

GEO BOGZA

LAND
OF
STONE

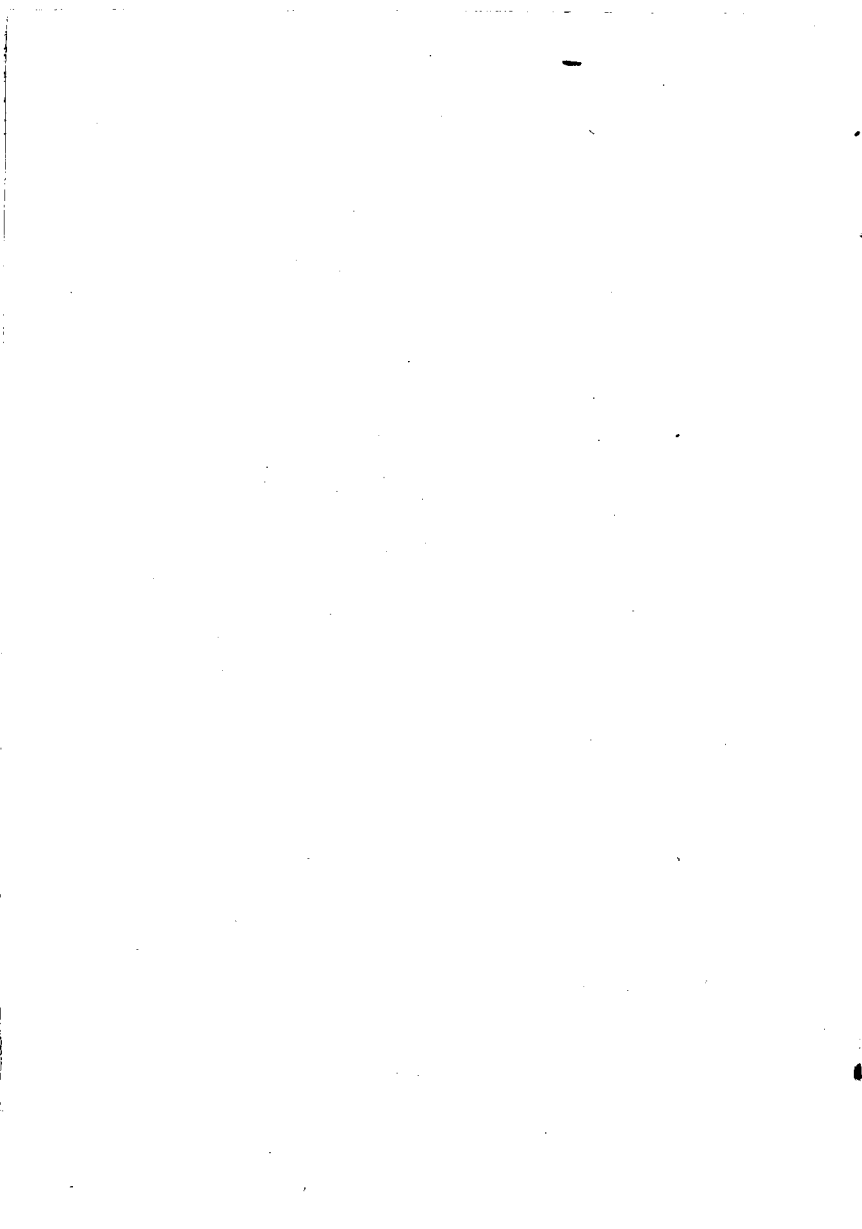
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G E O B O G Z A

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THE LAND OF THE MOTZI

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AMONG the generation of writers whom we consider as having reached full maturity, Geo Bogza (born at Ploesti in 1908) is the most original. Geo Bogza's age and biography place him at the crossing where the roads of the past meet those of the future which the writer was one of the first to take, carrying with him a solid stock of inheritance and prospects. From 1930 to 1940, the period of his formation, the writer tried out a large number of literary currents considered modern at the time. He looked for new roads and at the same time his work knotted some of the lasting threads of our literary tradition into a durable fabric. Even before consciously adopting a harmonious and militant conception of the world, an organic orientation created by his craving for justice and his love of truth made Geo Bogza take a stand on the traditional lines of liberty and progress, of popular inspiration and artistic ethics.

The feeling of revolt against a world which Bogza felt was unfair in its organization, narrow in its tastes and poor in aspirations, led him to the values from which Rumanian culture expected a renaissance. The road of moral convictions is in general more direct than that of artistic creation: therefore, although we see him try out various literary schools and forms, his beliefs led him from the very first to the outlook he has today—the stand of social justice, democracy, freedom and anti-fascism.

The fusion of the artistic ideal with the fighting ideal added some aspects of unusual dynamism to the writer's biography. When Geo Bogza chose the road of resistance and struggle, he had the honour of being twice sent to jail for reasons which were bashfully termed « literary » by the then authorities. Instead of becoming a solitary poet, which his super-sensitive nature seemed to tend to make of him, Bogza became a reporter and a journalist. Living as he did in the whirl of everyday life and permanent movement, the talents due to his psychological structure were enriched by a wealth of observations and an unceasing variation in the states of consciousness created by the daily struggle in the press, dedicated to a noble and generous ideal and carried on under adverse and particularly savage political conditions. The perils engendered by such an attitude and activity — and at the time they were far from few — seem to have been recorded by the writer with a shrug of the shoulders; he considered them the result of an inevitable clash between two diametrically opposed conceptions, inevitable and yet trivial. They could in no way alter the writer's two scopes which exerted an irresistible force of attraction on each other and finally merged: to struggle for the people and to fight for his artistic ideal.

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Our literary history records the names of many authors who wrote about nature. Let us mention but a few: Alecsandri, Eminescu, Creangă, Slavici, Coşbuc, Hogaş and Vlahuţă, and among contemporary writers: Sadoveanu, Arghezi and Galaction. Bogza's conception of nature, however, the way he uses this source of inspiration and represents it in his work, are something entirely new and mark a big step forward.

In order to characterize Bogza's description of nature, a comparison with Sadoveanu is necessary, both because the latter has been the recognized master of literary landscape-painting for the last four or five decades, and because he embodies the typical attitude to nature of the writers mentioned above. The many splendid pages devoted by our great master to the Rumanian landscape and particularly to his native Moldavia (a most significant difference) clearly show that his conception of nature is plastic, descriptive, familiar and somewhat romantic. Hence those great pastel-like pictures, transparent and subtle, in which man moves at his ease and on a perfectly equal footing with nature.

In Geo Bogza's works we shall meet, for the first time, a vision resting on an entirely different conception of nature which is internal, resulting from the reaction of his whole nervous system. Being of cosmic proportions, its boundaries are lost in the infinite. It is not only when he contemplates nature that the writer has the vision of the infinite. The infinite is conceived not in an agnostic manner, as a limit barring or excluding cognition, but as the incommensurable dimensions of the existing world, in the depth of which the wings of imagination can assume gigantic proportions. Human thought, an implement of perception, does not accept failure at the gates of the infinite; in order to be able to explore the cosmos it grows wings of imagination and genius. The limits of Geo Bogza's conception of nature are the limits of creative imagination.

The fact that the cosmic infinite always lies at the basis of his conception of nature and that it is included in his poetic imagination, has two direct natural consequences: the first is the expression of the dialectic unity of the world which is revealed in all his descriptions as an element of force and grandeur. Thus, by means of an universal comprehension

of the causal process of nature, the Olt (in *The Book of the Olt*) is seen not as springing from the mountain-rock marked on the map, but — and this is a poetic paradox of great effect — from the sea, that is from the place into which it flows. The earthly life of the river appears as a tiny link in a huge chain which the poet follows down to the minutest detail. The results are unique: the writer investigates nature under all its aspects, linking it spontaneously to a superior principle of grandeur which brings an entirely new tone into our literature.

The second consequence consists of the fact that nature is experienced directly, plastic description being replaced by vivid sensations which set the whole nervous system a quiver. The landscape makes the writer extraordinarily sensitive; he reacts violently and organically as he does to any excitement. The deep gorges are «painful to the eye» «or wound one like a knife in the flesh.» A mountain «makes you feel sore down in the core of your being, as if a red-hot iron had penetrated to your bones.» The precipices «hurt you.» At other times the mountain «works within you,» «penetrates into your innermost self,» «disturbs you,» «changes you.» The effects of nature upon man are sharp and deep. Their poetic symbol expresses all the historical causes whose product is man. «However, in a very short time, in front of this mountain that pulls at your heart-strings and makes it of stone, you will be the same as they, sullen and grim, with a heart of stone.» We all know that the Motzi were sullen and harsh not only because of the nature amidst which they lived, but on account of the historical conditions which made them one of the most wretched populations of the country. In Geo Bogza's vision, however, the mountain symbolically absorbs all these hard conditions and seems to express their long historical duration.

All this gives Geo Bogza's prose a new horizon in our literature. The rhythm is full, the image substantial, the cadence grave, the stress at its highest pitch. The words *eternity, infinite, nothingness, grandeur, age-old, permanent, primordial*, recur frequently and do not seem far-fetched, being the compulsory concepts that make up the writer's vision of the world. Hence the solemnity which pervades the usual atmosphere of his works, hence his almost sacerdotal tone. A description of nature in Geo Bogza's works is always a cosmogony.

In the infinite of the cosmos, Geo Bogza's rare talent distinguishes the essential constitutive elements of the world. In *The Book of the Olt*, a page describing the beginning of historical life in the midst of nature gives one a unique thrill: a man, a fire, a dog. This is the eternal generating trilogy of life on the crests of the Transylvanian mountains. In *Land of Stone* life appears unchanging, made up of basic elements which constitute the frame of its whole structure: «A Motzi and an axe,» «a Motzi and a fir-tree.» Equations which, in the limits of a certain historical stage, express the ineluctable cycle of life and death.

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This conception of nature did not sever the writer from life. Geo Bogza has never felt attracted by the solution offered by pessimism and contemplation made up of a feeling of isolation and of the ephemeral and useless character of the struggle. A moral concern for the welfare of the people, the consciousness of an ethic significance of life and art, made him fill the grandiose framework of nature with men of similar proportions. When social problems are projected on the infinite, they acquire immense dimensions, and this is the first progressive character of Geo Bogza's writings. Face to face with nature, infinite in time and space, man appears

as an analogous entity, infinite in the flow of generations, ever growing in the impetuous rush which changes the past into the future, present and active as an essential function of the universe. The daily struggle makes the writer feel the limits and character of the historical moment, whereas the incommensurable framework of nature gives human destiny its real value on a vast scale.

Geo Bogza turned to the investigation of the life of the many, to the glowing core of social life. He interpreted the fate of man from a historical point of view, as the struggle between progress and reaction. Craving to discover the essential elements of the historical moment, as he had found them in nature, he naturally adopted the stand of the democratic fight for the people and peace.

This viewpoint generated his great feature articles dealing with various parts of the country. They are a living social geography of modern Rumania. The book devoted to the region of the Apuseni Mountains describes the north-western part of our country, rich in gold mines, inhabited by the age-old Rumanian population of the Motzi, covered with historic glory by the insurrections carried out by them about once every century against the social and national oppression of the Magyar feudals. It is a population well-known for their unusual physiognomy as well as for the dreadful misery they had to endure—despite the subterraneous wealth of the region they inhabit—even after the liberation of Transylvania from the Austro-Hungarian yoke, until the days of 1944. The book was published almost 20 years ago under the title *Land of Stone*, and it is with the same title and in the form it had at that time that we offer it to readers today. Geo Bogza wrote similar works on the oil regions of Ploesti and Câmpina, the mining regions of the Jiu valley and on many other people and places.

Geo Bogza's recent *Gates of Grandeur* include four big feature articles about the huge industrial activity that changes the face of the land which is now a people's democracy. In perusing *Land of Stone*, the reader will fully realize how inadequate and poor the term «feature article» is, when applied to this vast social anthology of a whole country.

The feature articles written during a travel to Spain, dealing with the Spanish people and the civil war, constitute a special chapter which represents a transition to an anthology of the European drama prior to World War II. Due to the political situation obtaining between 1938 and 1944, which was characterized by fascist dictatorship and the anti-Soviet war, Geo Bogza was unable to sign any copy without somehow renouncing his opinions. He preferred to abandon journalism but not the struggle. In his seclusion he wrote *The Book of the Olt*, whose hero is the national river of the country; he describes and presents it as a symbol of the people's energy which has at times been fettered but has never been defeated.

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All these works reveal the basic qualities of Geo Bogza's talent. The grandeur of nature participates in the fight of man, in his life and death, and becomes their accessory. In the relation between man and nature, the first point we can establish is that man is primordial. The ebb on the Atlantic shore of Spain, for instance, is given the following interpretation: «The waves of the ocean stand on tiptoes that they may the better see the tragedy of the Spanish people.» About the custom of the Motzi of planting fir-trees on graves: They play the *tulnic*¹⁾ and the pipe to express their sorrow without words and plant fir-trees on the graves of the young dead thus expressing their mourning. The

¹⁾ Musical instrument — a long, straight horn

wind passes through the branches and sings a lovelier song than theirs. The want of petroleum which is expensive and difficult to get, compels the Motzi women to spin by the light of the moon. This fact, which has a precise economic cause, assumes the proportions of an unforgettable dream-like image, whose significance is increased by the interference of nature that does its share in the human drama: « And all of a sudden the moon rises above the country of mountains. The snow-covered crests shine, white and cold, in a polar eternity, as it were. In the vast and fantastic stillness of the mountains, something begins to stir. Then the moon shows behind the windows of the houses lost on the mountain sides; shapes begin to appear — a sort of human bogeys. Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of them. They are the Motzi women who, seeing the moon was up, have come near their windows to spin the hemp on their distaff. They are clad in coarse hempen shirts... » The writer's sensitiveness to the facts that reveal the sufferings of the masses is extreme and acute. The scene where a Motzi is obliged to sell some firewood which he painfully carried in his arms through snow and storm for the ridiculous sum... two small glasses of brandy, represents a whole sociology of the relations between the Motzi peasants and their various exploiters. The writer has the gift of seeing far into infinite dimensions, into the hidden laws of nature, and the sure, clear eyes of the reporter scrutinize every detail. Apart from the methods and results of intensive industrial exploitation, Bogza detects the whole range of tricks used to fool the rural population, establishing in this sinister hierarchy the precise identity of the capitalist, the landowner, the kulak and the village leech.

The delicacy of observation and the enlargement obtained by means of a profound and spontaneous vision, lift the most

prosaic and commonplace facts of life to a superior plane whence the people are shown as continuously moving in the solemn light of basic human laws, sometimes acquiring the tones of a ritual: « Bargaining is a solemn and earnest thing which is carried on slowly; it is a genuine and honest thing — clear, open bargaining, insistent as if the act of buying were a pleasant rite without which purchasing would lose all its charm . . . Girls of seventeen come to the market selling cups of cream . . . and bargain as if they had been selling all their lives. » The clarity of the economic relations between common people give these relations the character of a spiritual activity stressing the fearful side of the conditions of fierce exploitation under which the people have been obliged to play the part of age-old victims. In the galleries of the gold mines which are described as « a disturbed cemetery where the dead have risen, » labour is a curse. The complete indifference of the exploiters to the fate of the men, the lack of tools and equipment, the dreadful absence of safety devices, are pregnantly and exhaustively expressed in a single image: Men go and look for the ore with a sack on their backs, dynamite in their pockets, as they would go with an axe to bring wood from the forest. They are just as unarmed, just as unprepared.

This fearful exploitation pervades all the details of life, giving them an oppressive and tragical stamp. « The same as in fishermen's villages, women are in the habit of waiting for their husbands who have left for places where dangers are lying in wait for them. In their absence, the village is deserted; a woman or a child crosses the road, and every detail gives one the impression that they are on some ocean shore, close to an eternal reality which at any instant may bring them disaster. » The horror of capitalist exploitation weighs down on the shoulders of the people like an implacable destiny, altering the basic make-up of the soul, weaken-

ing and reducing the vital energy, as in an ancient tragedy. « Miners' wives are different from other women. You need only see how they walk along the village street. They have either just had some great sorrow or will have it soon. If it is not today, it will be tomorrow that their tired hands will wipe away bitter tears. And the drooping corners of their mouth are like shutters pulled down on an everlasting agony. » This sort of life made up of catastrophes and misery leads to the immaterialization of man, to his passing into death anticipated: « In the evening, when they leave home on some errand, lighting their way with the carbide lamps of their husbands who have just returned from the mine, they too look like shadows, wandering souls, ghosts borne on the wind all over the mountains. »

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The mortuary fragrance of *Land of Stone* now belongs to the past. The fearful character of the facts described fully shows the size of the huge work the people's democratic regime is now achieving in order to give the Motzi people freedom, human dignity, culture and prosperity. This work has fundamentally changed the aspect of the *Land of Stone*. If, at the time when Geo Bogza described that land, its sufferings had been lasting for ages and seemed to be eternal, today its memory is speedily covered up by the vapours of the past. Human memory is defeated by the rhythm of revolutionary changes.

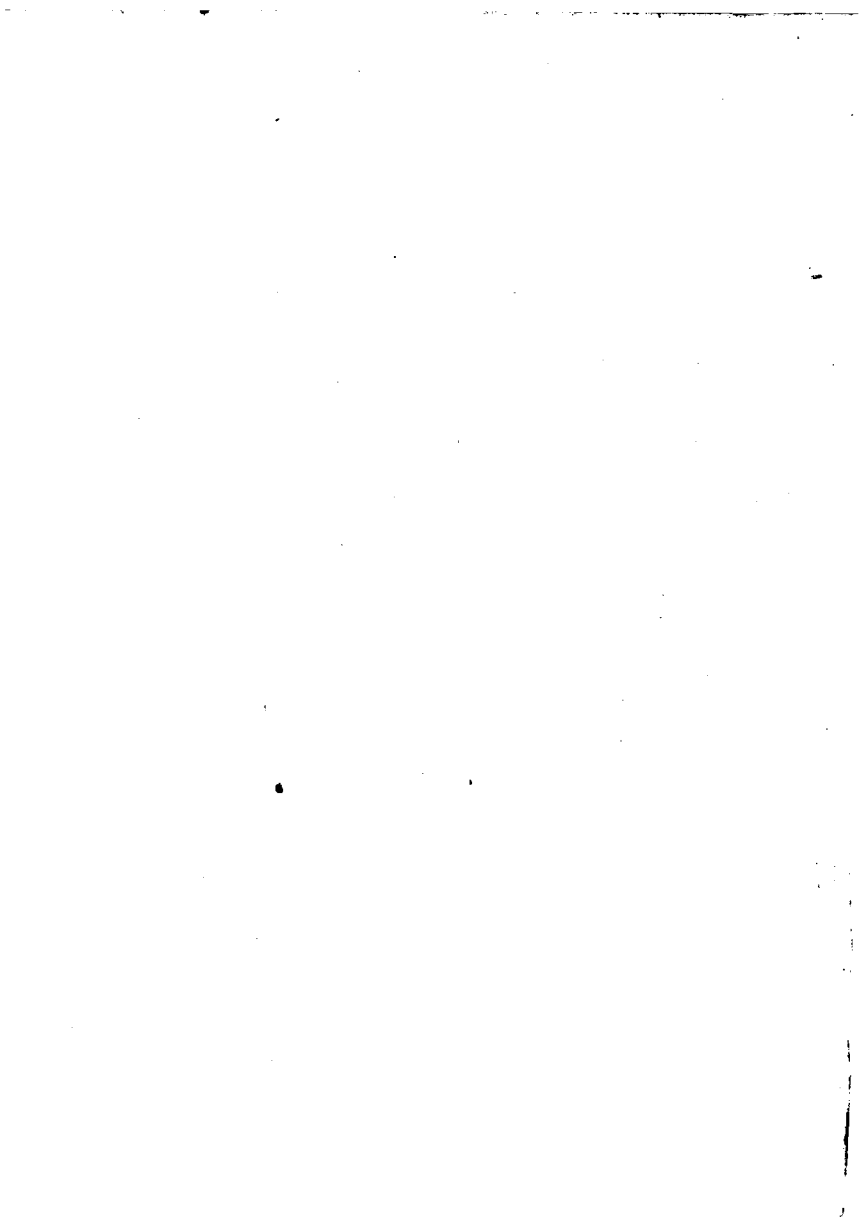
But as the realities which gave birth to the book are disappearing, it is acquiring a new life, as it constitutes a pathetic memento of the past, a rare and faithful document where one may find once more the Land of Stone with the life it led at that time and with its whole bitter poetry.

The pages that follow were written and appeared for the first time in 1935. They contain a picture of the life that the inhabitants of the Apuseni Mountains led in those days, in places which had seen the flames of the great rising headed by Horia blaze on the mountain tops. In their famous country, amidst wild nature, the Motzi led a life which lacked neither disease and misery nor exploitation.

Today, on the road that our people have taken towards a new order, these pages should be read as a document of the past and as an incentive for the liquidation of all traces of exploitation.

1951

G. B.



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KORIA'S DESCENDANTS