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FASCINATION AND AVERSION – THE IMAGINARY OF THE *PHANAR* IN THE WORKS OF THREE ROMANIAN WRITERS

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Fascination and Aversion – the Imaginary of the Phanar at Three Romanian Writers
Although generally pejorative, associated with negativity and aversion, in literary imagery, several aspects of **the fascinating Phanar** and of the adjacent imaginary, are relevant, starting from the positive etymological implications in modern Greek. Shifting from a bright origin to a dark representation, it becomes a multi-faceted cultural symbol, with strong stylistic and semantic reverberations in literary discourse. Its *imagemes*, the dominant imagistic nuclei, under the sign of the **Phanar as phenomenon**, **as appearance**, **as fantasy**, subscribe to the (an)historical Phanar, the Phanar as a state of mind, as a modus vivendi, as a specific atmosphere, but also as a (de-)limitation of the text. The three selected novels, *Craii de Curtea-Veche* by Mateiu Caragiale, *Fanar* by Horia Stancu and *Manuscrisul fanariot* by Doina Ruști, somewhat express the symbolic, aesthetic and ideological functions of the Fanar through the prism of the concept of *re-readability*. In these writings, the Phanariot world is marked by moral ambiguity, duplicity and decadence, and the strategies of survival and domination are based on fear, manipulation and corruption. The Phanar is depicted as a space of hypocrisy and multiple faces. **Fears and threats** always arise, tools of control and intimidation are used: executions, exile, imprisonment, poisoning. **Bribery** also plays an ambivalent role, as a tool of negotiation and influence. There are various Phanariot **plans and tactics**: delay, false promises, manipulation, betrayal, and information trading are practiced, and political intrigue becomes the central mechanism of holding power. As for **attitudes** and **states of mind**, there is a permanent **oscillation between credulity and suspicion**, between self-humiliation and excessive pride, reflecting emotional and moral instability. The Phanariotes have many **character flaws**, among which laziness, indecision, whims, boredom stand out, but also the lust for power, greed, denunciation, cruelty, as traits of a corrupt and decadent society. Thus, in a broader sense, a kind of Phanariot *hybris* arises in the three novels as a decadent and humanized form of ancient pride, expressing deep human weaknesses rather than a tragic destiny. **The literary Phanar** ultimately becomes a symbol of the capitulation of the human condition, of a multicultural synthesis and also of an aesthetic ambiguity, with profound resonances in these times.
Key-words: *fascination*, *literary Phanar*, *imagemes*, *Phanar as phenomenon*, *aversion*, *hybris*, *metafiction*

The term *Phanar* is most often used in a somewhat pejorative sense, generally associated with negativity. In literary imagery, however, several aspects of the Phanar, as well as of its adjacent imaginary, remain significant, beginning with its etymological implications – initially positive – in modern Greek. *To fanári* means "a large lantern" or even "a lighthouse," derived from the ancient Greek *phanárion,* the diminutive of *phanós*, itself from *phaíno*, meaning "to appear," "to show," or "to shine."

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> "From a strictly historical perspective, the Phanar is a district of Istanbul (formerly Constantinople), located midway along the Golden Horn, adjoining the Fatih quarter, on the slopes of the city's fifth hill. The neighborhood's streets are lined with numerous old wooden houses (many now in decay), as well as churches and synagogues dating from both the Byzantine and Ottoman periods. During the Ottoman era, it hosted the two successive seats of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and became the district where the city's Orthodox population – primarily Greek – was concentrated in the final centuries of Ottoman rule. It was particularly home to the remnants of the old Byzantine aristocracy, gathered around the Patriarchate, who played a significant role in the Ottoman administration as well as in the history of the Romanian Principalities" (Fanar – OrthodoxWiki).

Its **imagery is relevant**, functioning as a constellation of **dominant imagistic nuclei** under the sign of the Phanar as **phenomenon, apparition, and fantasy** – the (a)historical Phanar, the Phanar as **state of mind**, as **modus vivendi**, as **distinct atmosphere**, and, not least, as a **(de-)limitation of the text** through specific linguistic features. The three selected prose works – *Craii de Curtea-Veche* by Mateiu Caragiale, *Fanar* by Horia Stancu, and *Manuscrisul fanariot* by Doina Ruști – are examined and interpreted, to a certain extent, through the lens of the **concept of re-readability** (*relizibilitate*) advanced by Matei Călinescu in his study of Mateiu Caragiale's rereadings. In this regard, the rereading of *Craii de Curtea-Veche*, a rather well-known novel, reveals **unforeseen interpretative dimensions**:

> "Esthetically, there is something of that devout reverence implied by the periodic return to a sacred or at least quasi-religious text – a reverence manifested, among other ways, through the inner recitation of the text, its liturgical moralization, and the deliberate, reflective slowing down of the reading process so as to discern its more distant echoes – not only acoustic, but also semantic, etymological, intra- and intertextual"[2].

The Phanar, however, does not appear in this novel as an explicit physical setting; rather, the Phanariot symbolism and imaginary are deeply embedded in its atmosphere and characters. Above all, **PRIDE** – **an immeasurable, almost supernatural pride** – serves as an emblematic trait for several male characters across the three novels. "Arrogance seems an emblem upon the mask, the petrification of a carnivalesque moment: on the inside, the mask is protective, warm, innocent; only thus are the Rakes absolved"[3].

A certain restrained perseverance, which we shall also encounter in the character of Mavros from the second novel under analysis, together with the tendency to conceal (to encrypt) a depraved existence, represent the defining traits of an authentic descendant of the Phanar lineage – in the extended sense of the term, that of the Phanar as a literary enclave:

> "Could there have been a purpose behind the stubborn persistence with which he veiled his brief past and his everyday life? Quite possibly so. Yet – let me say it once again – there was in his gaze such immense pride, a gaze forever indifferent to the happenings of the earthly realm, seeming instead to lose itself elsewhere, in the distances of a dreamlike world, that it would have dispelled any shadow of doubt or suspicion"[4] (our translation).

Most friendships, acquaintances, and human relationships, in general, are forged in the **tavern** – in the traditional sense, a modest, dim, and often sordid inn, usually located in a

[2] Matei Călinescu, *Mateiu Caragiale: recitiri*, Cluj-Napoca, Biblioteca, Apostrof, 2007, p. 13.
[3] Ioan Derșidan, *Mateiu Caragiale – carnavalescul și liturgicul operei*, București, Editura Minerva, 1997, pp. 114-115.
[4] Mateiu Caragiale, *Craii de Curtea-Veche*, București, Editura Cartea Românească, 1929, p. 39.

basement, functioning as a profane tabernacle, a space of decadence, a site of confession, a symbol of marginality, a temporary refuge, and, above all, a place of transition par excellence. The Phanar itself, as is well known, is situated between good and evil, evoking an intermediary *topos* in which the balance between the two is exceedingly fragile and no clear distinction can be drawn. The tavern's extension is the street, the neighborhood – typically ill-famed – or the city (Bucharest), and, in Caragiale's successor (and later in Doina Ruști's prose), even the forest: "a dreadful, humid swelter brooded over the city, a vast nest of wickedness and corruption"[5] (Our Trans.).

It smelled of mystery, of sin, of perdition[6]. There is a leitmotif in *Craii de Curtea-Veche* – namely, an enchanted atmosphere: the gardens seem numbed, as if under an evil spell, o "light which, according to the lore of witchcraft, is favorable to the evil spirits that wander in the power of the night"[7] (Our Trans.). (Likewise, in Doina Ruști's novel, the spell that envelops Bucharest from all sides is frequently evoked). In the same vein, the night – paradoxically – is auspicious to the beings or creatures belonging to the Phanar, those who move and breathe within its shadowed essence.

> "You immerse yourself in the night, for it is boundless, profound, and filled with abysses. One cannot immerse oneself in the day, for the light of day delineates and abolishes chaos, elevating human consciousness to its zenith, from where it contemplates the irreversible flow of becoming as an order imbued with meaning. The night is the domain of choice both for the illuminated and for the wicked. Within its darkness, great ecstasies are fulfilled, yet conspiracies and murders are also woven. It is there that man encounters his deepest self – angelic or demonic"[8] (our translation).

Alongside the night stands another ambivalent being, a diaphanous yet passionate creature, an insidious entity that inhabits all three narratives – **the woman of the Phanar**: both servant and mistress, virgin and courtesan, sacred and profane, assuming all her hyposthasies – maid, Gypsy woman, princess, concubine, singer, dancer. The stylistic ambiguity and textual duplicity intertwine in Mateiu Caragiale's work, leading to a blurring of genders and a fusion of disparate literary registers: "Just as I could not then bring myself to believe that the apparition which had passed beside me was a woman, now it seemed to me that the being dragging me with it into the shadows was not a man"[9] (Our Trans.). In the other novel, authored by Horia Stancu, there emerges *the figure of the eunuch* (or *hadâmb*) – a being eternally dissatisfied and unhappy, suspended halfway between man and woman, halted temporarily in an intermediate state. Such is the case of Ismail, who harbors an impossible love for Aisha, a love he initially defiles out of habit, through the scheming manners of the *harem*, until he ultimately purifies himself, belatedly, through the supreme act of sacrifice.

Beyond that *indefinable dissatisfaction*, explains the *Mateian* voice, the Phanariot – as a generic character, a descendant of noble origin fallen through adverse circumstances and through his own failure to heed the limitations of the human condition – also embodies an *immense solitude*, one that we likewise encounter in Horia Stancu's characters. **WINE and INTOXICATION**, as an oscillatory state between two worlds, signify vehicles of transition, whether slow or abrupt, between good and evil, reality and the oblivion of reality, its affirmation and negation, exuberance and anxiety, exaltation and despair. Drinking is a

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[5] *Ibidem*, p. 40.
[6] *Ibidem*, p. 41.
[7] *Ibidem*, p. 43.
[8] Ovidiu Cotruș, *Opera lui Matei I. Caragiale*, București, Editura Minerva, 1977, p. 35.
[9] Mateiu Caragiale, *Craii de Curtea-Veche*, București, Editura Cartea Românească, 1929, p. 41.

pervasive act in this novel, as M. Călinescu observes, but also in *Fanar* and even in *Manuscrisul fanariot*. Indeed, the *Craii* are portrayed as spiritual heirs of the Phanariots: they inhabit a vanished, cultivated world, yet one devoid of meaning – a world adrift, listless, and absurd.

> "For a month, in silence and breathless secrecy, with both hope and purpose, I had led her into a drinking spree, a revelry, a game. In recent years, I had been severely tried by circumstance – the great waves had battered my small boat. I had defended myself poorly, and, utterly disgusted with everything, I had longed to find in a life of corruption the solace of oblivion"[10] (our translation).

If alcohol invariably bears a bluish hue, then ***Blue itself becomes a pathway to infinity, a realm in which the real transforms into the imaginar***[11]. "A domain – or rather, a climate – of immobility and unreality, or perhaps of heightened surreality, blue resolves within itself the contradictions and oscillations that rhythmically structure human existence"[12] (Our Trans.). It is also said that the ancient Egyptians regarded blue as the color of truth. This color further signifies detachment from the values of the material world, and it is likewise the color of transcendent wisdom, of death, of potentiality, and of emptiness[13]. "Within certain aberrant practices, blue may even come to signify the pinnacle of **passivity and renunciation**"[14](O/T).

Paradoxically, one discerns a recurring fixation on nobility – more specifically, on the aristocratic ethos, the decadence of the fallen boyar lineage, and the mythic connotation of blue blood. The motif of blue, both chromatic and symbolic, reappears insistently throughout the corpus, notably in the prose fragment Remember, where the decadent persona of Aubrey de Vere is invoked as a paradigmatic embodiment of aesthetic degeneration and metaphysical melancholy: "That sweet and tranquil evening was so profoundly blue, of a dark, fluid azure, that the city seemed submerged in the mysterious depths of **a sea**"[15] (Our Trans.). Elements of the sea – quays, jetties, balustrades, pontoons, and the like – appear discreetly in Mateiu Caragiale's work; the sea remains a symbol, emerging from the depths of the subconscious, expressing a kind of slow catastrophe, and, in its etymological sense, a return to origins, a reaching of the ultimate shore, an attainment of ultimate reality. By contrast, in Horia Stancu's novel, the sea is a recurring and palpable presence – the image with which the entire volume concludes. It is the entity that engulfs, buries, and entombs forever the sorrows and sufferings of all the book's characters – Phanariots, Romanians, Frenchmen, Greeks, and Turks alike.

At a certain point in Mateiu Caragiale's work, ancient cities – Babylon, Palmyra, Alexandria, Byzantium – are evoked under the emblem of the *ubi sunt* or, as the case may be, ubi est, beneath which the imaginary Phanar itself is subsumed. In a broader sense, **the journey** stands as the emblematic condition of the Levantine man, and the three Mateian rakes are themselves assiduous travelers, as are Mavros in Horia Stancu's novel and Leun in Doina Ruști's prose. The **IMPASSIBILITY** of the sea – that is to say, of life itself – remains a primordial coordinate of this melancholic and decadent Phanariot world, at once nostalgic and disenchanted, ironic and, at times, even sarcastic:

> "The sea remained the same, with its mutable yet immutable face – green, blue, gray, at times tranquil, at others tempestuous. Ever the same, indifferent, as always. And,

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 54.
[11] Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dicționar de simboluri*, vol. I (A-D), București, Editura Artemis, 1993, p. 79.
[12] *Ibidem*, p. 80.
[13] *Ibidem*, p. 81.
[14] *Ibidem*, p. 82.
[15] Mateiu Caragiale, *Craii de Curtea-Veche*, București, Editura Cartea Românească, 1929, p. 45.

> as always, it prepared to receive into its peace-giving bosom, adorned with algae and shells, the ships sunk by storms or by human hands"[16] (our translation).

Even though in Mateiu Caragiale's prose elements from multiple epochs and territories intermingle – for instance, Russian borscht and the Austrian waltz – what often binds and defines the atmosphere is **a distinctly Balkan irony**. The drunken nobles, in a grotesque tableau of decadence, lean upon one another's shoulders or collapse in heaps, emblematic of moral and existential exhaustion.

If in Caragiale's novel portraiture predominates, in Horia Stancu's narrative it is the arboreal, proliferating epic that dominates; whereas in Doina Ruști's work, the most striking element is the atmosphere itself – explicitly and self-consciously Balkan. Returning to the figure of the woman, as a fascinating catalyst of the specific imaginary, Rașelica Nachmanson and Pena Corcodușa stand as indubitable representatives of this archetype, the Jewish woman being portrayed as... "a black tropical flower – filled with both poison and honey"[17] (OT), as well as Masinca Drângeanu, Sultana Negoianu, Lena Ceptureanu, and the Arnoteanu sisters, Mima and Tita, with the sole exception of the almost perfect woman, Ilinca Arnoteanu, who perishes far too soon.

At a certain point, Pantazi, the second of the rakes, appears and declares of himself: "I am Greek," he went on, "and a nobleman – a Mediterranean"[18]. "Beyond that, I take pride in nothing – not even in the blood shed beneath the banners of the *Eteria* by my forebears, those of the branch of the Swan, who journeyed from Candia through the Phanar, into Russia and the Romanian Principalities"[19] (Our Trans.). It is interesting to observe that, within the imaginary of Mateiu Caragiale's prose, beyond the dominant Phanariot lineage – understood in the extended sense of the term – mixed blood becomes either the curse or the blessing of the novel's characters.

> "The Rakes' thirst for self-annihilation, particularly that of Pașadia, functions as a *mise-en-abîme* of the demise of the Levantine aristocracy and, simultaneously, as a reflection of the first great massacre of the nobility during the French Revolution. In the conclusion of the second *hagialâc* – the historical pilgrimage – these three deaths (that of rakes, of the Romanian aristocracy, and of the French one) converge and intertwine. The Balkan spirit itself, both fascinating and perverse, becomes emblematic of a slow and painful death, as well as of a deliberate refusal of balance"[20](our translation).

Horia Stancu, in his novel *Fanar*, draws another, yet indirect parallel – between the fate of the Phanariots and Napoleon's disastrous campaign in Egypt. From time to time, in Mateiu Caragiale's prose, there also occurs the invocation of the deceased members of the Phanariot lineage, spectral presences that haunt the text as reminders of a vanished world:

> "But it was not the judgment of the living that I feared – it was that of the dead, to whom I could not equally deny my reckoning. There were feverish, sleepless nights when I saw them before my very eyes, arrayed as in the old Greek icons, against a background of red gold, stiff in their *serasir* [silk brocade] caftans – those proud archons, bearing their severed heads in their hands, their unyielding gazes turning away from me in disgust – me, the betrayer"[21] (our translation).

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[16] Horia Stancu, *Fanar*, București, Editura pentru Literatură, 1968, p. 315.
[17] Mateiu Caragiale, *Craii de Curtea-Veche*, București, Editura Cartea Românească, 1929, p. 59.
[18] *Ibidem*, p. 100.
[19] *Ibidem*, p. 101.
[20] Dana Nicoleta Popescu, *Sub semnul barocului*, București, Editura Anthropos, 2009, p. 29.
[21] Mateiu Caragiale, *Craii de Curtea-Veche*, București, Editura Cartea Românească, 1929, p. 108.

In the writings of the structurally decadent Mateiu I. Caragiale, one encounters all the defining traits of the decadent genre: an inclination toward aristocratism and sexual deviation, hereditary pressures, refined interiors, a revolt and isolation of personality, and a voluptuous attraction to abjection. Within this same framework falls **Pantazi's suicide attempt**, emblematic of the existential exhaustion and morbid aestheticism that permeate Caragiale's oeuvre:

> "I cannot forget that misty and chill April night, as if whipped with the cream of the full moon and lightly perfumed by the blooming plum trees – a night that was to be my last. Do not imagine that I wished to perish because I had lost my fortune; on the contrary, I had squandered everything precisely because, long before, I had resolved to end the life of which I had grown weary. Its very spectacle had deepened my innate melancholy, and in its pleasures I had found nothing but disappointment and disgust"[22] (our translation).

In the same vein, the narrator's intellectual fascination with the three Crai intensifies with the appearance of Pașadia, who embodies the most pronounced traits of a renegade yet unmistakably authentic Phanariot.

> "But Pașadia was a morning star.Yet what a beautiful head he had ! In it there slumbered something unsettling – so much restrained passion, so much fierce pride and bitter hostility revealed themselves in the withered features of his face, in the weary fold of his lips, in the strength of his nostrils, and in that clouded gaze beneath heavy eyelids. And from what he said, in a drawn-out, muted voice, there emerged, with bitterness, a profound disgust[23] (our translation).

It must be noted that this character had been wronged, *exiled, marginalized, harassed, persecuted, and betrayed* by all – everyone had conspired against him. Yet, despite everything, he possesses boundless self-confidence and remarkable composure, skillfully turning adverse circumstances to his own advantage, remaining steadfast in the pursuit of his goal. His temperament is "passionate, intricate, and shadowed, often betraying itself in flashes of cynicism"[24] (OT). ***Pașadia was living a double life, alternating between two existences***[25]. "Reserved and cold, he remained impenetrable; yet, undeniably, within his entire being, something ancient and profoundly noble was lamenting its own demise"[26] (Our Trans.).

DECLINE, DEGRADATION, DEGENERATION, DISINTEGRATION, and ultimately DEATH – all are **emblems of a true Phanariot**, accompanied invariably by a profound **DISGUST with life itself**:

> "Everything I had once ardently desired – power, money, distinctions – not only failed to bring me any satisfaction once attained, but instead displeased and irritated me; flatteries felt like insults, and even the pleasure of revenge seemed insipid. For me, the alternative was therefore simple: either to possess the strength to stand my ground to the very end – and, by deceiving myself, to accept that the moral bankruptcy of my life should also be fraudulent – or to have the elegance to sound my own retreat"[27] (our translation).

On the other side – that of the *corporeal realm* – stand **debauchery, orgy, and the pursuit of intense experience** ("the wanderer through the nocturnal haunts of Bucharest's depravity" – OT). These are the watchwords that define him, yet the narrator continually finds

[22] *Ibidem*, p. 114.
[23] *Ibidem*, p. 56.
[24] *Ibidem*, p. 57.
[25] *Ibidem*, p. 82.
[26] *Ibidem*, p. 125.
[27] *Ibidem*, p. 127.

mitigating circumstances in his favor: "For me, the spectacle of that life possessed something overwhelming; within it, I sensed the unfolding of a dark spiritual drama, the mystery of which remained impenetrable" [28] (Our Trans.). In Pantazi's travel accounts appear sheikhs and pashas, emirs and khans, rajahs and mandarins, priests and monks of every creed and order, astrologers, hermits, magicians, healers, and chieftains of wild tribes, as well as numerous friends from Europe. He is portrayed as a great nobleman in the highest sense of the term, one of the last custodians of what the *ancien régime* possessed of charm and allure[29].

In apparent contrast to the other characters, the **fourth** *rake*, Gore Pirgu, assumes the role of a **negative initiator**, the one who **renders the world unworldly**, in a distinctly **Eminescian key**.

> "His endless antics as an insolent jester had earned him a reputation for cleverness, to which – no one knows why – was added that of being a good fellow, though he was good only at doing evil. This rascal possessed the soul of a knacker and a gravedigger. Corrupt to the marrow since childhood, a swindler, gambler, and lackey, he had long consorted with pimps and tricksters of every kind" [30] (our translation).

> "Seldom did any filthy affair occur without his involvement, and often solely out of a cruel and insatiable desire to mock, from which he would shrink at nothing. Intrigue, slander, gossip, discord, denunciation, blackmail through the betrayal or extortion of confidences, anonymous letters – all seemed equally acceptable to him, each employed as circumstances required"[31] (our translation).

> "Gore Pirgu was a scoundrel without equal or comparison. This rascal possessed the soul of a knacker and a gravedigger. In his very blood flowed the nostalgia for the old gypsy-like life of debauchery once familiar in our lands – with love affairs in the outskirts, revelries in monasteries, shameless songs, obscenities, and coarse jests"[32] (our translation).

A super-character that gathers together both fascination and aversion in all three novels is **VICE** – often spelled **'viţiul'**. In all three works there also appears another meta-character, Bucharest which, in Mateiu Caragiale's prose, is portrayed as follows:

> "Bucharest had remained faithful to its old tradition of corruption; at every step we were reminded that we stood at the gates of the Orient. And yet, debauchery astonished me less than the madness that reigned across all ranks – I confess I had not expected to see so many and such varied insanities fermenting, nor to encounter so much unrestrained folly"[33] (our translation).

From time to time, the narrative tone becomes authentically Caragialean, distinctly parodic in nature. At one point, there is an allusion to the Vicleim, that folk drama which so often underscores the moral conflict between good and evil. If one were to encapsulate this novel in a single Neo-Greek term, it would be the word **SASTISIRE** which encompasses, indiscriminately, boredom, psychological discomfort, mental fatigue, subtle irritation, and, at the same time, weariness, sensory saturation, and – above all – disgust with life, that existential lehamite. Throughout this deployment of negative forces, "the Pole of anamnesis and its

[28] *Ibidem*, p. 58.
[29] *Ibidem*, p. 78.
[30] *Ibidem*, p. 59.
[31] *Ibidem*, p. 63.
[32] *Ibidem*, p. 108.
[33] *Ibidem*, p. 120.

correlative, oblivion, are arranged within an entire mythology of decadence – a transfigured variant of the biblical and romantic myth of the Fall" (our translation).

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The three major novels by Horia Stancu – *Asklepios* (1965), *Fanar* (1968), and *Întoarcerea din deşert* [*Return from the Desert*] (1969), the latter being an episode from the history of Alexander the Great – represent refined literary syntheses intended for a wider readership, grounded in thorough historical research and documentation.

> "The simplicity and narrative fluency, the measured, mellow phrasing with archaising inflections, and, at times, a subtly bookish poetics of archaism, constitute the hallmarks of Stancu's prose style. *Asklepios* seeks, through the fictionalization of the hypothetical biography of the deified physician of legend, to reconstruct the mythic mode of thought characteristic of the ancients. Yet, the textual reality ultimately foregrounds an exotic and sensational dimension, following the hero's adventures across the Greece of the Trojan War, Egypt, Nubia, and Sumer" [34] (our translation).

In *Fanar* (1968), Horia Stancu depicts the history of the political upheavals that occurred in the Romanian Principalities, set against the backdrop of the complex relations between the Greeks – symbolized by the Phanar, the Greek quarter of Istanbul from which the Ottomans governed in 1798 – and the Romanians, at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is particularly interesting to note that a key phrase from *Craii de Curtea-Veche*, though meant solely to evoke long-vanished, ambiguous, and interwoven times, applies remarkably well to the events recounted in Stancu's 70s' novel, serving as an ambivalent paradigm of the Balkan and Phanariot imaginary, and, by extension, of a broader cultural archetype of instability and hybridity:

> "Yet, seeing in woman not only an end but also a means, as politics had often tempted us to do, we turned the alcove into a bridge, and that all might prosper, we lived in the company of the Chosen and served the Rulers. Interwoven from the shadows into every intrigue and conspiracy, nothing was sealed or unsealed without our involvement. Through flattery and gifts, we won over royal concubines and imperial mistresses; we served as advisers and guides to high officials, and, according to circumstance, labored for their rise or downfall, carrying out missions of every kind" [35] (our translation).

Horia Stancu's novel opens *in medias res*, around the year 1798, with the news of Prince Alexandru Ipsilanti's dethronation, around whom gravitates an entire constellation of Balkan figures – relatives, servants, concubines, viziers, physicians, merchants. The news is brought by Hagi Arghiropol, the Phanariot master, who conveys it with a kind of weary detachment and feigned serenity: "The Voivode is on his way to Stambul. Dethroned… Well, at least he's unharmed"[36]. He shares this with Iordache, the steward of the estate, who is immediately seized by fear for his own safety. In this climate of uncertainty, Iordache prepares for a secret meeting of political and financial intrigue, attended by Beizadea Constantin, the prince's son – who openly declares his ambition to claim the throne – along with Antonache Callistos, a Greek banker; Gelebi-hogea, an Armenian merchant; Mammona-Mihaloglu, a wealthy elder and the ruler's trusted man; and the monk Meletie. During this clandestine gathering, at which Iordache is a direct witness, he learns that… "Nobody ever tires of glory and wealth"[37] (O/T). According to the genuine Phanariot tradition, **procrastination** by **delay**

[34] Anton Cosma, *Romanul românesc contemporan*, volumul II, 1998, Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj, p. 212.
[35] Mateiu Caragiale, *Craii de Curtea-Veche*, București, Editura Cartea Românească, 1929, p. 78.
[36] Horia Stancu, *Fanar*, București, Editura pentru Literatură, 1968, p. 7.
[37] *Ibidem*, p. 8.

and deferral is regarded as the best solution to matters that cannot be resolved immediately: "Hours of bargaining followed. At times the voices clashed in heated argument, then subsided into uneasy calm"[38] (OT). Noteworthy is the legend of the city of **Byzantion**, a nodal point within the imaginary under discussion, serving as a symbolic axis of origin and continuity for the entire Phanariot mythos, "which had endured for a thousand years, until an emperor of Rome transformed it into the capital of the empire, bestowing upon it his own name – ***Constantinopolis***. It nevertheless remained the meeting place of two continents: Europe, aspiring toward the future, and Asia, still slumbering in the past"[39] (our translation).

Within the order – or rather, the disorder – of the Phanar, with its thousand guises and faces, there unfolds an intricate strategy of duplicity of character and ambiguity of personality, articulated along several key coordinates:

– **fears and threats**: beheading, exile, imprisonment, poisoning, the offering of purses – that is, bribery, which bears a double effect, sometimes opening, sometimes bolting doors;

– **plans and tactics**: DELAY and procrastination, unfulfilled promises, manipulation, buying and selling (of goods and information alike), betrayal, the politics of intrigue in its manifold forms; and, once again, bribery, accompanied by the perpetual pursuit of the so-called "satisfactory gain."

– **gestures and attitudes**, **emotions and states** – whether negative or ambivalent – include credulity, or, on the contrary, distrust and suspicion, all symptomatic of the moral instability and psychological duplicity characteristic of the Phanariot ethos ("You could no longer trust anyone – not even your own children"[40] – OT); self-humilliation ("Ismail threw himself at Suleiman's feet and kissed the curved tip of his red silk slipper"[41] – OT); PRIDE ("The youth was proud—and pride helps one stay alive just as much as the most abject humility"[42] – OT); humilliation, in general;

– **rituals, habits, and potions**: coffee, tea, opium (afion), theriac, poison, and the act of poisoning – whether through words or actual venom;

– **flaws and vices**: indecision, idleness (servants neglecting their duties), whims and caprices, and the pervasive boredom – an unbounded, existential ennui ("Boredom, Iordachi. A sickness that sometimes afflicts great men"[43] – says Mavros about the old Ipsilanti); DESIRE – for worldly pleasures and vain glory – along with intemperance, greed, denunciation and informancy, oppression, anger and severity, and finally, cruelty, all constitute the moral coordinates of corruption and decay within the Phanariot world ("Suleiman the vizier knew well the sultan's sudden rages and rash impulses. He was aware that he stood but a step away from death, yet he felt no fear. The bursts of fury came and went again, provided one knew how to dispel them"[44] (Our Trans.).

It is interesting to observe that, within the microcosm of the Phanar, passivity intertwines paradoxically with incessant conspiracy – both in the sense of perpetual intrigue and of a continuous sustaining of *the plot* at the narrative level.

> "The threads of high politics were secretly woven here, behind crumbling and impoverished outer walls, whose interiors were draped in velvet, silk, and costly mirrors. Beyond these façades, feigned humility was a duty of a thousand faces – manifested in

[38] *Ibidem*, p. 9.
[39] *Ibidem*, p. 8.
[40] *Ibidem*, p. 11.
[41] *Ibidem*, p. 16.
[42] *Ibidem*, p. 175.
[43] *Ibidem*, p. 111.
[44] *Ibidem*, p. 81.

> simple attire, timid manners, and deference carried to its extreme toward the dignitaries of the Porte and even toward the poorest Muslim. Yet, once sheltered within their chambers and salons, the Phanariots indulged themselves in the luxuries of both East and West, surrendering to banquets, entertainments, idleness, and languor"[45] (our translation).

WEALTH holds, once again, a position of paramount importance within the microcosm of the Phanar, as well as in the other two aforementioned novels. Upon it depend the status, reputation, and, at times, even the very life of the characters.

> "For on this occasion it was my fortune at stake, and I possess nothing else sacred in the world; for me wealth is everything – I place it above honour, above health, even above life itself. Indeed, even on that night – whose remembrance still disturbs me – had it been necessary to commit an act more grave than the destruction of a mere scrap of paper, well, as you behold me now, believe me, I would not have hesitated"[46] (our translation).

Within this climate dominated by an unquenchable desire for wealth, where moral values are frequently subordinated to personal interest, there emerges a world in which every gesture and decision unfolds against the backdrop of a perpetual struggle for survival and profit. It is hardly surprising that, in this Phanariot society, governed by fear of loss, suspicion, and mistrust, the characters justify their compromises without hesitation, transforming wealth not merely into an objective but into an all-consuming obsession that determines their actions and shapes their destinies. In such a universe – where honour, health, and even life itself may be sacrificed upon the altar of material gain – any remnant of humanity seems to survive only at the edge of the abyss, while human relationships are continually strained by cold calculation and smouldering fear.

In the multicultural world of the Phanar, there appears Kir Mavros, a penniless physician, serving as a kind of witness to his times, or rather a *bon raisonneur* – endowed with lucidity and a certain compassion toward the Phanariots. He stands as the only character who does not pursue self-interest, but rather places himself in the service of others, and, above all, in the service of the good itself. At one point, he dares to save the life of the merchant Arapache's wife and child, and, after prolonged and repeated efforts, he succeeds. In gratitude, the merchant says to him: "Well and truly do those who praise you everywhere speak…"[47] (OT). "Kir Mavros smiled, for he had few who praised him. Too many of those to whom he had done good called him a drunkard behind his back – which, indeed, was true – or maliciously spread the slander that each morning he partook of opium, a brazen and wicked falsehood"[48] (Our Trans.). The episode of the induced birth, and consequently of the mother's and child's rescue, is profoundly impactful, generating both fascination with the physician's skill and repulsion toward the sordid details of the medical intervention. It is again Mavros who facilitates Calliopia's escape with her child – later on – by deciphering a message sent by the illiterate woman, thereby enabling her flight with Iani, the young sponge diver.

Within this vast and intricate framework, rumor and its dissemination become part of a veritable commerce of words, a diplomacy of swift advantage, and a politics of personal interest.

> "News travels swiftly through Stambul, yet very often what has been known for weeks in the Phanar quarter, on the Street of the Armenians, or among the servants of foreign embassies, reaches the ears of the authorities only far too late. Foreign policy lies in the

[45] *Ibidem*, pp. 18-19.
[46] Mateiu Caragiale, *Craii de Curtea-Veche*, București, Editura Cartea Românească, 1929, p. 118.
[47] Horia Stancu, *Fanar*, București, Editura pentru Literatură, 1968, p. 41.
[48] *Ibidem*, p. 43.

> hands of the Greeks, the only ones who know the languages spoken in the Christian countries, who maintain paid informants in Vienna, Paris, Petersburg, and, at times, even in cold and distant London. The dragomans, both great and small, together with their agents, receive the letters, translate them, and bring them to the attention of the devlet (the Sultan), promptly or with delay; they draft the replies and prepare the terms of peace. It is they who collect the news, weigh it, disclose it, or conceal it – most often first for their own advantage, and only thereafter for that of the [Sublime] Porte"[49] (our translation).

In this world steeped in inhumanity, there are nevertheless a few signs of deeper humanity. Alexandru Ipsilanti is deposed because he found himself in unfavorable circumstances, true – but he returned to Istanbul solely out of love for his son. When he decides to become prince for the third time, yet collides with his son's ambition, "His heart tightened with pain, and for the first time he felt burdened by years and by the nearness of his end"[50] (O/T); Safta, the wife of Constantin, harbors a platonic love for Theodoros, her son's tutor; the eunuch Ismail, though hardened by adverse circumstances, idealizes the concubine Aişa to such an extent that he loses his life for her, and so on. The novel's mosaic-like style, with its frequent references to the historical context of the Ottoman Empire's decline – interwoven with Napoleon's dazzling Egyptian campaign and, of course, with the fragility of power in the Romanian Principalities, where rulers were appointed by the Ottoman Porte and drawn from influential Greek families of Istanbul's Phanar quarter – persists until the final page. "The [Sublime] Porte had just decided, on the ninth of September 1798, to declare war on France"[51] (O/T).

The fascination with beauty, skill, and cunning intertwines with aversion toward the frequent practices of deceit, denunciation, and betrayal, as well as toward the atrocious crimes committed by sultans, viziers, and executioners. At the heart of grand history take shape the threads of petty yet persistent intrigues – so persistent that they tear apart the very fabric of intricate political schemes. Within this framework, the eternal and the ephemeral feminine stand out, embodied in numerous figures: Sultana Validé (the Sultan's mother), the concubine Merzieh (the Sultan's favorite), and Aişa, the slave of rare beauty who, with Ismail's help, overturns the balance of power within the imperial harem. Yet she remains merely a figure, a chess piece, a seductive instrument within the mechanisms of power and submission orchestrated by Vizier Suleiman and the eunuch Ismail.

> "In the languid warmth of the evening, Aişa grew bored. In vain did her handmaidens try to cheer her with light dances and songs played on the lute. Ever since she had been at the Seraglio – only a few months – she had languished without any apparent reason, and without knowing herself why. She had long been accustomed to slavery, and for years she had been told that her beauty would one day bring her all the joys a woman could desire. She dismissed the dancers with a gesture and remained alone. The pavilion where she rested was open on all sides; a barely perceptible breeze brought a trace of cool, damp air from the sea"[52] (our translation).

Within the Ottoman Empire, women make and unmake, sell and buy, cherish and betray, kill and, in a sense, bring back to life those around them – through love or through hatred.

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[49] Horia Stancu, *Fanar*, București, Editura pentru Literatură, 1968, p. 26.
[50] *Ibidem*, p. 31.
[51] *Ibidem*, p. 109.
[52] *Ibidem*, p. 13.

> "Aişa passed through the halls and gardens, entered the harem, and reached her chamber. Everywhere she was met with servile bows, obeisances, glances of hatred and envy; she walked among them, disdainful and proud. Only when she was alone, with one or two faithful handmaidens, and when she removed her veil, did her face reveal itself as it truly was – filled with a weariness and discontent she no longer tried to conceal. She carelessly tossed aside her ornaments, the coral necklaces, the bracelets and rings she had received, while the servants picked them up from the floor and locked them in chests. She would stretch out on the wide sofa, almost naked, and remain there for hours, daydreaming with open eyes. The fruit of power had lost its flavor; grandeur and glory were nothing but false and deceptive illusions (*sic*). Others regarded such things as the very foundation and essence of life, and their absence was, to them, more bitter than death"[53] (our translation).

In this context, **PASSION**, **BITTERNESS**, and **VANITY** are the three modes of Phanariot existence, regressive engines of life and the dominant stylistic modalities under which the events in the works unfold.

"Adventurous happenings of a thoughtless young man" [the author adds further]. He crossed the street and headed toward Pera. The neighborhood was separated from the Phanar by a narrow arm of the sea. Mavros reached the other shore by paying the bridge guard a copper para"[54] (Our Trans.). Having wandered for many years through Istanbul, Mavros came to know quite a few of the city's inhabitants who followed a faith other than Islam.

> "He – the *iatros* [the physician] – despised all of them, and rightly so, he thought. What value does wealth have if you do not use it to delight both soul and body (*sic*)? Having no faith of his own, all beliefs seemed to him unfounded and deceptive. *The soul lives in reality*, Mavros thought, *but it is one and the same with life itself, and thus just as mortal as life.* Heaven and hell exist on earth and within man. As for the ancient laws, they had been fashioned to suit times long past and no longer fit the days of the present"[55] (our translation).

Most often, unshakable faith – even when not practiced but merely professed – and the ever-changing, volatile nature of fate are the only membranes separating the various peoples depicted in the book, while also serving as markers of both ethnic and human identity.

> "Fate was decided once and for all on an unknown plane and according to laws hidden from mortals. All that remained for man was to be a grain of sand, rolled here and there by the wind of the desert. Faith, born in the desert out of the imagination and needs of the wandering tribes, betrayed fears thousands of years old: thirst and scorching heat, hunger, a lost road, a dried-up well, a vanished stream. The belief in the omnipotence of fate had been both a help and a hindrance to the tribes. Carried by the steps of caravans and the gallop of warring bands, it had passed beyond the deserts"[56] (our translation).

At other times, more concrete elements of the Levantine, Byzantine, or more specifically Phanariot atmosphere punctuate the reverie, melancholy, and nostalgia of characters who are never fully satisfied with what they gain through intrigue – or whose satisfaction is often overshadowed by a sense of excess, once again by sastisire, as it is called in modern Greek.

> "The window of the chamber was open; the thin muslin curtains swayed gently in the breeze blowing from the shore. Beyond the palace stretched the dark and fragrant

[53] *Ibidem*, p. 99.
[54] *Ibidem*, p. 104.
[55] *Ibidem*, p. 258.
[56] *Ibidem*, p. 173.

> gardens of the Seraglio. Entire rows of gardeners, some brought from across the sea, had adorned and beautified them. They had planted bushes of white and red roses that never ceased to bloom throughout the year; they had set orange and lemon trees; countless shrubs bore blue, yellow, and white flowers. Master stonecutters had embellished the gardens with fountains carved from marble; masons had raised pavilions whose walls were nothing more than delicate lacework"[57] (our translation).

The portrait of Aişa again, after the attempt of poisoning by Merzieh, is rendered with unparalleled finesse and delicacy – yet it stands in stark contrast to her soul, drained of all strength.

> "While Aişa was sleeping, Ismail had dared to look at her – first in the trembling light of the lamps, then in the full, steadfast light of day. Aişa had large, almond-shaped eyes, veined bluish eyelids, and long, curling lashes. She was beautiful – more beautiful than anyone else – even so, without her usual adornments of paint and powder, wavering on the border between life and death. Her thin, arched lips, filled with will and determination; her pale cheeks; her slightly curved nose; her hair cascading in waves; her tense neck – all this perfect harmony could not conceal the sadness and bitterness (*sic*) that sleep and illness brought to the surface. Her slender, supple body, barely stirred by the faint movements of sleep, seemed renewed: the graceful curves of her breasts and thighs were new, her sunken belly and her full, rounded chest newly born"[58] (our translation).

If we were to sum up this volume, in a partial conclusion, in a single word, that word would be **STENOHORIA** – a term encompassing connotations such as restlessness, turmoil, discontent, once again boredom, but also unease, oppression, confusion, impasse, and misfortune.

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The *Phanariot Manuscript* is a sensual and historical fresco of eighteenth-century Bucharest, built around a manuscript dated 1796, which the author claims to have discovered at the Library of the Romanian Academy in Bucharest and later published in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, issue 47, volume 4, in the summer of 2014, at Johns Hopkins University.

> "The city was besieged by words and by the clatter of chains from the smokehouses. Mantu's Gypsy women were handing out glasses of sweetened brandy at the gate, while the great bell of Saint Spiridon constantly reminded everyone that a wedding was being prepared in the city. Forgetting about the plague, despite all the warnings from the princely chancery, the butchers had returned to their tables, bringing with them rabbits that, that spring, had come to cost only forty *bani*"[59] (our translation).

Creating the illusion of a personal chronicle from the era – and taking as its starting point a manuscript, which lends authenticity to the writing – the author reinvests the novel with a form of the imaginary power of the Phanariot age, yet one undermined by subtle and refined irony, even parody, directed at a world both idealized and demonized. 'It is the year 1790. Leun is 17 years old and leaves Thessaloniki with a single dream: to reach Bucharest and make his fortune, relying on the generosity of his compatriot, Mavrogheni, Prince of Wallachia. The city, however, is under Austrian occupation, which forces his plan to undergo multiple and unexpected changes. First of all, he falls in love with Maiorca (14 years old), the slave of the boyar Doicescu (25 years old), master of the Colțea neighborhood and one of the pillars of Bucharest's aristocracy ' (OT) (*Manuscrisul fanariot* – Doina Ruști).

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[57] *Ibidem*, p. 180.
[58] Doina Ruști, *Manuscrisul fanariot*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2015, p. 329.
[59] *Ibidem*, p. 38.

> "*The Phanariot Manuscript* is a sumptuous book, imbued with an infectious sensuality. It is a poem dedicated to Phanariot Bucharest – a city, or rather an improvised urban sprawl – that sways day and night to the languid rhythm of *manele*, steeped in the smoke of hookahs, in superstitions, rumors, and magical oriental fragrances, and which, from time to time, lets itself be overtaken by endemic and aimless frenzies, by heavy sorrows and nameless melancholies. If it were only that, it would already be enough. But the story of an impossible love – one that shatters conventions – told to us by Doina Ruști, grounded in documents and marked by her well-known talent, lifts the curtain on a world of customs, ruthless private relations, surprising behaviors, and strange habits that leave even the critic with a solid grasp of history in sheer bewilderment"[60] (our translation) (Eugen Negrici – back cover of the novel).

The seventeen-year-old Vlach, Ion sin (son of) Radu or the assimilated Greek Ioanis, or the adopted Romanian Leun – all one and the same person – is a wanderer, a dreamer, an adventurer, a bewildered soul (as Panait Istrati notes about Adrian Zografi), a tailor of dreams who finds his calling in love – and not just any love, but one for a Gypsy woman, a being considered inferior in that era. Although he seeks freedom with unwavering persistence, in the broadest sense of the word, he remains a sudit, a foreign subject, a beneficiary of special privileges – a resident of the Romanian Principalities under the protection of a foreign power – and not a velit, a great boyar, dignitary, or magnate of the time, a condition that somewhat restricts his movements and that near-absolute freedom he so ardently desires.

> "The first person to call him by his new name was Maiorca. She had stepped out onto the inn's balcony and was dreaming of patterns for sashes and girdles, her arms resting on the windowsill. Her silhouette, in the August light, seemed to him like a hollyhock flower. She wore a red skirt – a pure, vivid red – made of three gathered panels, which made her visible from a great distance. Her hair, braided with a multitude of multicolored rags, was this time tied up at the crown of her head, except for a few small locks that trembled like willow branches"[61] (our translation).

In the whirlwind of Bucharest – which becomes another Phanar, more condensed and, in a way, more fervent, or even the very mirror of the Phanar (the term itself being used several times throughout the novel) – the **PARTY**, approaching its climax in all its frenzy, stands as the emblem of a decadent yet vibrant society (though in a different manner than at Mateiu Caragiale). "But debauchery had taken hold not only in the streets. In the boyars' courtyards, by contagion, the fiddlers got to work, and the lanes filled with carts carrying musicians and revelers, leaving behind trails of smoke and the smell of cheap brandy"[62] (O/T) or "Along with the roast appeared the women, and the **WINE** was brought in – and from there [of course] the **FEAST** began"[63] (OT) as ***Life is made of delicacies snatched in haste***. At one point, an enigmatic sentence appears in the book: "At the Old Court, a box of devils had been brought"[64], that is, a clavier – a symbol of the other world: modern, Western, and emancipated. At one point, a balloon with a nacelle also appears, which, in the superstitions of the backward Phanariots, could be mistaken for anything – from a comet to a flying devil. Indeed, the city itself is the receptacle and resonating chamber of all secrets, enigmas, and mysteries. In Bucharest, "any secret would shatter into pieces within an hour"[65] (OT), while

[60] *Ibidem*, p. 298.
[61] *Ibidem*, p. 44.
[62] *Ibidem*, p. 78.
[63] *Ibidem*, p. 85.
[64] *Ibidem*, p. 73.
[65] *Ibidem*, p. 87.

gossip and intrigue ran through the labyrinthine underworld of the city – through the very fabric of Bucharest itself – during a time of dissolution, the writer adds. "No one remained untouched by the little mouths that chirped throughout the city"[66] (Our Trans.). The capital becomes a city with the resonance of a seashell (sic), and above Bucharest "the sky quivered, and waves of desire burst forth from the earth"[67]. "From the carriage, Bucharest looked like a sea of tiny lights"[68] (OT). "Over Bucharest reigned a sense of well-being"[69] (OT). "**The God of the city had left nothing to chance**"[70] (our translation).

In another vein, within the rather pressing reality of the novel, Prince Mavrogheni stands as the protagonist's dreamed protector. At one point, the enthronement of Alecu Moruzi takes place, apparently with the help of the Brotherhood of Saint Andrew, to which also belongs the master of the Colțea neighborhood, Dan Brașoveanu Doicescu – a shrewd and versatile man, landowner and slaveholder, a refined sensualist yet full of cruelty and corroded by corruption. There is also an episodic yet remarkably significant character: Riga of Velestino, that is, Rigas Feraios Velestinlis, who also appears in Fanar as an ideologue of the age or as a personal adviser during his encounter with Bonaparte – a propagator, in southeastern Europe, of the emancipatory ideas under Ottoman domination. In the third mentioned novel, he appears only sporadically, as a thinker who dispels the excesses of bygone times, stirring consciences and subtly urging rebellion ("Riga was a fortunate man and endured to the utmost – that is, for five full, glorious years, during which he managed to engrave himself into the history of all Balkan countries. Then, on that May morning, he did not yet know it – he was merely a restless man of the hurried Age of Enlightenment"[71] – OT). Another elemental force, difficult to keep under control, is the **plague epidemic**, which strikes frail bodies yet strengthens spirits – as happens, once again in parallel, in Horia Stancu's prose, within the French camp during the Egyptian campaign.

A distinctive dimension in Doina Ruști's novel, this time, is the taming or domesticating of the fantastic within these extensions of the Phanar, through the means of magical realism. The Cotroceni Forest, the Gorgani neighborhood (in *Homeric*), and also "la Bozărie," in *The Phanariot Manuscript*, become intermittent beams marking both the isotopy and the isochrony between the real and the imaginary.

> "The whole city was possessed by Maiorca's face. Her colorful ribbons fluttered from every window. Her voice echoed in every alleyway, her long arms hid in every carriage, her hidden feet pattered along every street. **Maiorca ruled his mind.** She had descended into his blood like a colony of mosquitoes and had locked his manhood in a tumbac sheath, whose sharp edges he felt with every step. Maiorca was in his mind, multiplied. She stirred in every pore of his skin, giggled in his ears, and – most of all – lifted her skirts before his pain-clouded blue eyes, so that anyone who looked closely at Leun could not fail to notice the veil-draped look in his gaze"[72] (our translation).

The fascination with sensuality and, at times, sexualization is persistent in this work, as well as in the author's other writings. The writer usually presses forcefully on the full keyboard of the unconquerable Eros (gr. *Eros aníkate máhan*), moving from elevating love to... certain vulgar expressions that are almost unreproducible here.

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[66] *Ibidem*, p. 106.
[67] *Ibidem*, p. 214.
[68] *Ibidem*, p. 144.
[69] *Ibidem*, p. 161.
[70] *Ibidem*, p. 198.
[71] *Ibidem*, p. 167.
[72] *Ibidem*, p. 105.

> "Leun saw the veins whitening her skin, and for a brief moment he felt the scorch of the wall down to his marrow. The girl's neck twisted, dissolving into the area of her breasts, which stood out boldly from the blue rag. Her skirt rippled, and her legs hopped about, uncovered, revealing a carob-colored thigh and a pear-shaped knee. She shrieked passionately, in tune with the general commotion"[73] (our translation).

Among the demons roaming this Phanariotized Bucharest, there is also a subtle, intellectual one – the **Devil with Glasses** – another name for the passion of writing. Leun himself, by the force of circumstance, becomes a copyist and forger in Wallachia. And Manda Doicescu reads none other than *The Leisure of Fantasy*, but also, not by chance, *Erotocritus*, *Alexandria*, *Imberie and Margarona*, and so on.

The comic touches, masterfully woven throughout the book and setting it apart from the other two novels, immerse the reader in reality – indeed, in *the present reality, the one that truly matters*, as further emphasized in this volume. When Riga envisions the possibility that Tranca, Maiorca's mother, might be burned at the stake like the witches of Vienna because she meddles with the devil's hair, it is Maiorca herself who intervenes – briefly, hilariously, and to the point: "Go burn your mother!"[74] (OT) (rom. „Ba s-o arzi pe mă-ta!") or "How many devils does your mother have?"[75] (OT) is suddenly questioned by Leun. Beyond the force of the epic, the power of words begins to seep in – especially the word with a special resonance, the word not known by everyone, the magical word. Indeed, the five words around which the chapters of the novel coalesce are: *Bucharest*, *Sudit* (see supra), *Gypsy*, *Maghevo* [do to magic], and *Bargain* (tc. Kilipir, rom. Chilipir).

Alte pagini sunt de o condensată poeticitate, vorbele devenind vehiculele unor stări privilegiate: "In the motley crowd, she was like a small candle in the night"[76] (OT) or "At last, Maiorca looked toward Leun. Between them melted the light of a shattered lamp"[77] (Our Trans.) or "He was now lucid, restored by opium fumes and two cups of coffee"[78] (O/T). Toward the end of the novel, another key term is recovered – one that encapsulates the frantic pursuit of pleasure and the chasing of wind: namely, **DELUSION**, with all its variants – temptation, seduction, self-deception, illusion – under which the entire Phanariot heterocosmos might well be subsumed. The neo-Romantic endeavor of the protagonist – who seeks either to redeem his beloved or to flee with her into the world – collides with the stark realism of Doicescu, the master, who devises an essentially pragmatic solution: that from Saint Demetrius' Day until Saint George's Day, Leun should enter the ranks of the Gypsy slaves, and from spring to autumn, he should be entirely a free man... The ending thus invites interpretation in a mythic or mythological key: the protagonist becomes a kind of male Persephone, if one may say so, and from a Phanariot perspective, in the broad sense of the term, this transformation signifies the most effective form of negotiation – between freedom and servitude, illusion and reality, love and resignation.

In terms of reader reception, there is, in this case, a constant negotiation between Doina Ruști and her audience: a full understanding of this seemingly accessible work requires knowledge of history, geography, linguistics, and even politics. The final element – the placement of Leun in a utopian social condition, half-slave and half-free, and the reversal of his status for the sake of imperfect love – sustain the novel's persistent play of ambiguity that

[73] *Ibidem*, p. 128.
[74] *Ibidem*, p. 149.
[75] *Ibidem*, p. 155.
[76] *Ibidem*, p. 170.
[77] *Ibidem*, p. 171.
[78] *Ibidem*, p. 175.

unfolds throughout the volume. "No deed holds meaning before the **NAME** with three hundred wings – that **NAME** known on every street, whispered over every fence. A tear fell from Leun's eye, and within it were gathered all his fleeting happinesses as a son of Bucharest"[79] (Our Trans.). Running through the subtext of all three novels is a Costinesque chronicle-like undertone – a meditation on the rise and fall of humankind, on the ever-turning wheel of life, and on the futility of human existence. This theme endures precisely because what a person reveals about himself should never be taken at face value [80]. The gradual transformation of the narrative into legend, or into the incipient form of a myth – in the etymological sense of a beautiful mystification of reality – is also expressed in the folk-inspired verses interwoven throughout the book: "Who has the very heart to bear/ /Fires and the torments of death"[81] (OT) (rom. „Cine are piept să poarte/ Focuri și dureri de moarte"), but also in other instances.

In contrast to the other two novels, self-referentiality is more pronounced, forming part of a ceremonial of manipulation through the imaginary – the ***elevation of conscious mystification to the status of an artistic device***[82], adds this time Ovidiu Cotruș's perspective on M. Caragiale. "His life would have followed a normal course, and he might never have become bound to *The Phanariot Manuscript*, had it not been for that journey which had chewed him up between its teeth"[83] (Our Trans.). The novel written in the Phanariot key concludes both naturally and, at the same time, unexpectedly, with the inclusion of the document itself, the contract, the bill of sale for the semi-servile slave, the very act of transaction and possession that encapsulates the moral and historical essence of the narrative:

> "In these circumstances – which brought nothing new – the day of the manuscript's birth finally arrived. It consisted of no more than a single page, yet within it the whole life of Leun, once Ioanis, was contained. It was not a story, but its map, fashioned like a set of Chinese boxes, within which still lie many compartments untouched by any human hand – though, in truth, this matters little. There are always things left unsaid, for the life of a story does not reside in the multitude of its events, but rather in the trembling tear left behind by a living soul. From the aged fibre of this paper arises a faint humming, which on certain nights – especially in winter – will not let me sleep. *I have called it the Phanariot Manuscript*"[84] (our translation).

In a somewhat similar manner, Horia Stancu concludes his predominantly objective novel with alternating narrative fragments which, however, are not typographically demarcated or separated, even by a blank line, as would normally be expected. Thus, the narrative appears continuous, though it is, in fact, structurally discontinuous. If one were to summarize the interwoven threads of the literary fabric in *Manuscrisul fanariot* with a single word, that word would be **EUPHORIA** – in all its resonances: an intense state of well-being, an unmotivated optimism, an accentuated sense of happiness, but also a form of unconsciousness, a rapture of the senses, and a renunciation of the self.

By preferring the term Phanar over the 'Levant' – the latter being broader and more exotic, designating all the Eastern Mediterranean territories under Ottoman influence (Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Cyprus, Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Anatolia, as well as much of Egypt and Greece), and evoking a wider fascination with the entire Near East – and by setting aside the term

[79] *Ibidem*, p. 230.
[80] *Ibidem*, p. 258.
[81] *Ibidem*, p. 248.
[82] Ovidiu Cotruș, *Opera lui Matei I. Caragiale*, București, Editura Minerva, 1977, p. 62.
[83] Doina Ruști, *Manuscrisul fanariot*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2015, p. 182.
[84] *Ibidem*, p. 282.

'Byzantium', which carries a more specific historical resonance and encompasses the grand symbols of decadent splendor, imperial theology, religious sacrality, and even a cosmic order, what ultimately crystallizes through this process of conceptual refinement is the Phanar itself, with all its obscurities and clarities, its turbidities and transparencies.

Across all three novels, each containing, in an Eminescian key, the acorn-like seed named Phanar, the term functions as a metaphorical nucleus, embodying a space of cultural confluence and moral ambivalence, a literary *topos* suspended between history and myth, between decline and transcendence.

> "The world is inverted or wavering, caught in an oscillating state, perpetually on the verge of collapse; reality itself is unstable or illusory, resembling a theatrical set. Likewise, the human being is unbalanced, convinced that he is never entirely what he is nor what he appears to be, concealing his face beneath a mask so skillfully employed that it becomes impossible to discern where the mask ends and the true face begins"[85] (our translation).

If ancient *hybris* was inextricable and belonged to the realm of the sublime, in the Phanariot world it undergoes a paradoxical degradation, taking the form of excess, yet simultaneously becoming humanized, assuming the shape of human imperfection – deplorable, detestable, at times repugnant, and yet, in its own way, forgivable. "The opposition between appearance and essence is powerfully delineated in these versatile and illusory characters. They resist definition or confinement within a single form, each constituting not a coherent, unified personality, but rather a constellation of personae – masks consciously assumed, fully aware of the theatricality inherent in their own being"[86] (our translation). Ultimately, the literary Phanar becomes a *locus amoenitas* in an expanded sense – one of inner exile, of withdrawal from history, so often brutal, yet also one of interethnic coexistence and Greco-Roman cultural synthesis. At the same time, it emerges as a familiar topos, surprisingly amoral (including from an aesthetic perspective), and of striking contemporary relevance.

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[85] Jean Rousset, *Literatura barocă în Franța. Circe și păunul*, București, Editura Univers, 1976, p. 73.
[86] Dana Nicoleta Popescu, *Sub semnul barocului*, București, Editura Anthropos, 2009