was the most prolific, the most generous in terms of economy, culture and spirituality in the entire history of Romania. Obviously, it was not perfect. No government, no period in the history of a country, nor of the world is perfect, because man is not perfect and societies are made of men and are, consequently, imperfect as well. But, in this period, Romania was at the peak of its development in all respects, and it was more dynamic than it had ever been before: *After the year 1924, which marked an important phase in the development of interwar Romania, economy progressed considerably. The number of enterprises and workers grows, the invested capital and the dynamics grow, the big enterprises are technically more evolved. (...) The essential characteristic of this period is defined by the industry momentum, which will influence positively the development of the country.*¹⁸

We should mention that things are debatable here, too. Not all historians agree with the "Romanian miracle" of this period, and there are even voices that contest the existence of such a phenomenon: *"The image conveyed is of overall stagnation. Comparison with the figures of other countries in the region puts the Romanian performance in an even bleaker light."*¹⁹

The "progressionism" of the Constitution of 1923 has always been discussed, but the logical question to ask is: *in what respect?* A first answer lies in the political scene, where the conservatory party openly opposed such a constitutional endeavour: *"Marghiloman counted on 'a block of parties of order and legality', opposed to the liberals in the matter of voting for the new Constitution."*²⁰

The radical character of the new Constitution of Romania, as well as its main strength,

consisted in the agrarian reform, as explained above. Moreover, from then on, we can also talk about the beginning of a real industrialization in the Romanian society.

16id., *ibid.*, p. 375

17id., *ibid.*, p. 14-15

18id., *ibid.*, p. 351-352

19Bogdan Murgescu, The Economic Performance of Interwar Romania, Nochen, 2004

20Ion Bulei, *The Political System of Modern Romania*, Bucharest, Editura Politică, 1987, p. 554

However, there are also numerous deficiencies. The rural civilization was still tributary to the old forms of social life. The almost complete absence of medical services in rural areas was endemic and the high levels of illiteracy was an incontestable reality. Measures start to be taken, but they are far from being able to resolve obvious deficiencies.

Moromete, the main character of the novel *The Morometes (Morometii)*, by Marin Preda, is a prototype. He represents the middle peasant class, which had a majority between the two world wars. They are (like the previous generations) the so-called sole of the country. In other words, Moromete is an *incarnation* of those who, through the work done on their own lands, brought the small kingdom of Romania an income that was among the first five in Europe (!). This was, however, possible under the circumstances in which the free peasant proprietors were a fact and, more than that, they were supported by the state through loans, small interest and cheap credits or (as Moromete himself shows through the almost funny game he plays with the bank agent) through the periodic lift of debt. The work of the proprietor peasantry was constantly the main source of income for Romania until the political régime changed. Moromete is therefore not anachronistic, as it has been frequently stated by the Marxist literary critique.

His concerns, his recurrent thoughts, his worries (which he never shares, or very rarely, in his deepest moments of crisis) are built strictly around maintaining his ownership of land. Nila and Paraschiv are revolted against their father's authority, because they feel he is exploiting them. Moromete tells them that the results of their work are found within the lands that not only have not been scattered (sold, in pawn, divided between successors etc.), but have been multiplied through the purchase of new lots. This is the entire issue of *The Morometes*, the maintenance of balance between ownership and land. When the land is not taken care of, it "revenge" and moves on to another owner. This is the case of Tugurlan, a different type of Ion, who is left without land because of his father's alcohol problem, or of Botoghina, who is forced to sell his land and, consequently, his independence, in order to be able to go to the doctor, as he is very ill. The law of land is, indeed, harsh and cruel. Those who cannot control land, for one reason or another, are taken out of the game. Not only from working the land, but also from Iocan's smithy, which means that they lose their authority and honorable seat in their rural community.

This is the symbol of Iocan's smithy, the place where a sort of peasant "gentry" meets up. Its authority in terms of working the land is hence acknowledged. It is difficult to say or even to assume that characters like Ilie Moromete existed indeed. He is, in any case, a literary prototype. His "philosophy" is a kind of inkhorn hall-mark of nobility that the author confers to him.

The historical situation in between wars "ratifies" the morometian character type completely. Along with the radical agrarian reform, one of the most progressist reforms in the entire Europe of that time, as we have showed, over 500,000 peasant families come into possession of land that covers over 70% of the ploughable surface of the country.

In the two decades before the second world war, the inexorable law of land, which requires

that the land is exploited as much as possible, works. Close to the agrarian reform of 1940, land owners are limited to 150,000 families, owning less than half of the ploughable surface of the country. This was in the context in which, despite the communist propaganda after 1945, the peasantry was still supported by the government through loans, lift of debt and export licenses.

Ilie Moromete is nothing else but one of these thousands of hundreds of peasants, whose existence is a perpetual fight with the hardship of agricultural life, with the debt owed to the state, with the ups and downs of the times. When he is against his sons' leaving to the city (his sons eventually failing in their condition of "lumpen-proletarians"), Moromete is not anachronistic, as it has often been said with the intention of denigrating him, but an absolute peasant who knows that true independence lies in work and in ownership of the land.