

Space of Periphery in Romanian Interwar Novel

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Abstract:

The novelists dealing with the issue of periphery aim to present as accurate as possible, the real world as a harsh, tough, hermetic one, shaped by very particular rules. The novel of suburbia is, above all, one of peripheral areas. They emerge as outcomes of the city's growth and are usually populated by a dirty, mixed crowd. We may say that dirtiness, misery, garbage represent the specificity, even the constant of this marginal world. The characters of the Romanian novel of periphery live, paradoxically, two-folded: namely, in a torturing, miserable, destructive present, that we may undoubtedly call as awful; but also in a pink, happy future hardly loomed among the alcohol steams or the smoke of sordid workshops, a desired future, "invested" in a love story which, eventually, ends in crimes, extra-conjugal adventures, violence. In short, they project all in a "golden future".

What I am trying to do in this research is to show the representative areas of the periphery – like the pub, the brothel, the church, the street – as they are reflected in Romanian interwar novels on such topics, novels that follow the social reality of the time, with an almost naturalistic fidelity.

Key words: periphery, suburbia, centre, novel, interwar literature.

Introduction

According to *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (2001, 1144) **periphery** is: "1. If something is on the periphery of an area, place, or thing, it is on the edge of it (...). 2. The periphery of a subject or area of interest is the part of it that is not considered to be as important or basic as the main part (...)". Still, the significances of the term "periphery" go far beyond the sphere of these definitions and have to be correlated to the one of "centre", since they form together a dialectical couple (Hess, 2001, 93). The centre and the periphery represent research topics that one may find more and more often in various fields like biology linguistics, philosophy, sociology, politics or economics.

As far as literature is concerned, Virgil Nemoianu proposes the notions of "main" and "secondary" which may be equated to those of "centre" and "periphery". According to him, literature appears as peripheral with respect to other activities (that constitute the centre) – "literature is itself a secondary issue in contrast to the central human preoccupations and to the central gears of the history" (1997, 6) – while, on the other side, literature is a mirror "reflecting in its substance, the connections between principal and secondary – between the structure and the texture, as some old critics would have put it – or, at least, interprets for the reader, the dialectical drama of the relationship between them. It means hegemony and subjugation, revolt and harmony, anarchy and order" (1997, 7). And, there are, indeed, hegemonies in the very core of literature. One may find, this way, first shelf books and second shelf ones. The differentiation is grounded on an aesthetical criterion, which is, however, in a continuous change.

Another point of view comes from Constantin Cublesan who notices the turn from rural to urban areas in the Romanian novel written shortly after the First World War. "There will be a special place within the description and analysis of the *tentacular city* occupied by a set of novels oriented to surveying the human universe at the *bottom* of the society, of those from the rudimentary peripheries" (2009, 181).

A doctoral thesis has been already defended on this topic, at the West University in Timisoara (2009), by Alina Georgeta Toman, entitled *The Centre – Periphery Relation in the Romanian Literature. The Case of G.M. Zamfirescu*. It is mainly concerned with the way in which the work of G. M. Zamfirescu – he, himself, a marginal - had been perceived in the media of his time. Georgiana Sârbu has published a comparative book *The Histories of Periphery. The Slum in Romanian Novel. From G.M. Zamfirescu to Radu Aldulescu*. She discusses

there three different novels from different times: *The Field with Love* (1933) by G. M. Zamfirescu, *The Hollow* (1957) by Eugen Barbu and *The Lover of the Wheat Boiling Woman*³⁸ (1996) by Radu Aldulescu.

Usually, the slum area is “thrown” away by the city: garbage hallows the place where the garbage is stored or where the dead animals are thrown away. The pub, the brothel, the church, the street are emblematical toposes of the periphery, being rich of colour and significances that we will uncover in this paper. Although we will analyse them separately, they form a unitary entity which plays an important role in designing a complete picture of marginality.

It follows that the city’s periphery has constituted a permanent preoccupation of Romanian writers, especially in the interwar period, when the topic was checked with a realistic approach, since it has its own, particular life at the edge between rural and urban. Despite of all these, it remained a second or third shelf literature and has seldom interested the critics. It was merely the vigour and the novelty of this space, as we have discovered it in the time’s novels, the reason which determined us to conduct the present research.

We will study here the novels: *Love God* – 1921 (1991) and *The Decomposed Man* – 1925, by Felix Aderca; *The Diplomat*, *Leather Dresser* (1928) and *The Actress The House with Girls* (1930), by Carol Ardeleanu; *Don Juan Hunched* (1933), *The Childhood of a Worthless* (1936), *The Trust* (1937), by Ion Calugaru; *Codin* – 1925 (1970) and *Nerantzula* – 1927 (1974), by Panait Istrati; *The Field with Love* – 1933 (1986), by G. M. Zamfirescu and *The Nights of Miss Mili* (1935), by Isac Peltz.

Method of Study

In the first paragraph, entitled *Space of Periphery* we will make a general presentation of the marginal spaces, using *synthesis* as it emerges from the notions of “open space” and “closed space” (Kovacs, 1987, p. 245). After this, we will analyse part by part, the main elements of such spaces, like the pub, the brothel, the church and the street. With respect to the pub, we will point to its parable aspect (Piskonov, 1979, 299) in order to compare and synthesise facts and ideas from the novels of Carol Ardeleanu and Felix Aderca. The same methods will be used while speaking about the brothel in order to depict the way this *institution* has been reflected in the novels of Carol Ardeleanu, Felix Aderca, Panait Istrati, G. M Zamfirescu, Ion Calugaru. The next chapter will reflect the church issue as one can extract from the novels of Carol Ardeleanu, Ion Calugaru and Panait Istrati, while the paper ends displaying the significances of the street as they come out from the novels of Isac Peltz, Panait Istrati, Carol Ardeleanu and Ion Calugaru. The slum, as it is drafted in these novels, is a relatively new space, a transitional one, but which generates other areas like: the pubs, the brothel, the church, the street.

The Space of Periphery

In the present day theory of literature, the notions of *open space* and *closed space* have been defined. Thus, while the open space suggests freedom, unchaining, returning to the imaginary paradise of nature, the closed space would represent on one hand clausturation, death, extinction, and on the other, protection, safety. There are plenty of cases in this respect, starting from the sacred space of the traditional house to the comfortable, intimate and protective of the modern person’s car. While speaking about the closed space from a slum, there is no way to think about protection, safety or the same. On the contrary, getting together several members of a family in a single, sordid room is an endless opportunity for conflicts.

It follows that we may say – once with the critics – that in Romanian slum “we often find closed, inhospitable, hostile spaces, generating the feeling of sequestration or the act itself, if not the non-being” (Kovacs, 1987, 245). Moreover, we might tend to think that nothing is sure as related to the Romanian slum, since the spaces that usually are destined to providing safety, calm and happiness turn, all of a sudden into threatening, adversary, aggressive ones.

To conclude, we should say that the entire topic of the space of Romanian slum is meant to draft an area of desperation, of refusal of life

The pub

This is the place where the men (in the majority of cases, but sometimes, women, as well) find their salvation – be it even a temporary one – from the home hell or from the Calvary of the animalic work in the

³⁸ It refferes to a woman who usually boils wheat with honey and nuts for the funerals;

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factory, enterprise, station, port. It is obvious that such a person becomes the slave of alcohol and finally, dependent on it.

The pub means socialization. Is a place of getting information (Ardeleanu, 1930), here is where it comes out Consuls idea to kill Andrei (Ardeleanu, 1928), here friendships are tied and untied, and here destinies get united (the match-making of Nuta in novel *The Lady in Neptun Street*, by Felix Aderca).

The pub is a parable inside the same type of prose, meaning a protective space of these disinherited people. It functions as a shelter of the unhappy guys in the slum but also as an element of local flavor, since there can't be imagined a periphery without a pub.

Therefore, one may say, without the risk of exaggeration, that the true house of the unhappy inhabitants of the slum is the pub. They are genuine alienated men.

This place of perish, the pub, becomes some sort of club, where the individual feels himself as a whole and may talk to his equals. "This is what they are looking for, while crossing the threshold of the pub, which is, however, places in the middle of the road: the atmosphere" (Sarbu, 2009, 97).

The pub is, in the novel of Romanian periphery, a place where the plenitude of life is more than anywhere else, manifested. Much more, according to some exegetes, it is the rationality of the novel. There is an emergent world, a humanity asking its right to existence and history, beyond the sometimes morbid aspect, over which the wing of death is often floating: "the self reliance of novel grew up, especially after he XVIIIth and XIXth century, when it has dealt with the moral force of individuals and their relation to the surrounding world." (Toma, 2003, 17)

There is here, in this protector space of the pub where the clients spend a time of "getting out of the world", of the world's time, namely of the one during which they are sentenced to work. We might call it a "sacred time. This time is a profound spatial and concrete one." (Bahtin, 1982, 436)

The pub has also a narrative function that should not be ignored, besides its social, psychological, existential one, representing a bank of salvation, a realm of illusions, of hopes and dreams. It follows that people entering the sordid pubs of the slums hope to forget, to enter a different world, a different life. But life itself does not change. It can't become another one.

The brothel

The brothel should not be taken in a literary, textual sense. We do not always speak about a proper said institution. Thus, the hotel can replace (and it does very well) the brothel, according to all the proper rules, especially to those of paying the tax.

"Girls were raising their shirts to make him feel ashamed.

- Hey, merchant, have a look, since you got no money to pay..." (Calugaru, 1937, 160).

Beyond the status of feminity, beyond the mix of guilt, shame, pleasure and horror that the sexual act supposes – at least at the beginning – being or not paid, eventually, the "inhabitants" of the pleasure houses cross easily over their not honourable status, telling themselves (as well as all the people in the slum) that they have been pushed to it, by need. "At the beginning, it was something that no women can say: a mix of pleasure and impulse; later on, frenzy of senses, and after, a vice or a habit, while now, at the end of the day, of all the instinctual joys, the need" (Ardeleanu, 1930, 27).

Brothels are differentiated according to their quality, into select and common ones. This typology appears both in *The House of Girls* by Carol Ardeleanu (where Margarita's house belongs to the first group) and in *Nerantula* by Panait Istrati: "we also knew two or three such houses in the ditch, where officers from the ships and married, well educated men used to go" (1974, 135).

The connection to mud is not hazardous. There is primary instinct at work, the satisfaction of needs: "The house here has its own smell: that of mud turned upside down. People used to enter though a dark courtyard full of dirty water, since the used water was thrown out from the chain of rooms, directly in the yard, thought the windows" (Aderca, 1925, 217).

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But still, the brothel hosts its own feelings. It balances between uniting (in *The God of Love*, by Felix Aderca, Aurel meets Ema again and marries her) and decomposition (in *Decomposed Man*, by Felix Aderca, where the tired less search of the brothels in all the cities in the country ends in human dissolution, in sinking into the mud).

While in Ion Calugaru's book, the brothel means the gain of sexual maturity, in Felix Aderca's work there is a different significance: looking for childhood (Ema), for heard purity. All these remain a simple illusion and leads to the search of other love affairs. This meaning is very similar to the one in *Nerantula*, by Panait Istrati, where the brothel reappears as a place of meeting again, even if painful. The paradox consists of preserving the soul's innocence despite of body's dishonour. Nerantula's room unveiled "in its order and disorder, so much naïve innocence, so much childhood" (Istrati, 1974, 141).

For Carol Ardeleanu (1930), the brothel is a means of enrichment, an affair; while for G. M. Zamfirescu (1986) it gains the connotation of revenge (Gore punishes Sultana through a sodomization act merely inside the house for she dared to disclose his truth).

This space influences decisively the life in the slum as well as the shape of persons' characters. Therefore, the merit of these novels is that of describing realistically, with no prejudices, an authentic space.

The Church

Most of those populating the Romanian slums feel themselves left by the entire world, especially by their parents – and for many of them, this is the truth. Therefore, in the deep of their souls, they consider the church as a real mother, although expressively, they are against it.

It may be "unrealistic" that the girls from various brothels of the slum are faithful in the full sense of this word. Despite of their "profession", they make their cross while passing along the church and say, voiceless, a pray. "She passed in front of a church, stopped for a while, made a cross and whispered, only for God to listen: "God, help me!"..." (Ardeleanu, 1930, 15)

Despite of her status of matron, a female in Carol Ardeleanu's work finds no impediment to move, for the winter time, from the brothel into the church. "Following the advice of Margareta and Negrița, Jana has written to Alexandra that the possession enforcement had been postponed and she moves with Natasa into the church." (Ardeleanu, 1930, 178). The church represents a bank, a light in a sea of despair, in this world of hopelessness and misery. For these disinherited people, the church is not a place (nor the time) of regret, of penance. It is the only hope that perhaps, somewhere, even if not in this world, there is some room for their happiness, as well. "All the girls were still hoping for something and all were going to the church to pray" (Ardeleanu, 1930, 189).

An important feature of this world is what we would call today as inter-ethnicity. Usually, the inhabitants of the slums are Romanians who had been expelled or self-exiled from the village world. But there are also, in these Romanian slums, many Turks, Bulgarians, Greeks, Russians, even Armenians, but, especially, Jews. It is obvious that synagogues will appear in these communities, bearing the religious function they had been "invested" with. "At the synagogue, lights should be burnt on the Atonement's Day, for all the Deaths." (Calugaru, 1936, 233). There are not rare the cases in which one of the partners in a couple (although it is hard to define them like that), converts himself to the other one's religion. Intention may be noble and the turn, a major one, but the overcoming of a miserable and crisis situation is seldom a success. "The Jew woman received <the secret of the baptistry> from which she was waiting for a change in her Christian lover's attitude, but he was very little interested in all these stories "with priests". However, a change had happened, but in a reversed way: my mother turned from a clean and working woman, into a dirty, uncaring and bad smelling bigot" (Istrati, 1974, 161).

The Street

On our territories, the cities "appear" from the old markets, "emerged" at their turn from the old "capitals" or most often from the most developed rural communities, perhaps with commercial potential. Systematization had never been a preoccupation of the Romanians – at least with respect to cities' building – except, of course, for those in the Habsburgic or Austro-Hungarian Empire. While the cities still come out of something, the slums with their streets come into being from the dust of the fields full of thistles. "Many houses

have been built, now having many inhabitants, on what had been desert streets, like five years ago.” (Peltz, 1935, 282).

There is not only the religious perspective, but also an ethnical one to organise the streets. Mainly, those belonging to one ethnicity or nation, those coming from the same country (which they have left, mostly for economic reasons), all these settle in the same “place”, in the same desert space of a collectivity-to-be. “I have passed, this way, through the slums, through the streets which are most characteristic for the city: the Russian one, the Jewish one, the Greek one, the Gipsy one. And I have found new morals and habits, all over” (Istrati, 1970, 31)

In most of the cases, these streets are nothing but former, present or future “garbage fields”: here is where not only the rests of a slum are thrown away (animals’ corps, all kind of garbage) but also those of the city. The smell, the bad one is the distinctive sign of “reaching the place”, much before the depressive picture. “The Sun (...) was stirring here poisoned stinks, especially from some heaps of spoiled sour cabbage, entire butts thrown directly in the street, since the spring was already here.” (Istrati, 1970, 43).

The general aspect of the slum is, thus, one of desegregation, of lack of systematization, of organization, of order: “The pavement was broken by cobble stones, deepening hole after hole and creating the moon’s landscape as seen through bad telescopes, when the ordinary people look at the miracle in exchange of some little money“ (Ardeleanu, 1928, 9).

There is a current admonition – used even nowadays - for those kids behaving unruly, namely *sine you haven’t grew up in the street*. But the slum’s kids literally are growing up on the street. Since they are very little, these kids discover the flavour of freedom, in the street, they find a space where they can breath, running away from the scandals in the miserable, crammed rooms where people quarrel, beat, struggle for gaining the daily food. “Here there are the worse kids. The children of gypsy shoeing smiths, of German wheelwrights, the younglings of Jewish carriage makers or those of baggage men from the mill, they run after dogs, catch the geese in the court yards with the angling line, play *oina* in the middle of the street, throw stones in calm passers by or in the sick ones, or follow the crazy people in the market” (Calugaru, 1936, 40).

The street of the slum is also the place where the stories of this unhappy place, come out. For instance, there had been a rumour that on a certain street, in a certain place, gold and silver had been thrown away. This is the golden dream of mankind. “From the hidden small streets, from the military barracks, from the gypsy side, from the slums with fountains, people were coming to check whether was true that gold and silver had been thrown away.” (Calugaru, 1936, 232)

The street is not only a component of the slum, it is its epidermis. Here is where everything is seen from, here is where the pulse of life is caught beyond the shrunk walls ready to fall down. “The street is a transparent skin through which one may see how the inner organs work: but also a part of eternity that may be shared” (Calugaru, 1933, 6).

Conclusions:

We may conclude by saying that the problematic of space in the Romanian novel of the slum is, in the same time, complex and productive from a narrative point of view. It is complex, because, in contrast to the rural space, the slum is a relatively new area in our country and, in the same time, a transitional one. Currently, the slums of the big cities had been swallowed by the city. But, we believe, that the other way around is also true, namely, that the centre got enlarged and included the periphery. Many changes have occurred here, too. There have been not only mental ones, but also spatial changes.

Secondly, we have to say that this literary tip which is the slum is generous from the point of view of generating new spaces, genuine scenes of a rather tragic show: the pub, the brothel, the street, the church. It is interesting to be hold that all these spaces have, in a normal context, some positive functions and significances, since the urban collectivities have precisely this role, to enlarge the safety of its inhabitants, to offer them a richer, easier, better life.

This kind of literature throws away the idyllic picture of the periphery with coquette small houses, with ordered streets, with storks in the window. It is a terrible, tough, misery world, being in full and permanent degrading process.

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