

RURAL MODERNISM
ROMANIAN LITERATURE AS EAST-CENTRAL EUROPEAN
LITERATURE
(RuMo)

This project brings an original contribution to the field of Romanian and East-Central European literary research, first of all because it undertakes the first systematic analysis of Romanian modernism from the perspective of so-called “New Modernist Studies” (perhaps the most theoretically comprehensive and substantial research directions of recent decades – Mao and Walkowitz, 2008; Wollaeger and Eatough, 2012; Friedman 2015).

RuMo is thus simultaneously a revisionist *and* a restitutive project possessing a broad socio-cultural perspective, not least because it aims at:

- a. Deconstructing the preconceived idea that Romanian modernism represents no more than the mimetic adaptation of Western cultural models (especially the French and English models), as if local and regional (socio-political, economic and cultural) contexts had had a negligible, if any, influence.
- b. Reassessing the (usually belittled, neglected or contested) contribution of rural literature and of rural ideological and cultural worldviews to the configuration of Romanian modernism.

Secondly, the project’s scientific relevance owes to the fact that it attempts to redirect the agenda of New Modernist Studies towards a subject and a region which are still relatively poorly researched: rural literature and the East-Central European cultural space, respectively.

Therefore, on the one hand, the project places itself among New Modernist Studies which, as a reaction to postmodern attacks against modernism (labelled as inherently elitist, exclusivist and discriminating), have succeeded, starting with the mid-1990s, in reconceptualizing the presumably central literary paradigm of the late 19th century and the early 20th century. Building upon the questions raised by and the conceptual tools initially employed by postcolonial theory and subsequently by World Literature (with its transnational/multicultural/global/planetary turns), these studies have not only destabilized a series of highly influential conceptual constructs, but also:

- a. Invalidated what Pierre Bourdieu (1993) labelled the “derealization and intellectualization” of literary paradigms, namely the rigidly formalist interpretation of

modernism, that seeks to render it equivalent to a set of literary attitudes, formulas, techniques or devices (refinement, contemplation, gratuitousness, sublime feelings, elitism, unrealism, ambiguity, purism, etc.). Such reductively formalist approaches had been the staple of several studies from the 1980s and 1990s as well (Berman, 1982; Călinescu, 1987; Harrison and Wood, 1992), but which had nonetheless opened up this cultural phenomenon's research towards a socio-economic and ideological/political understanding through acknowledging the tension between modernity (the historical progress generated by capitalism, scientific and technical advancements, mechanization and industrialization) and modernism (the critical reaction of the cultural field against humanity's despiritualizing tendencies), as well as their unyielding interdependence;

- b. Reconsidered the classical temporality of modernism, from retracing its chronological landmarks – regardless if they fall among the vaguest (“mid-nineteenth – mid-twentieth century”) ones put forward by Hugo Friedrich (1956), or among the most rigid – and implicitly most artificial – ones proposed by the majority of dictionaries and encyclopaedias (1890-1945) – to the radical denial of modernity's linear, unidirectional evolution and progress;
- c. “de-Westernized” modernism – by developing analyses consecrated to “alternative”, “later”, “differently situated”, “(semi-)peripheral” types of modernism (Kronfeld, 1996; Geist and Monléon, 1999; Gaonkar, 2001; Brooker and Thacker, 2005; Doyle and Winkiel, 2005; Young, 2012). This reassessment of the reception of Western modernism (especially its British, French and North American branches) aims to reveal modernism's unfolding in “subaltern”, colonial and postcolonial cultural spaces situated in Asia, Africa or Latin America, whereby the metropolitan model was “translated”, “appropriated”, “replicated” and “mimicked”.

On the other hand, the *RuMo* project attempts to transgress two of the most significant shortcomings of New Modernist Studies:

- a. that of imagining the Western World, Europe or the so-called “first-world literatures”, together with their corresponding *modernisms*, as homogenous and highly coherent entities, free from tensions, contradictions and hybridizations. More often than not, the aforementioned studies reveal that the spectrum of European modernism is not exhausted by analysing Western cultural spaces exclusively, but that an analysis of Nordic and Eastern cultures is also necessary, inasmuch as their corresponding types of modernism are completely different when seen against the backdrop of canonized Western modernisms, in

the same manner in which modernity – and implicitly modernist formulas as well –, far from being fully consistent, is deeply unequal in its distribution even within highly developed countries.

b. that of equating modernism with urban spaces and considering the cities and metropolitan clusters the exclusive loci of modern literature (Harding, 2003, Rainey, 2003; Walkowitz, 2006). Despite consistent refinements in the employed methodological tools, most of the theses and research directions of New Modernist Studies still contribute to what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2003) called “the spectralization of the rural”.

It is precisely because of this that *RuMo* is methodologically indebted to the analytical perspective put forward by Warwick Research Collective (2015) as well, a project that, having been influenced by Perry Anderson’s (1984), Raymond Williams’ (1989), Franco Moretti’s (2001) or Pascale Casanova’s (2004) studies, cultivate the idea of modernism as “combined and uneven development”. Preoccupied with the cultural expansions of the ideological, social and economic model of 21st century liberal capitalism, the scholars from Warwick Research Collective go against the grain, denying the theory of alternative modernities and substantiating the existence of a singular, but profoundly asymmetrical modernity/modernism. The well-established connections between centre and periphery, East and West, Occident and Orient have ceased to be analysed as if they represent insurmountable dichotomies and are now analysed dialectically, emphasis falling neither on the (semi-)peripheric literatures’ derivative or belated character, nor on their inferiority complexes, but rather on the local and regional reactions to the challenges and inequalities inherent to modernization. Consequently, dedicated case studies that completely eschew the normative periodisation and localization of modernism are dedicated to the different facets of modernism: from the mid-19th century up until after 1989 and covering geographical spaces spanning from Iceland, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Russia, Scotland and Italy to Sudan, South Africa and Columbia.

Furthermore, the *RuMo* project is scientifically founded on the conceptual and methodological advances registered by contemporary Rural Studies as well, which often intersect with those of New Modernist Studies, when the latter do not assimilate them entirely. Revived by Raymond Williams’ seminal work *The Country and the City* (1973), these research directions (embodied by Parkinson, 1984; Conlogue, 2001; Freitag, 2013) fundamentally aim at counterbalancing both idealizing and mythicizing readings, as well derogatory and belittling ones, through which rural literature has been reduced to its most rudimentary interpretation (premodern, anti-intellectual and anti-psychologizing). It is against

this backdrop that increasingly more studies (Dore, 2005; Farlan, 2007; Hubbs, 2008; Moffitt, 2012; Buechsel, 2014) bring forth the imperative of a *rural modernism* originating in two mutations of mentality, both theorized by Pascale Casanova (2004): a socio-cultural one, taking place at the end of the 19th century, as the Herderian conception of mythical peasantry as conserver of the “national soul” gives way to defining the peasantry as working class, and one anchored in literary criticism and ignited by the rural writings of Thomas Hardy, Émile Zola and especially William Faulkner and Gabriel García Márquez, whose unique mixture of rural themes with modern narrative techniques and formulas have gained international recognition.

Summarizing, through combining the theories of “combined and uneven development” with those of “rural modernism”, this project aims to deconstruct what scholars such as Sorin Alexandrescu (1999) and Teodora Dumitru (2016) regard as the intrinsic backwardness of Romanian literary studies, which are presumably caught up in the (now obsolete) conceptual framework put together during the early 20th century by Ștefan Zeletin (1925) and Eugen Lovinescu (1925; 1926-1929). The main postulate of this framework is that social and cultural modernity is defined by the strong opposition between “revolutionary”, civilizing, bourgeois, capitalist, liberal “forces” and “reactionary forces” consisting of peasant, boyar, agrarian and conservative elements. Even most recent projects (Antoși, 2008; Cernat, 2009; Soare, 2017), largely inspired by the success registered by Antoine Compagnon’s *Les antimodernes* (2005), although aiming at a diversification and democratization of Romanian modernism, allows no room for rurality and/or for the East-Central European context.

One of the major challenges of the present project consists in reading studies dwelling on the rurality of Romanian literature against the grain. Despite the fact that, starting in the 19th century and up until the present time, the rurality of Romanian literature, culture and society has remained a constantly privileged – when not downright *the sole and central* – subject of debate (igniting local nationalist frenzies or, on the contrary, feelings of self-deprecation in regard to a perceived backwardness), local theory, literary criticism and literary history are blatantly avoiding to associate rural literature with modernism. On the contrary, the generally accepted stance is that of irrevocably dissociating them. (Craia, 1985; Bârna, 2009).

Moreover, the reluctance of Romanian culture in regard to a project such as *RuMo* can owe to the difficulty of contextualizing or elaborating comparative analyses within East-Central Europe due to the limited access to relevant bibliographical sources in languages of wider circulation. However, as other collective projects also demonstrate, together with the hundreds of works that reference them, the bibliographic impediment is rather a cliché and a

false problem. We are referring to projects such as the ones put together by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek (2002), by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer (2004-2010), by Marc Maufort and Caroline de Wagter (2011) or Balázs Trencsényi (*et al.*, 2018), but also to overviews such as Stefano Bianchini's (2015), Chris Hann's (2015) and Martin Kohlrausch's (2019).

The specific objectives of the present project are:

- a. Delimiting the features of East-Central European Modernism by taking into account the mix of social, economic, political and cultural anti-capitalist influences that caused East-Central European countries to follow a different modernising trajectory than their Western peers:
 - a.1. Mapping the avatars and the spread of agrarian ideologies, theories, and movements (*Russian Narodnicism, peasantism, agrarian mysticism, Bolshevism, Slavophilism, Orthodoxy*, etc.) throughout the region during the 19th and 20th centuries;
 - a.2. Highlighting the cultural/literary dispersion of these theories/movements, all while pursuing the mutations that Western modernist formulas have underwent;
 - a.3. Sketching a comparative network of East-Central European rural modernism.
- b. Exploring the Romanian setting of rural modernism through putting into perspective the main East-Central European ruralist orientations:
 - b.1. Reassessing the most prominent so-called “traditionalist” and “anti-modernist” directions (*sămănătorism*, from *The Sower/Sămănătorul*, *poporanism*, derived from the Romanian word for *The people*, “poporul”, and *gândirism*, originating in the name of the cultural magazine *Gândirea*) and their confrontation with corresponding East-Central European directions (*Narodnicism*, Germanic *Heimatliteratur*, Baltic *maakultur*, Polish *chlopomania*, Bulgarian *agrarianism*, etc.);
 - b.2. Investigating the revival and strengthening of rural modernism under Romanian communism (during the 1960s up until the 1980s) by means of mapping out the regional circuit of the most significant transnational models of the period (such as William Faulkner, Gabriel García Márquez, John Steinbeck);
 - b.3. Summarizing the presented material so as to identify and elaborate on the similarities or the discrepancies between the different phases of Romanian rural modernism.
- c. Presenting a series of case studies dedicated to the main rural modernist writers and literary formulas:
 - c.1. Analysing the East-Central European influence on the rural imaginary cultivated in the works of major Romanian inter- and post-war writers (Liviu Rebreanu, Marin Preda, Mihail Sadoveanu, Lucian Blaga, Tudor Arghezi, Marin Sorescu, Benjamin Fondane);
 - c.2. Analysing the rural extensions of Romanian expressionism, avant-garde, socialist realism, magical realism, and, from the 1960s until the 1980s, of “neomodernism”.

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