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## TYPES OF CHARACTERS IN *NUNTA DOMNIȚEI RUXANDA* BY MIHAIL SADOVEANU

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**Abstract:** *THIS PAPER AIMS TO DISCUSS A SERIES OF SYMBOLS AND CONCEPTS ABOUT MAN AND LIFE THAT SADOVEANU INSERTS IN HIS NOVEL, NUNTA DOMNIȚEI RUXANDA. THE ROMANIAN WRITER EXPERIENCED A FUNDAMENTAL CHANGED ONCE HE ENTERED THE FREEMASONRY. ALTHOUGH THEY MAKE UP AN EXTREMELY INTERESTING UNIVERSE, THESE CHANGES HAVE BEEN SYSTEMATICALLY FORGOTTEN UNDER THE VEIL OF SILENCE. THE NOVEL NUNTA DOMNIȚEI RUXANDA HAS NOT BEEN DISCUSSED SO FAR THROUGH THE LENS PROVIDED BY THE MASONIC TEACHINGS WHOSE CORE, AS SADOVEANU TELLS US, RESIDES IN ESOTERICISM, THEIR DEEP MEANING THUS REMAINING HIDDEN. THIS PAPER AIMS TO HIGHLIGHT EXACTLY THOSE ELEMENTS THAT HAVE BEEN OVERLOOKED OVER TIME.*

**Keywords:** *MASONRY, INITIATION, ESOTERICISM, SADOVEANU*

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It is no secret that Mihail Sadoveanu was an important member of Romanian Freemasonry. But in the light of his initiation, Sadoveanu's writing style acquires new nuances. If in works that appeared immediately after initiation, such as *Olanda*, this is not yet obvious, gradually, changes in writing will become stronger in the sense that the initiation will leave its imprint on the author. In fact, this change is the very essence of the whole initiation which „means a new beginning (initium); an estrangement from the old method and the old lifestyle and the entry into a new life, with a greater self-knowledge, which deepens the understanding and intensifies the virtue”(Wilmshurst, 2014, p.13). In other words, when we talk about Sadoveanu's works written after 1927, the deep meaning of the words must be sought beyond what it is seen. This disguised erudition, as Paleologu will later on call it, finds its force in everything that the Masonic cult means and represents a materialization of the mutations that the writer's consciousness will suffer after the initiation into Masonic mysteries; once these mysteries are revealed, they have the power to radically change the perception of the initiate. In fact, Sadoveanu



explained: „the so-called «secret» of Freemasonry has nothing to do with the vulgar meaning of the word [...] Its secret - the writer continues - lies in esotericism. Esotericism is a mysterious doctrine, in the sense of religious mysteries; a doctrine superior to all dogmas and all forms, capable, through its unity and generality, of reconciling multiple aspects of the truth. It is a secret, because it is not learned directly, through ordinary mental operations; it represents the knowledge of the truth through a personal insight, meditating on the symbols; it takes you to the deep meaning of things, the one that escapes superficial comprehension”(Unsigned, 1993, p.1). In this light, personal meditation becomes the sieve through which the elements of reality will be filtered, and the power of the symbol will triumph. Moreover, the explanation offered by Sadoveanu to the notion of esotericism emphasizes very well the fundamental difference between essence and appearance, between what can be seen and what can be understood, between what is deep and what bears the imprint of shallowness. Initiated in this great mystery, Sadoveanu brings in his works elements of this doctrine. Speaking about the esotericism in the works of the Moldavian writer, Vasile Lovinescu opened an article from 1935 on this topic with the following statement: „Mr. Mihail Sadoveanu, according to the purest traditional orthodoxism, does not leave this field at sight, a field he partly possesses and in order to discover it, you need quite trained eyes” (Lovinescu, 1935, p.3). In the same article, Vasile Lovinescu also raises a question: „The main problem is this: did Mr. Sadoveanu entered ... *the country beyond the shadows*<sup>1</sup>, only through his intuition as a great writer of the Dacian land, or through a discipline appropriate to an esoteric doctrine?” (Lovinescu, 1935, p.3). It is obvious that the problem of an influence manifested on Sadoveanu coming from a special discipline has been discussed ever since 1935. Going over everything that the profane cannot perceive (or understand), starting with the year of his initiation, the Moldavian writer will present a complete understanding of the world, bringing in front of the reader, as Paleologu observes, „superior figures of intellectuals, from Paul de Marenne and Alecu Ruset to Kesarion Breb and Plato from Sakkoudion, to the foreman Ștefan Soroceanu”(Paleologu, 2006, p.41). In fact, the latter is the character around which revolves the novel that will be analyzed in this paper, *Nunta domniței Ruxanda*. Not only that Ștefan Soroceanu represents the intellectual in this novel, but he is, at the same time, the model of the initiate, of the man who sees beyond things, the one situated between worlds, as it might be said. In other words, it is the prototype of the enlightened man, a typology often identified in Sadoveanu's works that see the light of day after he comes into contact with the Masonic teachings.

Sadoveanu published *Nunta domniței Ruxanda* in 1932. He had already become a member of Freemasonry for a few years and had rapidly advanced within the organization. However, in what regards the genesis of the novel, one can recognize Miron Costin's chronicle as his source of inspiration. In fact, in G. Călinescu's view this novel is „a contemplation of troubled times, a complex chronicle, in which what could have had an epic rhythm is usually indirectly recounted”(Călinescu, 1982, p.625). Moreover, the same critic observes the following: „the patriarchal tone extinguishes the drama of the facts and the war is seen from afar, shiftless, idyllic, as a manifestation of violence necessary to the state of Edenic happiness. This explains how all the protagonists in the most critical moments seek the euphoria of liquor and food” (Călinescu, 1982, p.625). In a pantagurelic atmosphere, courtiers, advisers or ordinary people live their lives for better or for worse. On the other hand, this aspect of Sadoveanu's writing is also noticed by Alexandru Paleologu: „all these courtiers Sadoveanu likes so much, are often annoying and tend to become stereotypes with their kindness, advice and their wine of Cotnari. But, although the author uses them too much, theoretically they have a purpose, and their stereotype and emptiness prove to be necessary and are imposed by their function, which is introductory and ceremonial” (Paleologu, 2006, p.49). Therefore, using this statement, we can discuss

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to Mihail Sadoveanu's work called *Țara de dincolo de negură*.



the following hypothesis: it seems that, if on the one hand we can identify in Sadoveanu's works these annoying figures that can be included in a gallery of characters with a Dionysian dominance, figures that in Paleologu's terms have an introductory function, on the other hand, by comparison to them, another class of characters is delimited, those whose function far exceeds the introductory one. We are talking about those characters who cross the barrier of shallowness, who have eyes to see beyond matter, who understand things in their depth, in other words, „there are in this work, as we have shown, characters of great intellectuality, but we do not witness the manifestation of their intellectuality or their mental and moral processes” (Paleologu, 2006, p.47). Thus, we can say that between these two types of characters a certain antithesis is created, or in order to avoid the stylistic load of this word, we can talk about a certain distinction regarding their use in his works.

Obviously, the foreman Ștefan Soroceanu is one of Sadoveanu's intellectuals. As earlier mentioned, he is the prototype of the initiate, of the one who knows much more than one might think. In fact, when we talk about the historical novel of Sadoveanu, *Nunta domniței Ruxanda*, this character needs special attention. First of all, the Moldavian writer brings, through the voice of the foreman, echoes from long gone times. On the other hand, the way the novel is constructed enhances the aura of mystery in which this character is shrouded even from the beginning. From this perspective, Ștefan Soroceanu who appears in the first pages of this writing will become, along the way, the foreman Ștefan Soroceanu, an ancestor of the Soroceanu family who had spent his days in the time of Vasile Lupu. This way Sadoveanu proposes a return in time, but not one that boils down to recollections and finds fulfillment in memories. He then moves his characters, Ștefan and his younger nephew Bogdănuț Soroceanu, to a time which marks the beginnings of their family. All this transmigration, because, as shall be seen, the writer hints to this concept throughout the entire novel, has more to do with what Eugen Simion calls „Sadoveanu's magical realism”(Simion, 1976, p.5). In this way, the reader meets with Ștefan Soroceanu „who seems to live nowadays”(Sadoveanu, 2006, p.13) and also with the foreman Ștefan Soroceanu, the old man who lived in long gone times, the founder of the hermitage that Bogdănuț was supposed to inherit. This, however, does not happen before Sadoveanu inserts, more or less subtly, through behavior and reasoning, the profile of the one who was to be the guide, in a journey back to the origins, for the young offspring of the Soroceanu family. As the readers find out from the very first page of the novel, this old man „is not like any other ordinary mortals” (Sadoveanu, 2006, p.13):

„He looked at me sideways, with a crooked smile.

"After all, this is nonsense, not madness. Sound can only propagate in the atmosphere of our Earth. It could only go beyond it by means of electric waves. However, light passes through interstellar spaces and steps into infinity, carrying the image of moments. If only man could do this: to see again what light keeps and takes in its endless flight. In this way we could be able to see our ancestors's life. That's another thing I was thinking about at night, sitting alone” (Sadoveanu, 2006, p.22)

Through the voice of Ștefan Soroceanu, Sadoveanu exposes, once again, concepts a lot more complex than one might think. We have already established, at the beginning of our discussion, that this novel was written at a time when Sadoveanu had already rapidly advanced within the organization and shared the secret of Freemasonry called, in his opinion, esotericism. We consider it appropriate to recall this because in *Nunta domniței Ruxanda*, an observant eye can identify a large number of elements that come precisely from this sphere of things better left unspoken. In Soroceanu's words quoted before contain an idea that will appear throughout the novel, namely the concern for the origins, for the ancestors. In fact, Paleologu also observes the author's tendency to always return to the past



and explains it in the following way: „the nostalgia of the original does not mean, as it was thought, passeism, but the representation of a model. The feeling of the past is the memory of humanity” (Paleologu, 2006, p.53). For Soroceanu, as well as for other characters built by Sadoveanu who will follow him, the past represents a way of defining himself. In order to access this definition, Sadoveanu offers light as the primary vehicle. Thus, Soroceanu meditates on a mechanism of capturing and deciphering light, because, in his theory, light is the carrier of life to infinity. But with Sadoveanu light does not appear only once and, each time it does, its meaning must be sought in its deepest layer. A Mason in the highest degree speaking of light cannot overlook the substantial load that this word has in the organization of which he is a part: „Light is an important word in the Masonic system. It has a much more hidden meaning than most readers think. In fact, light is the first of the symbols presented to the neophyte and will continue to appear, in different forms, throughout his Masonic career. It does not only mean, as it is believed, truth and wisdom, but it contains an allusion to the very essence of Freemasonry” (Mackey, 1919, p.469). In other words, if we take into account this definition of light that Albert Mackey gives in *An Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry*, not only the meaning of the discussion between Ștefan Soroceanu and his nephew might change, but even the way of understanding the whole novel would be a completely different one. From this perspective, we consider that it is appropriate to discuss Simuț's opinion, who sees in Sadoveanu „a moment of synthesis comparable to Eminescu” (Simuț, 2012, p.45). The resemblance to Eminescu is not a coincidence. Paleologu also notices it in his writing dedicated to Sadoveanu. In fact, the prose writer himself „always called Eminescu «my favorite poet», and his poetry was « always at hand»” (Cernătescu, 2000). Besides the fact that the degree of intellectuality is the one that brings the two great writers closer in the eyes of those who study Sadoveanu's work, it can be said that in his writings, Eminescu's echoes cannot go unheard.

Returning to Ștefan Soroceanu's words, the old man suggests to use light as a means of knowing the lives of those who are no longer alive, which, at the same time, as we have seen, is the first symbol of masonry that the neophyte acknowledges. Thus, all this exposition can be considered a preamble of the journey that the two are going to make in time, or in other words, it can be an initiation of the initiation because in the end Bogdanuț is the one who will have known his roots as he returns to the past to find out a story he will turn into his own.

The foreman Soroceanu proves to be a true initiate, and the substance of his words contains the sap of a much older and deeper teaching, a teaching that finds its roots in the old esoteric mysteries. In fact, we can consider that this character anticipates to some extent the figures of the initiates Kesarion Breb and Plato from Sakkoudion who will dominate the novel *Creanga de aur*:

*„As we stand now, here, in this meadow and near this spring, feasting and talking, so I have often stood in the Land of the Talians, and in the Lechi, and in Muscali, and in the Turks, and I have befriended people. And at the age of thirty I passed from Tsarigrad to Anatolia and, with a caravan of faithful Christians and Muslims, I reached the holy ground. I had a great time, filling my soul with sweetness, and I stayed there for a year. And from there I traveled to Egypt and stopped in the city of Alexandria for four years. Being very eager to learn, that's where I found my teachers. There were Greeks and Jews who knew all the science of the world and had secret teachings which common people do not even suspect. I was their apprentice and I obeyed them with faith. I learned a lot from them, and two things I learned in particular. First of all that people are brothers, but they have in them the demon of stupidity and misunderstanding. Secondly, that there is one God and one only above all. [...] It was not the languages I learned that were useful to me, but mostly these truths” (Sadoveanu, 2006, p.51).*



As it is obvious from this quote, two fundamental ideas emerge when it comes to this character of the Moldavian writer. In the first place there clearly emphasized the initiation into occult mysteries in the area of Egypt, and secondly, the fraternity, equality and the fact that "there is one God above all" are brought into discussion.

Once again, placing the character in the midst of a mystery-carrying civilization that is the source of most secret doctrines is not accidental or innocent. Soroceanu is, indisputably, an initiate who acquired the teachings of Egypt. In fact, „Egypt has always been considered the homeland of mysteries. This is where the initiation ceremonies were established. Here the truth was first dressed in allegory, and religious dogmas were shared in the form of symbols. From Egypt [...] this system of symbols spread to Greece, Rome and other countries in Europe and Asia, giving birth, after many intermediate stages, to that mysterious association which is today represented by the Institution of Freemasonry” (Mackey, 1919, p.242). Therefore, Egypt was a point of interest for Freemasons because it can be considered „the cradle of that mysterious science of the symbols whose means of perpetuating, only they, of all modern institutions, have preserved up to this day” (Mackey, 1919, p.262). Hence the idea that the Mason Sadoveanu does not accidentally choose Egypt as the place of initiation of his character. Moreover, in support of the same idea, the foreman Soroceanu says that following these teachings he learned two truths which he holds very dear, „that men are brothers” and that „there is one God an one only above all." But can't one find in these words the basic principles which guide the Freemasonry? The Romanian Freemasonry Constitution clearly states the so-called principle of fraternity as being „the love that must bind all people, being all an emanation of the same cause, working together to achieve the same goal”(Ștefănescu, 2009, p.238).

All things considered, it can be said that in this novel, Sadoveanu creates a gallery of characters who, on a closer look, prove to be bearers of a wisdom that comes from ancient times. Using this characters, the writer reveals himself - to those who are willing to understand- as an initiate in mysteries that transcends the barriers of time and history.



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