

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Living in the Balkans: From ‘Caragea’s Plague’ to the Coronavirus Pandemic

Alina Bako

Lucian Blaga University

[alina.bako@ulbsibiu.ro](mailto:alina.bako@ulbsibiu.ro)

---

In her article published in *Literary Geographies* 6(1), ‘The Cube of Loneliness: Literary Geographies in Isolation’, Sheila Hones inquires whether literary geography can properly ‘respond to social isolation’. The fact that works of fiction offer concrete and multiple spatial patterns implies, according to the author’s vision, a possible escape from isolation, even when we are ‘inhabiting a cube of loneliness’ (Hones 2020: 13). The state of isolation is experienced differently, however, not only according to the individual and his spiritual features, but also on the level of the community and of the mentality generated by the geographic space to which he belongs. In keeping with this assertion, the present essay tackles, through a short geographic-historical-literary excursion, the manner in which isolation has functioned in the South-Eastern European area, in the Balkans, and more specifically, in Romania.

Thus, within the Romanian collective consciousness, any epidemic leads to a narrative pattern generated by the plague that hit Walachia in 1813. Also referred to as ‘Caragea’s plague’, in reference to the ruling prince of the time, the epidemic that haunted Constantinople is described in literary texts as a major point of reference. An important account of the age is offered by the writings of Ion Ghica, an author and political figure (three times Prime Minister) who took active part in the revolution of 1848 which sought the unification of the principalities of Moldova and Wallachia under a single ruler. Ghica had acted as a negotiator for the prevention of the entrance of the Russian Army into the territory of the Romanian principalities. Consequently, he was an astute observer of not just Romanian society of the beginning of the nineteenth century but also Istanbul. His letters to Vasile Alecsandri, another militant author of the age, prove a proper knowledge of the situation generated by the

epidemic that had ravished the population. The letters, which were written in London, mention that

the plague struck the country in successive waves, but the Romanian annals do not mention a more terrible illness than Caragea's plague! Never did this disease make as many victims! Up to 300 people used to die daily and it is believed that the number of deaths in the entire country surpassed 90,000. Contagion was so high, that the tiniest contact with an infected household brought death to an entire family, and the progress of the disease was so violent, that an individual struck by the plague was a doomed individual. (Ghica 1978: 23)

Quarantine and isolation are also mentioned when Ghica describes how the ruling prince had to self-isolate between 25<sup>th</sup> November and 12<sup>th</sup> December (Nistor 1946: 357). Historical documents mention spaces such as the Văcărești monastery, Băneasa, Colentina being turned into quarantine facilities, and access to the city being limited. Access was consequently permitted only in locations such as the Mogoșoaiei Bridge or the Herăstrău Park, the Cleiului Bridge or Târgoviștei Road, the Calicilor Bridge or the Antim Road, the road from Izvorul Filaret and the Șerban Vodă Bridge (Nistor 1946: 398).

However, in the Romanian principalities quarantine was legally enforced only as late as 1833, along with the first law that took up a constitutional role, the *Regulamentul organic* (Organic Regulation) (Negulescu and Alexianu 1944). Looking at official documents we can remark that two large spatial centres begin to polarize. On the one hand, Constantinople represented the Orient, where epidemics originated and was thus understood in malefic terms. On the other, Bucharest was seen as a protected space but one that was subject to invasion by the destructive Orient, represented by the plague and the Phanariot ruler. (The Phanariotes – a denomination derived from the Phanar (Fener) neighbourhood of Constantinople – were appointed by the sultan to the throne of the Romanian principalities and considered vassals to the Ottoman Empire.) Robert T. Tally Jr points out that

[t]he figural use of the verb 'orient,' which once meant 'to turn towards the east,' is itself a sign of the interplay between writing and mapping. The storyteller, like the mapmaker, determines the space to be represented, selects the elements to be included, draws the scale, and so on. In producing the narrative, the writer also produces a map of the space, connecting the reader to a totality formed by the narrative itself. In a sense, all storytelling is a kind of mapping. (Tally 2008: 2)

From this perspective, in the Middle Ages and later on, up into the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was perceived by Romanians as a source of anguish and a bringer of epidemics. We can observe that in the Romanian collective consciousness, the conceptual map of South-East Europe identified the Orient through its exoticism, with a regime of disease that was brought in by foreigners.

In the seventeenth century Nicolae Milescu Spătaru, a man of letters from the Romanian principalities, travelled to China, the heart of the Orient, which he describes in detail in two travel volumes entitled *Chinese Travel Journal* and *A Description of China* (written after the Chinese expedition from 1675-1678 and published late in 1888). Noting that it was from the Chinese that Europeans learned the ‘use of the compass in navigation’, the author, who undertakes this journey over the course of several years starting with 1675, makes frequent mention of traditional Chinese medicine, which features in drawings of herbs and stones. The two volumes promote a sort of literary geography and sketch out a map of eastward travel through Russia. Spătaru meets Mongolian tribes and eventually reaches the Chinese Kingdom and the Emperor’s court in Beijing. Edward Said’s distinction is well-known: ‘The Orient was almost a European invention’ (1978: 1), and the author’s journey is presented through the lens of the European observer. The space described is an exotic one whereas the observations articulated from a position of reason, from the description of the walls ensuring protection against Mongolian invaders to the culinary habits such as consuming bats ‘as large as chickens’ (Milescu Spătaru 1974: 56), teas that protect them from kidney stones and natural remedies made out of herbs, snakes or minerals. The Chinese excursion, narrated through the eyes of the seventeenth-century man, produces the desired effect – amazement – and an unconscious comparison to his readers’ homelands. Counted among the first literary texts in Romanian culture, Nicolae Milescu Spătaru’s journal constructs the image of a space isolated by the natural borders produced by rivers and seas that is difficult to reach. One can mention also later encounters with China written by Romanian writers, for example Mircea Eliade’s 1938 translation from English into Romanian of Pearl S. Buck’s well-known novel *Fighting Angel*, which unfolds within the large framework of Chinese rural life.

At the beginning of 2020 the gaze of the Balkan European was once again directed towards China in the context of an emerging health crisis, this time in the context of the new coronavirus. The virus was perceived as an exotic, destructive phenomenon and dressed up in the same mix of fascination and fear as hundreds of years ago. As in *Chinese Travel Journal and a Description of China*, Orientals were represented as being in contact, via wet markets, with bats, rats and other animals that are not part of European cuisine. During this time people started gradually to retreat from daily activities and reduce socializing, faced with an unknown danger. The consequent reaction unfolded in three steps. The first was one of paralysis, which was followed by a reclusion into the family unit. This forced isolation generated neurosis, a state of introversion or a desire to elude the established rules, all a result of individuals being denied access to spaces that had become part of their universe. The last stage, experienced after the relaxation of measures, generated even bigger frustrations due to limitations on free communication with geographical spaces relatively far away from home. In the context of mass media, the most frequently used instrument to explain these restrictions – just as in literary geography – was the map: a map of the world stained in various colours, featuring percentages and confusing imagery. The real world overlapped with a world mapped by the contamination of the new virus. To make use of a term coined and defined by Robert Tally Jr., space became ‘topophilia’:

I think that the pervasive place-mindedness infusing our subjective experience in and apprehension of the world is characterized by a profound sense of unease, anxiety, or discontent. [...E]ven when we are ‘at home’, we maintain our awareness of the unfamiliar, the *unheimlich*. [...] Topophobia is not a disease, properly speaking[;] it is a condition of ‘disease,’ something of the sort that Freud indicates in his use of the term *Unbehagen*, which is similar to the French term *malaise* and is translated as ‘discontent’ in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the English title given to *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*. (Tally 2018: 23)

Along with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, many Romanians who had left to work in Western Europe returned to the country. Certain statistical studies, like the one reported by Horváth & Partners and reported in Romanian journals such as *Adevărul*, *Forbes*, or *Business Magazine* in May estimated that around one million people returned during the first months of 2020, many of them entering home isolation or being isolated upon their arrival in special places designated by the authorities. The writings of canonical Romanian writers also note a multiplicity of such spaces in the literature of times long gone. The escape from a foreign place in search of a more secure one was witnessed in South-East Europe either as a consequence of epidemics of the plague or cholera, or by the invasions of the Ottoman armies. In the novella *Vremuri de bejenie* (*Times of Flight*, 1930), Mihail Sadoveanu describes escape from the protective space of the home village and its consequent destruction in order to halt the enemy’s advancement, an abandonment that is represented as painful but necessary. The same author uses the narrative pattern generated by the plague outbreak in Florence, described in Boccaccio’s *Decamerone*, in order to create the frame-narration of *Hanu-Ancuței* (Ancuța’s Inn, 1928), which became a pretext for a number of storytellers to recount the events they had lived through, heard of, or witnessed. In this space north of the Danube, life in isolation and quarantine are governed to a certain extent by Raymond Poincaré’s well-known statement ‘nous sommes ici aux portes de l’Orient, où tout est pris à la légère’ (Caragiale 1988: 2), an affirmation that we also see in Mateiu Caragiale’s novel, *Craii de Curtea-Veche* (*Gallants of the Old Court*, 1929). A fresco of a Balkan landscape with no rules, a decadent world on the twilight of existence, this baroque novel contains an image that recalls the threat represented by the plague. The character Pirgu draws mystical images on the walls of his hotel room on Victoriei Boulevard, among which appears the face of Saint Haralambie holding ‘the plague enchained, beneath his feet’ (156). The present-day territory of Romania harbours many churches the patron saint of which is Saint Haralambie, who, according to legend, saved Bucharest from ‘Caragea’s plague’ at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

In fact, isolation and quarantine were imposed primarily in the nineteenth century when cholera was ravaging the present-day territory of Romania. In a novella written by Ioan Slavici it becomes apparent through the verbal exchange between characters that the cholera epidemic was not really taken seriously and people were rather focusing on the upcoming harvest. The character Busuioc from *Pădureanca* (*The Forest Woman*, 1965) ignores the epidemic he had heard about: ‘cholera had struck the country, but Busuioc did not want to hear about

it. Cholera in the time of harvest?’ (Slavici 1965: 127). Agricultural labour, the main occupation of the Romanian peasant, takes up the character’s thoughts completely, leaving no room for fear of the epidemic. In 1873, when historical documents attest to a new cholera wave, Transylvania belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the authorities imposed firm restrictions in order to protect the population. Historians such as Mora (1997: 110) claim that migrations related to harvesting, like the one described in Slavici’s novella, led to the spread of the epidemic. The revolt against the rulers is also described by the author, the power of the masses being related to the large number of those who wanted to work and were considering two opposing options: on the one hand hunger, if the wheat had not been harvested, and on the other hand death from disease. The conclusion reached by the character in *Pădureanca* is surprising: ‘After all, cholera is a much better option. If it be my destiny to die of cholera, the rulers will simply erase my data from wherever they may keep it! Destiny is all powerful, you can’t fight it, and that’s that’ (Slavici 1965: 102). The submission to destiny – to the Greek *fatum*, which frequently surfaces in Romanian folklore, that resignation when facing situations one cannot control – determines the consideration of space as *topophrenia*. In this sense, it is also relevant to note the testimony of a foreign traveller to the Romanian principalities, who observes that this space was plagued by epidemics of all sorts, including cholera, diphtheria and typhus. J.W. Ozanne states that the fever epidemics were caused by the ‘fetid swamps’ surrounding Bucharest (Ozanne 2015: 56) and describes the city as an insalubrious, Balkan place that is unsuited to foreigners who sooner or later end up ‘paying the price’ of being there. In Alecu Russo’s work the Orient is also blamed for the cholera epidemic, as described in the chapter *Holera* (Cholera) from ‘Cântarea României’ (*Song of Romania*). ‘The Oriental dogma’ related to fatalism, is what in the author’s vision characterizes the Romanian attitude towards cholera: ‘If it is meant to be so, it will be so...’ (Russo 1985: 79). The writer himself was orphaned in his early childhood as a result of the epidemic. He notes with some bitterness that isolation is inefficient in the case of Romania’s inhabitants, considering that ‘two friends upon meeting will shake each other’s hand even more firmly than before’, and the dominant attitude is one of socializing even in the face of death, with the people ‘drinking from death’s cup in large sips’ (Russo 1985: 92).

The attitude towards epidemic and death is characterized in this part of Europe by two important elements. On the one hand there is a schizoid relation to space, a topophrenic vision, with space generating contradictory feelings or a sort of malaise which fascinates and frightens at the same time. On the other hand there is fatalism, encountered both in written literature and in the descriptions of the Balkan mentality which is exposed during extreme turning points such as epidemics. Another two elements specific to Romania and extended to the Balkans more broadly are the need for representation to take the form of supernatural beings, in respect to both the plague and to cholera, and the resort to religious symbolism through the attribution of plague healing powers to one of the Saints of the Orthodox Church. The veneration of Saint Haralamb is also encountered in Balkan countries such as Greece or Serbia, but is not correlated there with healing the plague. By contrast, in Romania the healing aspect of the saint is present in iconography, with the plague being pictured as an enchained woman bearing a scythe and looking emaciated. We can thus conclude that in the Balkan

imaginary epidemics are experienced at a different level, determined by a culturally specific mentality. In our day too, in South-East Europe, the coronavirus pandemic does not entail a sense of isolation in the same manner that it does in other areas of the world, and fatalism remains the dominant factor in defining the attitude towards this event. Experiencing the pandemic in the previously described cultural spaces imposes an entirely new set of coordinates, generated rather by a Balkan vision of existence, as it was previously described by means of its three characteristic elements.

## Works Cited

- Caragiale, M. (1988) *Craii de Curtea-Veche* (Gallants of the Old Court). Bucharest: Minerva.
- Ghica, I. (1978) Letters to Vasile Alecsandri. *Din vremea lui Caragea*. Bucharest: Albatros
- Hones, S. (2020) 'The Cube of Loneliness: Literary Geographies in Isolation.' *Literary Geographies*, 6(1), pp. 11-14
- Milescu Spătaru, N. (1974) *Jurnal de călătorie în China*. Bucharest: Editura Eminescu.
- Mora, O. (1997) 'Considerații asupra epidemiei de holeră din 1843 din Transilvania.' *Buletinul cercurilor științifice studențești, arheologie-istorie*, 3, pp. 109-114.
- Negulescu, P. and Alexianu, G. (1944) *Regulamentele Organice ale Valabiei și Moldovei*. Bucharest: Întreprinderile 'Eminescu' S.A.
- Nistor I.I. (1946) 'The ravaging plague and cholera epidemics and the institution of the Danube quarantine belt.' *Annals of the Romanian Academy. Memoirs of the Historical Section*, Series III. tome XXVII. Bucharest: Official Monitor and State Press.
- Ozanne, J W. (2015) *Trei ani în România (1870-1873)*. Bucharest: Humanitas.
- Russo, Alecu. (1985) *Cântarea României*. Bucharest: Minerva.
- Sadoveanu, M. (1930) *Vremuri de bejenie*. Bucharest: Cartea Românească.
- Slavici, I. (1965) *Pădureanca*. Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură.
- Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Tally Jr., R.T (2008) 'Literary Cartography, Space, Representation, and Narrative'. *Digital Collections Repository* [Online] [Accessed: 8 December 2020] <https://digital.library.txstate.edu/bitstream/handle/10877/3932/fulltext.pdf?sequence=1%26isAllowed=y>
- Tally Jr., R. T. (2018) *Topophobia: Place, Narrative, and the Spatial Imagination*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.