

Book Review on Daniel Dragomirescu's Oameni și Marionete / Men and Puppets

Neil Leadbeater

Editor, author, essayist and critic, Edinburgh, Scotland.

This bilingual (English / Romanian) collection contains a total of fifteen short stories that offer a chilling insight into what it is like to grow up in a totalitarian regime. Most, if not all, of the stories may well be autobiographical, although this is never made explicit in the book. Peel back the layers of any oppressive political regime and it will quickly become apparent that those whose job it is to enforce the rules are merely puppets whose actions are being determined by others higher up the chain of command. This is what lies behind the title of this collection in which Dragomirescu uses literary devices in order to convey an unpalatable truth.

Fish Borscht, for example, is a story of conflict between generations. It is a protest against a life of rigid discipline that is pursued with religious fervour. The shock of stepping over the line, of doing the unthinkable (and, in this case, still going hungry) demonstrates the utter

hopelessness of making a protest in the first place. The story is not really about food, it is about politics.

Politics comes to the fore once again in *The Archives of the Old Courthouse*. This time, the metaphor is the postage stamp. Stamps can reveal a lot about a country and in this one it is the rainbow-coloured royal stamps that are sought after the most. These were issued in a time when Romania was ruled by monarchs such as King Ferdinand (reigned 1914-1927), King Carol II (reigned 1930-1940) and King Michael I (reigned 1927-1930 and 1940-1947). They represent a yearning to hold on to something special, regardless of whether or not they are worth anything on the commercial market. Rifling through this archive, however, leads to other more important discoveries that the authorities are at pains to cover up:

That mountain of papers showed us the image of a world that did not match the one described at school: property was a legitimate right of every person, the state could not lay claim to a monopoly of everything, the world before had not been hell....the kings of Romania had enjoyed appreciation and authority, and King Michael had been forced to abdicate, not because he had been the last support of the exploiting classes, but because the country had lost its independence and was controlled from the outside.

The dangerous escapade of the youths who discover the archive represents a chance to get at some semblance of truth. It is an eye-opener on another world.

There are several stories in this book that revolve around the theme of forbidden territory and the need to break into it in order to discover some kind of truth. I have already mentioned the episode concerning the archive of the old courthouse, but there are others such as *The Treasure of Mr. Constantinovici* and *The Story of the Sandals*. Both stories are descriptions of childhood escapades into other people's properties. In the former, children steal books and in the latter it is apricots. The latter is a story of temptation, a re-enactment of the fall of mankind (for "apricots" read "apples"), retribution and forgiveness. Like so many of these stories, it strikes at the heart of what it truly means to be human. Often, as in *The Scooter*, there is an encounter with evil which appears to be insurmountable at the time but often leads to a moral being drawn later on.

Dragomirescu is a master at conveying the right atmosphere for each piece. The scent of danger is everywhere in *The Stop in the Woods* where the author reminds us just how close we can come to being in real danger without really knowing it at various points in our lives. In *The Meeting with Cerberus* the sense of panic that is instilled by being chased by a vicious dog through a lonely cemetery is palpable.

In *Marilena*, a sensitively written story, the sadness of unrequited love becomes all too apparent when one person fails to relate to another.

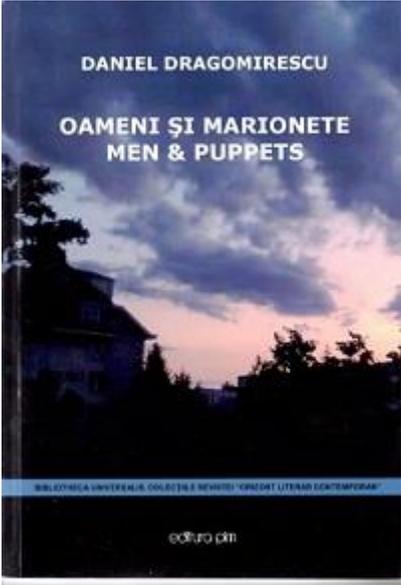
The Bucharest earthquake of 4 March 1977, which was one of the worst earthquake disasters of the 1970's, is the centrepiece of the story entitled *A Few Hours After the End of the World*. This is a first-hand account of an earthquake that measured 7.3 on the Richter scale; causing the loss of more than 1,500 lives and injuring an additional 11,000 people. The epicentre was in Vrancea but most of the casualties were in Bucharest. Over 35,000 people were made homeless and thousands of buildings were damaged. It changed the face of Bucharest forever. Dragomirescu likens it to the toppling of an oppressed regime:

We all felt liberated from something which had oppressed and trampled on us for too long. The first hours after the end of the world seemed to bring back, among tears and suffering, our freedom.

In *The Revolution That Did Not Take Place*, school children become the victims of oppression when they are forced to put aside their school work to undergo a period of hard manual labour in a silage yard at the start of the summer holidays. Their smouldering resentment leads to a defiant stand-off that ultimately crumbles before the face of authority.

The final story, *The Typewriter*, is a blistering exposé of censorship and the paranoia of those in authority who watch our every move.

Credit should go to the translator, Roxana Doncu, for her excellent contribution in bringing the work of this writer to a wider audience.

	<p>Title: Oameni și Marionete / Men and Puppets</p> <p>Author: Daniel Dragomirescu</p> <p>Imprint: editura pim, Iași, Romania</p> <p>ISBN: 9786061340880</p> <p>Genre: Short Story</p> <p>Language: English and Romanian</p> <p>Binding: Paperback</p> <p>Year: 2018</p> <p>Pages: 221</p> <p>Price: 20 Euros</p>
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Author: Daniel Dragomirescu

Daniel is a Romanian (born in Bucharest in 1952) is a Romanian prose writer, editor and journalist. He is a member of the Writers' Union of Romania, a graduate of the Post-Secondary School of Secretariat-Stenography and External Commerce, Bucharest, and a Bachelor of the Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest. Between 1978 and 1980 he worked as assistant stenographer at the Linguistics Institute, Bucharest and subsequently in the education system before pursuing cultural and literary activities on a freelance basis. Between 2006 and 2007 he was the editor of *Adevărul Literar din Vaslui* and in 2008 he became the founder and editor of *Orizont Literar Contemporan* (Contemporary Literary Horizon) which is a multicultural journal with contributions in English, Spanish and Romanian. His novels include *Nothing New Behind the Iron Curtain* (2003); *The Red Desert* (2004); *Dark November* (2005) and *Quicksand* (2007). A collection of short stories, *The Meeting with Cerberus* was published in 2016.

Reviewer: Neil Leadbeater

Neil is an editor, author, essayist and critic living in Edinburgh, Scotland. His short stories, articles and poems have been published widely in anthologies and journals both at home and abroad. His publications include *Librettos for the Black Madonna* (White Adder Press, Scotland, 2011); *The Worcester Fragments* (Original Plus Press, England, 2013); *The Loveliest Vein of Our Lives* (Poetry Space, England, 2014), *Greasebanding the Apple Trees* (Rafaelli Editore, Rimini, Italy),

Finding the River Horse (Littoral Press, 2017) and *Punching Cork Stoppers* (Original Press, 2018). His work has been translated into Dutch, Romanian, Spanish and Swedish.

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