

MITREA COCOR

Mihail Sadoveanu



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With a Foreword by
MULK RAJ ANAND

and an Introduction by
JACK LINDSAY

FOREWORD

My dear venerable friend Mihail Sadoveanu,

When I first met you a few years ago in Berlin, I asked several Rumanians whether any of your books had been translated into English. At that time the work of literary exchange between your country and the west had not started, and my curiosity about those works on which your fame seems securely based in Rumania remained unsatisfied. The warmth of your handshake and your benign and kindly smile compelled me again last year in Vienna to ask you if by now something from the many books you have written had now become available in a foreign language, and you reassured me in your staccato English by saying "So". Imagine my pleasure therefore, when on reaching London this spring your English publishers handed me a manuscript of the translation of your novel 'Mitrea Cocor', with the suggestion that I should write a short forward to it. I read the final proofs of the book and readily agreed to put down a few words, not by way of an introduction, but as a very modest token of my homage to your beloved personality and your great gifts as a novelist.

The book 'Mitrea Cocor', plunged me right into the inner orbits of the transition between the old life of Rumania and the new life. Perhaps, by a sheer accident of chance, this was the ideal way of sensing the spiritual depths in which your people plumbed the values of endurance and the courageous acceptance of the humiliations and indignities of Boyar rule from which they emancipated themselves into the humanist world of Rumania today. In many ways the picaresque adventures of your main character, Mitrea Cocor, are so reminiscent to me of the hazards and stresses of the sons of our own Indian peasantry: the struggles of Mitrea Cocor and his incoherent longings towards a full life are, I suppose, universally human traits and thus make him typical of the youth of many rural civilisations which still linger in our contemporary world. But the fact that your hero comes through to some poise through the liberation of Rumania from the grandees and the militarists, makes him an enviable symbol of success. I was deeply impressed by your uncan-

ny awareness of the fleeting moods of a peasant boy, and I marvel at the extraordinary alliance which you, at the mature age of 70, can still self-consciously make with a person so far removed from you in years. Of course, as a master of narrative and with your gifts as a story-teller, based on a fiery principle of recognition of the quick of life in your characters, your achievement in this book was only to be expected. It is, however, startlingly evident that you are one of the few novelists in the world who have been able to show the beauties of peace through the presentation of an organic social conflict in time of war: as Mitrea Cocor experiences the new life after the toils of his soldiering career, his love of the good life of creative endeavour seems like a natural flowering of his innate genius for living.

You deservedly won for this book the Gold Medal of Peace from the International Jury. I assure you that you will also win through the publication of the various translations of this book, many friends in all countries of the world. I, for one, shall look forward to seeing many more translations of the early novels which you, in your lifetime of devotion to the art of writing, have piled up as monuments of the love that you have for your people.

MULK RAJ ANAND

MIHAIL SADOVEANU.

The literature of the People's Republic of Rumania, by entering on the road of Socialist Realism, has achieved a liberation so extensive that one can only call it a cultural renaissance. From the pens of Rumanian writers come works steadily increasing in number and remarkable in character, which draw their inspiration and vigour from the life and the reality about them, and which consider social development through the prism of the luminous future assured to the people of Rumania.

Wherever literature has to be raised to a new and higher level, it is on the writers that the task is laid of carrying out the deep changes required, while at the same time thoroughly absorbing the best tradition of both the national literature and world-literature. However, not all national literatures have the advantage of counting among their living writers one of classical stature, who sets himself the task of adapting a personal method, of high virtue, to the new conditions created by deep-going social transformations.

Rumanian literature owns a classical writer of this type in the person of the great prose-writer and incomparable master of narrative Mihail Sadoveanu.

Born at Pascani in 1880, in the midst of the smiling meadowlands of Moldavia, Sadoveanu from earliest years learned to love his country, to cherish its beauties, and to base himself on the inexhaustible treasury of popular literature. His mother, a peasant woman of the village of Versheni, put her child to sleep with immemorial songs and lullabies. In the child's eyes she personified dignity as well as commonsense, sensibility as well as humour — the dominating qualities of a person of the people. The links of Sadoveanu with the home-village of his mother, his encounters with his grandfather, wheelwright of Versheni, fixed in his young spirit a love and attachment for the peasant class, which, despite its crushed condition, kept alive at its heart, like the sleeping giants of folktales, the undying seed of the people's vitality. His autobiographical writings are penetrated by distant memories of childhood. At Versheni it was that he was caught up in love of the densely

foliated trees, the freshly furrowed fields, the serene heavens of his homeland, its hills and flowering woods. But besides the beauties of nature he learned to know the people around him, women exhausted by toil yet owning untamed faces, peasants hard-driven and yet open of soul, and he felt that their sufferings and aspirations would never cease to be his own.

The time spent at an elementary school strengthened him yet further in his faith in the people's invincible force. In a tale called *Mr Trandafir* he evokes the schoolmaster who with a slow warm voice brought alive in the children's imaginations the towering figures of those that loved justice and made it triumph, or set out before the youngster's eyes the marvellous deeds and gallantry of charmed heroes. By the good works of schoolmaster Trandafir the pupils learned to enjoy the delightful tales of Ion Creanga and the melody of the magical verses of Eminescu, and thus to esteem the masters of Rumanian literature, whose works germinated and grew deep in the soil of the people's life.

On finishing his studies, Sadoveanu went to Bucarest and set out on the arduous ways of a literary career, became familiar with the editorial offices of papers, and knocked on the doors of the publishing houses. Returning to Moldavia, the young writer went through his military service. In the army he came up sharply against the boorishness of the N.C.O.'s, the ignorance and arrogance of the officers of the period; with difficulty he controlled his revolt in the face of the treatment inflicted on the soldiers, sons of the people, who were humiliated, beaten with savage brutality, and submitted on the least excuse to harsh punishments, and who were kept at hard toil so that their superiors might live an easy life. In *Memories of Corporal Gheorghitsa*, Sadoveanu set out bitterly and with a scarcely-veiled sarcasm the impressions gained at this time.

Henceforth every fresh book of his was a message of fellow-feeling addressed to the hundreds of thousands of peasants toiling on the vast seignorial domains, dressed in rags and underfed, who, as soon as they resumed their torn army-uniforms, were forced to fight in defence of masters that enriched themselves out of their sweated labours.

His writings, which number more than a hundred, reflect the true face of the people's life. "The peasant has been my principal hero," he has remarked. In fact his work describes the tormented existence of the peasant under the past regime of oppression, the life of distant villages where poverty and famine rule the thatched mudhuts. The peasants who fill his novels and tales are simple men, issued from the people, choked with humiliations and hardships, who at times, driven to bay, take justice into their own hands, but who are always ready to defend the earth of their forefathers. Rated as beasts of burden, in life and death they are at the landlord's mercy. *The Robber* is the story of a peasant who, driven by poverty, dares to steal some dead boughs from the boyar's forest, and who is taken and flogged to death for this trivial offence. The law was not devised for the peasants but against them. Mayor, notary, police were the docile servants of the hoyars. They tortured and jailed, not in accordance with the dusty and disregarded code, in which some vague human rights also figured, but in accordance with the interests of the landed proprietors, the kulaks and moneylenders. Continually there are more peasants who, despoiled and cheated of their rights, take the road of exile, aided by their fellow-countrymen, like the two Toni of *Emigrants for Brazil*. They have realised that between justice for themselves and justice for their masters there gapes an abyss. And then revolt breaks out, letting loose the floods. The peasants attempt to work out and put into action a law which is not that of the wolf for the lamb. Is that not simply the judgment given by the Great Basil in the tale *Judge of the Poor*? The peasant, whose wife has been seduced by the boyar and who has then himself been tortured and beaten with ferocious cruelty, flees to the mountain, where he meets the outlaw, or *haiduc*, called the Great Basil, who sets out to gain justice and punish the boyar. The two men go down to the village and halt the boyar's carriage, calling to those around them:

We have come to get justice, according to ancient custom. For while we're waiting for God to bring us the Last Judgment — since we can't make the judges or the Grand Council listen — it's right for our arms to get us justice for ourselves. As for the women, we forgive you that, illustrious lord, but

what about the way we've trembled with head between the palings of the fence, ankle-deep in the icy millwater, with shackled feet and eyes burnt by the smoke of the peppers, like to spit our very souls out? And you've whipped us till we bled. You tore our fingernails out. You poured a poison in our life; for all our days we've been treated like that and we've never found the least solace or justice. So we've come to pay our debt, lord.

The same ineradicable hate seethes in Petrache's heart, in *A Shadow*. Exorbitant taxes have wrecked him. He has handed over to the collector his last clothes and stands in rags on the threatening edge of winter. In the forest clearing he waylays the collector, instrument of pitiless authority, to have things out. „Uncle Gheorghe," says the peasant slowly, „I've an account to settle with you . . . Uncle Gheorghe, I've come to the point of not knowing in what world I live . . . The festivals are coming and there's not a candle burning in my home; and my wife is sick, and my little boy, only three years old, he died in Lent . . . And look, three days ago he came along and went off with my heifer, he took my furred jacket and some carpets, while I wasn't there . . . I went to his place and asked him why he did it. Why? says he. You'd better get off, I've got a gun here that can shoot a bullet through five bastards the like of you . . . and look, I have a wife and kids; as for bread, God hasn't willed we should have any this year. He's taken away what I had, he's taken it and said he'll take my life too. Like a dog, he said, I'll slaughter you."

These heroes are not resigned people, they do not bow before the lot to which the representatives of the oppressing classes have condemned them. They are proud and tough men, who struggle without weakening to escape that life of oppression. They firmly believe that the day of victory will come. In their looks, heavier with hate every generation, we can read the unshakeable faith in a future time when there will no longer exist boyars who turn away in disgust from their emaciated and tattered condition — boyars whose own fortune is based on that misery.

The boyars' power is not unlimited. The end of Raducan Chioru in *Judge of the Poor* abundantly shows it. The lives of Cosma Racorare and the Great Basil recall those of popular heroes in the *haiduc* songs and ballads. Those outlaws at times appear in Sadoveanu's

work, showing who it is that the peasants look towards when their yoke grows intolerable. The revolt of maddened peasants drives them to bring down one or another of the oppressors, but can hardly guide them into the path of alliance with the working-class for a common struggle to overthrow all the oppressors and break the chains of exploitation.

The character of Sadoveanu's heroes reflects the spiritual richness and the profoundly moral qualities of the people. He is at the other end from the writers called *poporanistes* who depicted idyllic peasants, always on holiday, dancing round-dances and uttering cries of joy, or else meeting on vigils where they carry out divinations or indulge in spiritual ejaculations. Sadoveanu on the contrary has reproduced in his work the truthful image of the peasants' life and unveiled their true qualities of soul. From their actions emerge steadily courage and resolution, skill and ingenuity.

Some of Sadoveanu's tales deal with the creative powers of the common man. But that man's knowledge, his experience, his desire to bring about some bettering of things where the need makes itself felt, are ignored by the masters who refuse to let the sons of the people raise their heads. And so the artisan Blandu whose life is spent in seeking to launch an apparatus of his own invention, is disregarded and deprived of any help.

The people's artistic gifts, so well known to the writer, are continually brought out in his work. Assiduous collector of folkmasterpieces in words, in the tradition of all the great artists of his country, Sadoveanu has seen in folklore a treasure of inestimable value. Again and again, he expresses his unmeasured admiration for the anonymous creator, insisting always on the unequalled artistic qualities of the popular creations and comparing folklore to a seashell in which sounds the echo of the people's life. The old blind singer of *The Inn of Ancoutza* joins the other travellers and listens to the memories that each brings up out of his tormented life. Drawn to tell something in his turn, he slowly begins a popular song, the spell of which is such that the whole audience vibrates with a deep response.

To grasp the soul of the simple man, Sadoveanu takes his stand

on a thorough knowledge of his way of life and on the infinite love he feels for him.

The distant past of the stirring history of the Rumanian people and their long struggle for liberty and the country's salvation occupy an important place in his work. The cycle of historical tales, *Time of Exodus*, the trilogy *The Brothers Jderi*, *Line of Shoimeri*, *Under the Sign of Cancer*, *Nicoara Potcoava*, reveal one of the aspects of this unceasing struggle, the resistance that the peasants make to the savage oppression of boyars and the countless battles fought against invaders. These works are especially valuable because Sadoveanu has been able to distinguish the just wars, when the toilers went off in mass to defend their land and hearth. Those who stood up like an impenetrable barrier before the Tatar or Turk invaders were not soldiers of the prince's armies clad in glittering coats of mail, but wretched men who staked life and death to protect their fields trampled by horseshoes and their poor shelters turned to cinders. Scythe and hoe, tools of their peaceful toil, swung by a bold arm, became redoubtable weapons in the eyes of the arrogant invader. The remarkable heroism and boldness of the nameless hero are excellently drawn in the historical novel, *Time of Exodus*. The peasant hands rise up as if miraculously, ready to confront the scourge of the Tatar hordes.

From the uttermost depths of the villages hidden at the feet of gulleed mountains, from their miserable huts, all the warriors have hastened at the plaintive crying of the horn. Coming out of the unknown, that old and infinitely sad call, so often heard in childhood, sends the women and children up into the mountains and draws the humble toilers of the earth towards the storm-heart of danger. Thus responded, thus struggled, thus died their parents. And now they too were ready to struggle with fury and despair, they were ready to die in the same way, uncomplaining, fertilising with their blood mingled with the foe's the earth they left to their offspring. They did not smile, they exchanged no useless words, they had come together, they understood one another; they had assembled now to aid the horse-fighters and they awaited the hour of march when they could hurl themselves on the enemy with all their forces; they watched the skyline in flames, without throb of heart, thinking bitterly of their small homes burning in the same way, the village with its poor church burning, the harvest ungathered and all they had amassed by the days of toil when they wore themselves out with the sweat of their brows.

But Sadoveanu knows also how to bring out within the framework of the historical novel the changing aspects of the social organization at different periods of our history. Thus, he lays stress on the epoch when the peasants were still free, when the *razeshi* (free peasants) defended their strips of land. In those days men, narrowly bound to the soil, struggled tenaciously to defend their meagre possessions. They were the men who at the time of Stephen the Great, a prince beloved and appreciated by the people, defended national liberty. (*The Brothers Jderi*).

Later, when the cruel and rapacious boyars had deprived the *razeshi* of their lands, the peasants no longer found in their souls the determination to fight as before, and the Turkish yoke began weighing ever more heavily on the nation's shoulders. But whenever there appeared princes like the Voivode Ion the Terrible or chieftains like Nicoara Potcoava, brother of Ion, men who understood the bitter and grievous lot of the peasant, the people gathered afresh around them.

An admirable figure in Sadoveanu's work is Nicoara Potcoava, in the novel named after him. Nicoara has known much love for the crushed people, he has striven to draw them from their enslavement by both Turks and boyars, with all the fibres of his being he has felt for this people who have experienced through the centuries (as the writer so strikingly puts it) only "the calm of winds and the rest of waves." Looking back, Nicoara has grasped which were the true friends of the oppressed people, and to them he directs his thought and his words. His appeal to the Zaporozhian Cossacks does not go unanswered. The good neighbours in the East come in haste, bring aid to their stricken brothers, and then, as so often, the blood of our peasants mingled with that of the brave Cossacks, reddens Rumanian earth.

While bringing to life in his luminous pages the sad story of the Rumanian people, Sadoveanu reaches the war of 1877 when that people, aided by Russian armies, fought with a courage and obstinacy assuring its independence, and shook off for ever the debasing yoke of Turkish domination. In the sketches *During the battle*, *The taking of Grivitsa*, and others, the writer conjures up with

incomparable vigour the great conflict where the Russian and Rumanian soldiers fraternized yet once more. In these brief tales he lays bare the truth about the war's story; that victory has been won by the magnificent self-sacrifice and heroism of simple men. The Rumanian soldiers, ill-equipped, ill-fed, furnished with insufficient arms, fight with abandon, enflamed by love of the homeland, by the unconquerable desire to free themselves from the Turkish rule which for centuries weighed on the life of their ancestors.

Sadoveanu lovingly describes the rank-and-file soldier, bringing out his fine moral qualities. The tale *Panciuc* depicts with unlimited sympathy the nobility of character of this ordinary man. Intrepid in the fight against the foe, after the battle he goes to rest a moment in a ditch. But as soon as he notices the absence of his friend, who lies perhaps wounded on the battlefield, Panciuc goes off to find him and bring him aid. He crosses the enemy lines, finds the wounded man and drags him towards his own shelter, when a bullet hits and kills him in the act.

Imbued with patriotism and an ardent love of the people, Sadoveanu's work is not blotted with the least chauvinism, even when dealing with the enemy. All his writings are alive with love and sympathy for the common man, whatever his nationality. Thus, in *Convoy* he finds tones of warm pity and fellow-feeling to describe a convoy of Turkish prisoners, pierced with cold and famishing, who drag themselves heavily through the deep snow.

In his work the descriptions of nature are one of the constitutive elements of his talent as story-teller. He evokes equally the snow-capped mountains and the sunny plains of the Baraga and the Danube Delta with all their fauna and flora, in their wealth of beauty. The power of this descriptive art derives from the writer's deep patriotic feeling. Nature plays an integral part in the action. After realizing the places they inhabit, it is right that we know more intimately the men, their conception of life, their character, their cares and aspirations.

Thus, in the proud massifs of Transylvania, deep among vast natural forms, in a hard climate, we see the building of strong and

tenacious beings like Victoria Lipan in the novel *The Axe* (Baltagul). Here the action springs from the idea expressed in the fine folk-ballad *Mioritza* (*The Little Lamb*). A shepherd is attacked by robbers and slain. His wife goes wandering through the world after justice, to find her husband's murderers. But the town-judges scarcely listen to her. So the peasant woman goes up into the rocky mountain-tracks, carelessly braving all dangers and resolved to punish the guilty with her own hands.

Never in this great prose-writer's work does nature appear isolated or cut off from the life of men. Between man and nature indissoluble bonds are established, which are here set out, authentically, in all their majesty. Nature reveals herself as a precious ally of man, in times of peace as well as in times of adversity. In the tale *The Apiary of Bygone Days* an old bee-keeper lives with his daughter in an abandoned hut, surrounded by the bees of the plain. The girl's beauty is so great that rumours of it reach the ears of the boyar, who attempts to get hold of her. When the old father resists, he orders his servants to flog him. Then, suddenly, unexpected swarms of defenders come to the old man's aid — the bees, who put the boyar and his men to flight. During the night the old man piles his meagre belongings on a cart, and, taking his daughter and his bees, goes off to other lands, seeking a new resting place.

We have seen that a characteristic trait of the works of Sadoveanu published before August 23rd 1944, day of Rumania's liberation, is the ceaseless quest for the road that will enable his people to escape from their oppressors and vindicate their right to a worthy and human life. This quest is nothing else than the echo of the torments and agonies of the rule of the bourgeois and the great landed proprietors. But at the same time Sadoveanu's work at this period, before freedom the yoke of exploitation was won, reflects the disequilibrium and weakness of the peasant toilers, their incapacity as a class to find by themselves the means of throwing off that crushing yoke.

After August 23rd life itself has taken over the task of answering

all the questions so often posed in the writer's past work. The new horizons opening up before the Rumanian people, as a result of the national liberation, give a new orientation, to his creative energies. The writer finds at last the key to so many problems that previously seemed insoluble; he thus makes a giant step forward and can confirm with his own eyes the realization of his finest dreams. He sees, under the leadership of the Rumanian Communist Party, the power of the working class steadily increase, he witnesses and takes an active part in the great mass movements for a democratic government and for land distribution among the peasants, he shares in the struggle to realize so many demands, so many dear hopes, that he has carried in his heart all his life. Before his eyes unrolls a new landscape of his homeland, new heroes spring up — yesterday's disinherited — penetrated with the importance of their historical mission both as constructors of socialism and defenders of peace.

In setting out along this new road, spacious and luminous, the writer does no more than pursue and develop in a higher degree the dominant qualities of his previous work. With every ounce of his creative powers, Sadoveanu is present among the people, he participates in the great revolutionary transformations in which the citizens of the Rumanian People's Republic are engaged, and he himself too is transformed under the decisive influence of an epoch illuminated by the profound ideas of Lenin and Stalin.

In these conditions his work undergoes a second youth, a new blossoming, attested by his books, *Little Pauna* (1948), *Mitrea Cocor* (1949), the novel that won the Gold Peace Medal and provided the material for the script of the film with the same name which gained a distinguished notice at the festival at Karlovy Vary, *The Charms of Flowers*, (1950), and the historical novel, *Nicoara Potcoaca* (1952).

Mitrea Cocor, of which over 100,000 copies have been printed in Rumania and which has been translated in Russian, French, Polish, Czech, German, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Italian, Spanish, Arab, Swedish and Hebrew, is the most characteristic product of the writer's new orientation. Appearing on the eve of his 70th birth-

day, it won its place in the front rank of the national literature in the course of the second year of the People's Republic, when the Rumanian people consolidated their gains and, lifted on a mounting wave of achievement, advanced to the attack of new victories. Keeping from the past, now gone for ever, all that it owned of good and living elements, the writer has known how to penetrate deeply into the direction of history, grasp its laws, retain what he learns, and clearly perceive the roads into the future.

Mitrea Cocor was conceived and realized in the perspective opened the revolutionary changes lived through by the author. Following the classic method of socialist realism, he moves from the particular to the essential, and gives to his main character, the unfortunate orphan Mitrea, the inner qualities of the Rumanian peasant: ingenuity, love of work and of justice. Little Mitrea is only one child among countless children of poor peasants destined to waste their health and youth, groaning in hardship, under the weighty yoke of the boyar's exploitation. He is sold to the boyar by his elder brother, the kulak Ghitza Lungu, who aims at stripping him even of the poor strip of land inherited from his parents. The spark of revolt smouldering in the child's soul would be extinguished under ashes as of resignation and debasement were it not that he has felt from the outset, and succeeded in understanding, on the threshold of his adult life, the true causes of his sufferings and those of his fellows; were it not that he is able to distinguish the guilty men, those who profit from this state of things; were it not that he finds on his way friends who indicate the possibilities and means of struggle for the overthrow of those that humiliate him, wear him down, and dispose even of his life. Called to the colours and dispatched to the front, he discovers sincere friends among the soldiers compelled to go and shed their blood in a strange land and to attack people who have never troubled them or done them any harm. And so, in the soul of this peasant who is simple and illiterate, but honest and just, there awakens the revolutionary consciousness of the class-struggle, which previously did not enter into his scheme of things. He is thus able to lift himself to the consciousness of the working class in whom he sees natural allies fighting to attain the