

Lucian CHIȘU\*

## Panait Istrati and His posterity in European Dictionaries



### Abstract

Romanian and French writer, Panait Istrati (1884 - 1935) gained recognition after being published in the Parisian Magazine "Europe", occasion on which the famous Romain Rolland wrote about him, declaring that Panait Istrati is a "Gorki of the Balkans". In less than a decade, his novels were translated in the main European languages, while his work, containing pronounced autobiographical accents, became the source of interesting aesthetical and ideational debates. The Dictionaries of the time retain those moments, to which we can add the many episodes of his involvement in the most important events of the time. A writer of real vocation and a conscience of his time, Panait Istrati became a European "rebel", after his rejection of Communism, reflected in his book "Confession for the vanquished" (1929), which condemned communism in its Stalinist version. He can be said to have preceded Solzhenitsyn, and considered as a real dissident. The echoes of the life and work of Panait Istrati have endured through time until the contemporary period, always being interpreted from so many different perspectives, that, even after the writer's biological passing, his work still seems to pay the price for his courage of telling the truth.

Keywords: Romanian literature, French literature, Romain Rolland, Europe, ideology, Panait Istrati, Solzhenitsyn, European dictionaries and encyclopaedias

I. The life and work of Panait Istrati (10 August 1884, Brăila – 15 April 1935, Bucharest), has always offered grounds for constant commentary, debate and reflection for lovers of literature, as well as for researchers of the literary phenomenon at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Fate has sealed his short existence of only 50 years, and, as Istrati's work is emphatically autobiographical in character, some of the omens foretold by the Fates echo throughout its content.

In brief, we could say that the author was condemned to perpetually start all over again. Born from a perennial Romanian peasant woman and a Greek smuggler, the future writer started from very humble origins, and the squalor of the slums of his childhood continued to haunt him. He barely completed the four years of primary school, continuing his instruction at the harsh school of life<sup>1</sup>. The first phase in the Odyssey of this Wallachian Ulysses, if we

\* Universitatea Spiru Haret București. Comunicare susținută în cadrul Simpozionului internațional Cartea. România.Europa, 20-24 sept. 2009, București.

<sup>1</sup> He was, alternatively, shop and errand boy, apprentice in the dock workshops (mechanic, locksmith, brazier), day labourer at the State Fisheries, worker in a rope factory, than porter in the port at Giurgiu. He travelled as a stowaway on ships sailing the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. He befriended tramps in Syria, Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, Greece, Italy. He was a night watchman at a hotel in the Lacul Sarat resort, becoming after while secretary of the workers' trade union in the Braila port and strike organizer, and later sandwich-man, valet, internationalist socialist agitator, orderly, farmer, house painter, travelling actor, embankment worker. He worked in a 'neutral' Swiss armament factory, which he left in order to be a tractor driver in the canton of Valois. He was a travelling photographer and, whenever necessary, a journalist. 'Jack-of-all-trades, master of none', as Istrati writes somewhere

may call him so, reaches a dramatic end. Tired of so much struggling and crushed under life's hardships, forsaken by the few friends he had ever had, Panaït Istrati attempts to take his own life<sup>2</sup>. Invoking destiny, we might say that in the dawn of that Mediterranean morning the wretched existence of a misfortunate soul came to an end. The identity of the Romanian subject Gherasim Panaït Istrati flows into the ground together with the blood shed onto the park alley, but, as the suicide is rescued at the last minute, the life returning to his body which is shaking spasmodically belongs to another person. The miracle of this unexpected substitution was fulfilled, shortly after the event, by Romain Rolland. Moved by the Romanian's suffering, Rolland discovers, in the long confession addressed to him, the torment and the epic seething of artistic genius. The disappointed, hopeless tramp is replaced by the writer full of ideals, whom his protector and mentor labels as 'a Gorki of the Balkans'<sup>3</sup>, thus prefacing the Romanian's triumphal entrance, by the main gate, into European literature.

Istrati's life restarts from scratch and his name and meteoric fame gain recognition at the top of European literature. Reversing the course of things in the Greek epic poems, from now on he finds himself in the middle of *The Iliad*. Glory (in capitals) becomes his companion. He publishes, one after the other, in French or/and Romanian, *Chira Chiralina* (1924), *Uncle Anghel* (1924), *Past and Future* (1925), *The Outlaws* (2 volumes 1925, 1926), *Codin* (1926), *Mihail*

(1927), *The Perlmutter Family* (1927, in collaboration with Josué Jéhouda), *Neranțula* (1927), *The Thistles of the Baragan Plain* (1928), *The Sponge Fisher* (1930), *Aunt Minca* (1931), *The Thüringer House* (1932), *The Employment Agency* (1933), *The Mediterranean* (2 volumes 1934, 1935).

Within only a decade his work is translated in several scores of countries. He is held in honour and giddy with the strong wine of success. All literary salons open their doors to him. His writing sells very well and he could become rich if he were not so reckless about money. He spends in a kind of frenzy, as the prose writer knows from his former self, the tramp, that happiness derives not from money, but from good health, friendship, and, above all, freedom.

In 1927, his disappointment makes him 'leave France,' his adoptive literary country.

He visits the Soviet Union, and, always unable to be enthused by chimeras and utopias, he affirms in *L'Humanité*, with the full force of his passionate convictions: 'I saw the celebration of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary [of the October Revolution] and I wept for joy. I simply wept'. But he discovers very soon that he has been mistaken and has the courage to admit to his misconstruction in *Spovedanie pentru învinși / Confession for the Defeated* (1929). The book is among the first indictments of communist and Stalinist totalitarianism articulated by an enormously popular writer. We must stress the fact that other important European writers, enjoying an equally considerable public

2 The echoes of the New Year's Eve still lingered in Nice on the morning of 3 January 1921, when, in front of Prince Albert's statue, the Romanian slashes his jugular with a razor. For those who do not believe in destiny, an amazing detail must be added: it was a child that came to the suicides rescue, more precisely a little girl who was strolling with her grandfather. She sees the body collapsed in a pool of blood and draws her companion's attention to the tragedy. The girl was of Romanian origin, and her parents, impressed by the terrible attempt witnessed by their daughter, bought a camera for the one who had tried to end his life, in the hope that he could use it to make a living.

3 In one pocket of his coat, the rescuers find, besides his justificatory note, a long, heart-rending confession addressed to the French writer Romain Rolland. It was not this letter in the suicide's pocket that reached its purpose, as the legend has it, but another one, held by the journalist Fernand Desprès, from *L'Humanité*. After the suicidal incident, Desprès writes Rolland a few lines attached to the Romanian's epistle, lines containing the expression 'a Gorki of the Balkans'. The journalist's description becomes notorious due to Romain Rolland, who puts it into circulation in his preface to Istrati's debut in the review 'Europe' (15 August 1923), with the short-story *Chira Chiralina*.

popularity, can also see the truth...but choose to keep silent.

The Soviets understand almost immediately that, as far as Panait Istrati is concerned, it is not merely a moment's whim (as in the case of other writers), and respond by a torrent of calumny. The climactic moment is represented by the metaphorical back-stabbing operations carried out by Henri Barbusse, Vladimir Maiakovski<sup>4</sup>, Ilyia Ehrenburg, Bela Illes, Leonid Leonov<sup>5</sup> and many others<sup>6</sup>. After having labelled him, in an earlier article, as 'a writer of the proletariat', Barbusse then describes Istrati not as a mere traitor, but worse, as 'a bandit of the political police'. Conversely, the Romanian press brands him as 'an agent of Moscow'.

Once again abandoned by his friends, suspected and marginalised by the people around him, Istrati confesses, shortly before his death, leaving us in no wonder about why his life was so short: 'devoid of any faith, my soul gropes in an unfathomable darkness'. The writer can no longer believe in anything or espouse any cause, except faithfully serving his art, which he defines thus: 'in the obscurity of life, art is our only light, and maybe the only hope of universal improvement (...), capable of changing, in the course of centuries, the ugly face of the world. Of all emotional and spiritual values underlying life of a superior order, art is that which contains the most love, purity

and sincerity, art is the only thing which never deceives us'.<sup>7</sup> These words represent a veritable testimonial addressed by the writer to those still willing to listen to him. After a long suffering, Panait Istrati's heart stops beating on 16 April 1935.

But his ordeal is not over yet. There begins an equally unsettled posterity of his work, itself condemned to start all over again several times. All the political regimes which rise to power feel it their duty to settle the accounts with the writer. The legionary government removes the commemorative plaque from the façade of the house at No. 3 Palacologu Street, where he had lived the last years of his life. The legionaries ban his books, which are subjected to public burning, together with those of Mihail Sadoveanu. At the end of the legionary rebellion the plaque is put back in its place, but the same marble plate is smashed (for the sake of safety) under the communist regime, and another one is set in its place after 1989.

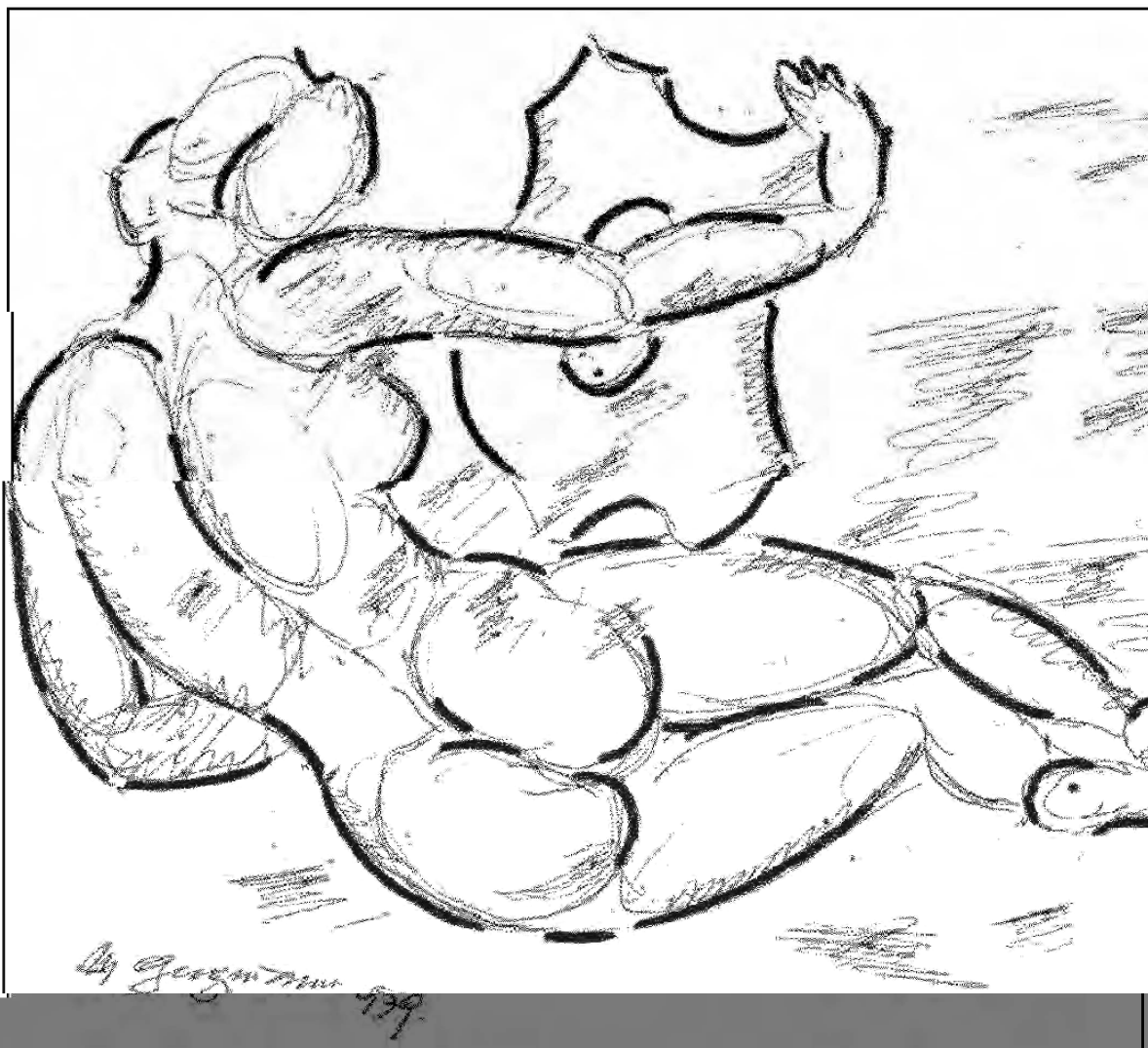
A few decades of silence pass by. Istrati's work re-enters the public circuit in Romania, but it is censored of everything that might upset the big brother to the East. In Europe, the Cold War, unfolding on a large front, always has Istrati in view. And his work was to represent, during all those years, a kind of barometer of the relationship, sometimes more relaxed, sometimes more tense, between the two blocs.

4 Maiakovski publishes in the Moscow satirical magazine "Ciudak" (No. 3, January 1929), the poem *It Is Said That*, from which we quote: 'Barbusse is offended. For criticism's sake, he claims / We quarrel in vain? / I, says he, am not a French Panait Istrati / I am a Spanish Lev Tolstoi. / They say in criticism they are running out of names - / There is no one left to make comparisons with any more! / Therefore Istrati Panait, this Gorki of the Balkans, / Will be called from now on a Dostoyevsky of Ireland / ...' (see Serghei Feodosiev, *Panait Istrati and Vladimir Maiakovski*, in *Panait Istrati – the Man who Adheres to Nothing (documents from Soviet Russia)*, Istros Publishing House – The Brăila museum, "Panait Istrati" Memorial House, Brăila, 1996, Vol. I, pp. 97-101.

5 In a letter of 1993, answering a question addressed to him by Serghei Feodosiev, Leonid Leonov, aged 94, states: '...As you see, Istrati and I are writers from different schools. As for the signatures under the article from "Literaturnaia Gazeta", 1929, which you are referring to, the very enumeration of such different writers raises legitimate doubt about their agreement on the respective issue' (op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 296).

6 Those who signed the protest in the "Literaturnaia Gazeta" (No. 20, November 1929, p. 1) are: Vsevolod Ivanov, N. Ognev, Leonid Leonov, V. Lidiit, Iuri Olesă, V. Maiakovski, Valentin Kataev, I. Serviski, Aleksandr Iakovlev, Abraham Efros, Vera Inber, Pantelimon Romanov, P. S. Kogan, Serghei Budanțev, K. Zelinski, E. Bagritski, E. Zozulia.

7 from the lecture entitled *The Arts and Today's Humanity*, 3-17 febr. 1933, Deutscher Kulturbund



After 1989 we can speak about a third posterity of Istrati, also prone to false illusions. The author of *Confession for the Defeated* declared not long before his death: 'One of the characteristics of communism is that, when it does not end up by mortally disgusting an honest intellectual, it ends up by making him fatally stupid'<sup>8</sup>. Despite this fact, there still appear frequent books analysing the communist ideology, whose authors feel it their duty to 'administer a blow' to Istrati, too, just because they found records of his activity, detached from any finality.

We consider his life and work equally

important, as they embody an existential and artistic model in which we can easily discern the dissident in a pure state, who professes his discontent with a political regime not because he supports another, but because he is more generally dissatisfied, with the idea that injustice is as old as the world and society is far from perfect.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the writer and his work have yet to find their peace.

II. This synthetic presentation of the life and work of Panait Istrati, which has purposefully avoided other numerous litigious

8 "The Crusade of Romanian-ism", No. 16, 21 March 1935 (see Panait Istrati, *My Crusade or Ours*, Delta Press, Cluj, 1992, p. 161).



aspects<sup>9</sup>, is meant as an induction to the crux of our presentation from the aforementioned perspective, that of the writer's literary destiny. Our opinion is that it is not adventure that essentially defines Istrati's literary becoming, but his relationship with reading, with books, and, by extension, with the library. This idea is also shared by other exegetes of his work, among whom we must mention Mircea Iorgulescu<sup>10</sup>, because he was the first, chronologically speaking, to draw attention to this aspect.

Pursuing this hypothesis and line of argument has to overcome prejudices which are deeply-rooted in the mind of readers and even researchers and literary historians. Istrati's image has often been associated with that of a tramp, it is true, a greatly talented one, but still a tramp. His literary creation is imbued with biographical details, and, in many of its aspects, by a deep probing into the lightless depths of the social ocean, from where poverty, promiscuity, vice, let alone wrongs and injustice, have been brought to light in the pure state of artistic emotion.

From this much marginalised, almost infernal world of Istrati's work, "the fisher" brings to the surface innumerable samples of humanity, haloed by the cult of friendship and sweet-scented with the gifts of story-telling. This is what the artistic mira-

cle consist in, but the presence of so many oppressive scenes, as well as the feeling that the author actually lived them, come to distort the real image of one considered to be either *a tramp of genius* or *a pilgrim of the heart*. To counteract this prejudice, some corrective remarks are necessary:

1. It is enough for one to look at the photographs<sup>11</sup> of Istrati. There is no trace of the tramp, but always an elegant man, well-groomed almost to pedantry.

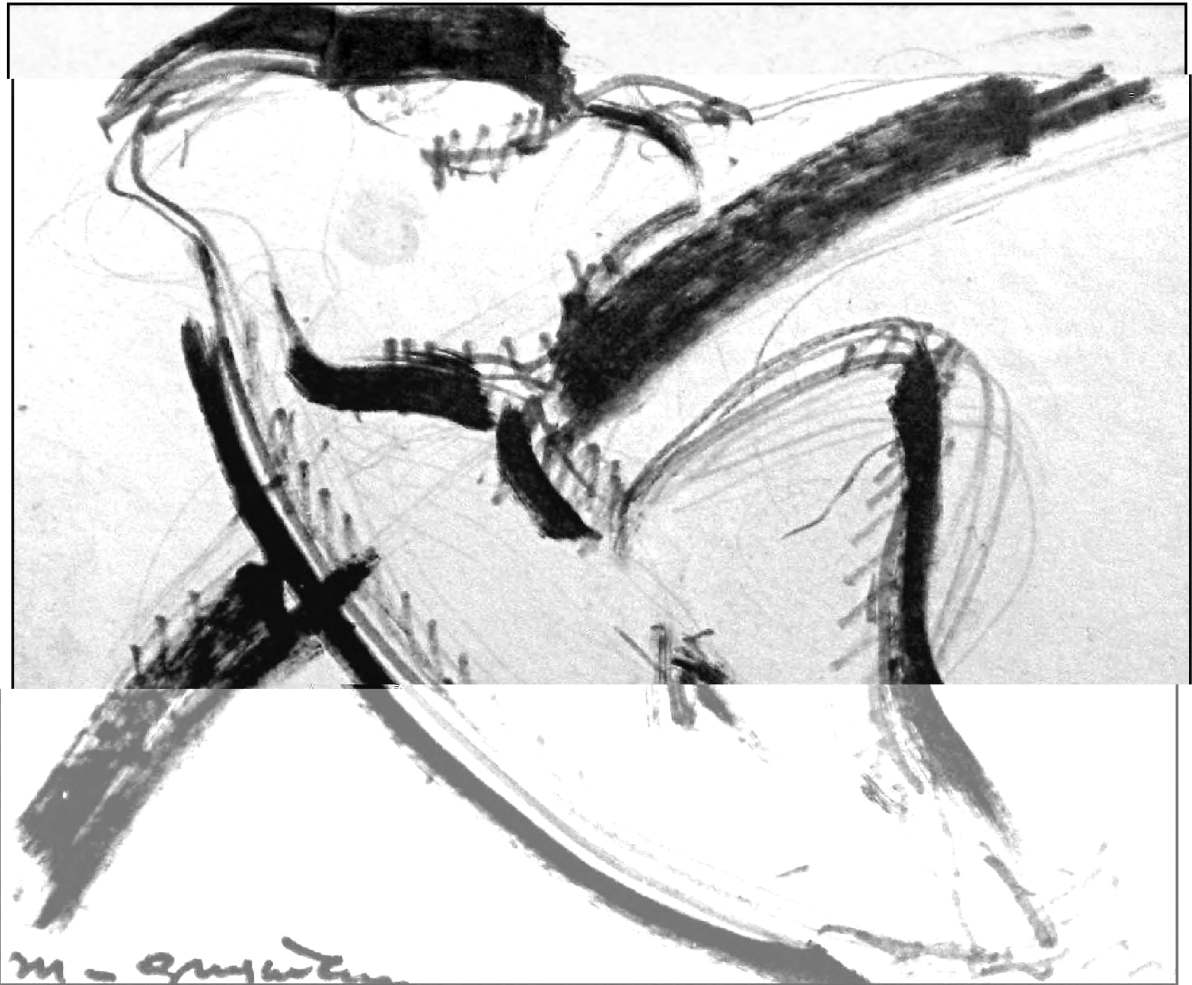
2. Whoever examines with close interest the generous iconography of Istrati, will notice that in the representative images showing him in the foreground he is invariably in the company of books, in the featuring as his devoted friends. To begin with, we should evoke the photograph taken in Paris, at No. 24 Rue de Colisée, in which, beside his own books, we can distinguish tomes from the work of Mihail Sadoveanu. Then, the photographs taken in Brăila, as well as those showing the interior of the rooms at No. 3 Paleologu Street, his last Bucharest residence, display the same atmosphere. The camera always captures him surrounded by the warmth of the shelves piled with books. They are not a mere stage set, but allow the researcher to reconstruct accurately enough the atmosphere surrounding the writing desk.

3. The intellectual training of the future

<sup>9</sup> Among the sore points of Istrati's work, one is represented by the debate regarding its belonging to Romanian culture and literature. A contentious issue, it is complicated by the conviction held by many that Istrati is a Romanian storyteller and a French language writer. At least this is how he is presented in his country of literary adoption, and the French public's ignoring of his Romanian side of his personality as a writer might be explained by their poor knowledge of the Romanian people. Indeed, Panait Istrati wrote in both languages. He started as a journalist for the socialist press in our country, but the great writer was discovered by Romain Rolland, who solemnized his literary baptism. But the greatest part of his work was written in French. After the unsuccessful attempt of a translator to translate *Chira Chiralina* into Romanian, Istrati resorted to rewriting his short story *Uncle Anghel* for the readers in his home country. In the same year, 1925, he writes directly in Romanian the admirable volume of autobiography *Past and Future*. Between 1931 and 1935 he publishes, proceeding in the same way, *Aunt Minca*, *The Employment Agency*, *Chira Chiralina*, *Codin*, and the posthumous volumes *In the Master's Service*, *The Sponge Fisher*, *The Thistles of the Baragan Plain*, (the first chapter, the rest in the translation of Alexandru Talex). The numerous conflicts arisen after 1929 and the writer's untimely death left him not respite to finish rewriting the 'French' into Romanian. Consequently, the task was taken up by publishers, exegetes and translators.

<sup>10</sup> *Spre alt Istrati*, Minerva Publishing, 1986, *Celălalt Istrati*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> There are hundreds of pictures of Panait Istrati, because, after his suicide attempt, the future writer worked as a photographer in Nice, on the Promenade des Anglais, a trade and hobby he never abandoned.



writer represents another prejudice. Besides the iconographic arguments, which reveal him as a passionate reader, there are his memorable pages dedicated to books, pages on which Mircea Iorgulescu focuses in his immensely revealing monograph entitled *Spre alt Istrati / Towards Another Istrati*, recently republished. Considering that that the writer is mainly known as a world wanderer, the assertion must be endorsed by further arguments. The prevalent opinion is that Istrati travelled too much to be able to grow roots, and, after all, *the road becomes the traveller*, as the proverb goes. However incredible this may sound, Istrati-the-tramp was a most passionate reader, for whom reading<sup>12</sup> becomes a form of reverie and freedom, at least for the imagination. If it is

not easy to picture Istrati immersed in books, the pros being scarce in comparison with the cons, especially since the latter are deeply ingrained in the almost general prejudice, one thing is certain, though: Istrati's intellectual instruction is that of a self-taught man who compensated by himself his precarious formal education, hypothetically completing his secondary and college education – as it has already been said – at the harsh school of life.

He is known to have hardly completed his four-year primary education, in the course of six years. In reality – and it is Mircea Iorgulescu's merit to have been the first to observe this – Istrati was, above all, a man of books. In the chapter so suggestively entitled *The Son of Books*, Mircea

12 Even the *School Register* of the failed schoolboy reveals that at Reading he had constantly got the highest grade.



Iorgulescu is the first exegete to remark on this huge appetite for reading, drawing all the right conclusions necessary for outlining the intellectual profile of the future prose writer. The monographer places Istrati's destiny under the sign of the book. In this sense, he evokes the period spent in Kir Nicola's public house, where the errand boy receives from his older friend, the ship captain Mavromati, a magic gift: The Universal Dictionary of the Romanian Language, by Lazăr Șăineanu. A curious gift for the twelve-year-old boy, accustomed to run about the public house on the bank of

the Danube, whenever a customer called: 'Boy, bring a steamin'un!' During the short respite of the lunch-break, when the other servants dozed off with their heads on the table, the child would greedily read the newspapers left behind by the customers. Many of the words in the newspapers were unknown to him, and the old Mavromati, amazed by the boy's consuming fire, presents him with the dictionary. After the last customers leave and the pub closes for the night, the future teenager pursues his passion for reading till daybreak, by the light of sizzling candle ends, under the shelter of an

13 Kir Leonida's public house endured through time. Almost in ruins, it still stands today on the edge of the former Greek quarter of Brăila, known for its parties with musicians and its pleasure houses. The subterranean vault under the pub, which extended way beyond the perimeter of the building, has been covered. What still survives from the time of the writer's childhood is the vine which gave shade for the tables in the yard. And for some time there still stood the walls of the attic where the child had written with charcoal brought from the kitchen near the stove the words which he did not understand.

umbrella<sup>13</sup>.

Not long after his days as an errand boy come to an end, Istrati meets his future friend Mihail Mihailovici Kazanski. The meeting takes place under the same sign of the book, and it is evoked in detail by Mircea Iorgulescu. The critic also shows that in Alexandria (in Egypt), the tramp buys, from a poor devil like himself, with his last money, Tolstoi's novel *The Resurrection*. In 1907, while still wandering in Damascus, he makes a real fuss because none of those around him, from mere mortals to the local wise men, knows who the author of *Hamlet* was<sup>14</sup>. In Napoli, the stowaway is caught and disembarked from the ship bound for Marseille. The customs officers find in his suitcase *The Life of Socrates* and Eminescu's *Poems*. In 1916 he moves to Switzerland<sup>15</sup>. Locked in a little room, Istrati familiarises himself with the French language by reading, with the aid of a dictionary, Fénelon, Rousseau, Voltaire, Pascal, Montaigne. Here are only a few of the arguments that entitles Mircea Iorgulescu to assert: *'The intoxication of books is, if we are to really understand him, infinitely more powerful than the intoxication of the eternal departures, just as his steadfast attachment to books is infinitely more important than his constant fondness of wandering. In Istrati the wanderer we have to see first of all Istrati the reader, the former changing a hundred temporary jobs, the latter pursuing a unique, stable, passionate calling'*<sup>16</sup>.

There are, therefore, solid arguments in favour of considering him a great lover of books, a passion in which he immersed himself especially in the latter part of his life, when his financial means permitted him to buy books to his heart's desire.

4. A further argument in favour of our

hypothesis is provided by the tomes in his library. First, it must be said that Istrati's library was scattered to the four winds. After becoming a successful author, the writer enjoyed an extraordinary celebrity, manifested editorially by concomitant translations from his work in several languages. Translated in numerous countries and rewarded by the friendship of some of the greatest writers of the time, Istrati begins to receive their books at the address of his friend Ionescu, at 24 Rue de Colisée. They remained in the rooms of the building after the death his old friend. Other books remained permanently in the house at 2 Rue Massena in Nice. A suitcase containing the most precious of the books he had received was entrusted to the care of other friends, before his departure to the Soviet Union in 1927. A great many of the books in his library were in Brăila, in the custody of Nicu Constantinescu, a friend from his youth. During Panait Istrati's lifetime, he had set up a room with memorial significances, where the books were given pride of place. Finally, his last library was set up in Paleologu Street, in the four little rooms, as small as matchboxes, but crammed with books. These were kept as precious relics by his last wife, Margareta Istrati, and were later transferred to the Memorial House in his native town, Brăila. These are the only ones still existing, available to be admired and studied at leisure in the museum-house<sup>17</sup>.

5. A small part of this library constitutes a bibliophilic section of rare books. Many of the existing volumes were printed in countries where bibliophily had become a fashion. The volumes contain original illustrations, made on special types of paper and in

14 The incident is recounted in *Apus de soare / Sunset*, which is part of the second volume of *In the Mediterranean World* (1935).

15 Tudor Arghezi and Tristan Tzara were also there, Arghezi crafting watch-cases, while Istrati drove a tractor in the canton of Valois. In the cabaret where Tzara was to launch his revolutionary manifesto, had strayed the steps of Vladimir Ilici Ulianov, better known under the name of Lenin. Each man with his revolution.

16 *Spre alt Istrati / Towards Another Istrati*, 1986, the edition quoted, p. 75.

17 Here we find books with dedications from his friends, foreign and Romanian writers: Romain Rolland, Jean-Richard Bloch, Fr. Lefèvre, J. Jéhouda, A. M. De Yong, Mihail Sadoveanu, George Topârceanu, Demostene Botez, Mihai Codreanu, Otilia Cazimir, G. Bacovia, Aron and George Cotruș.



limited editions<sup>18</sup>. From Panait Istrati's library were kept the copies numbered as 1 from the bibliophile editions (limited) of the books *Chira Chiralina* and *Uncle Anghel*, published by the Parisian publishing house Rieder on Van Gelder Dutch paper. Margareta Istrati confessed to me that, since their coming out in 1924, the writer never parted from these two books. They were the author's most treasured copies, which he piously carried in his suitcase all over the world<sup>19</sup>.

6. Finally, the library did not lack dictionaries and anthologies, of which the most worthy of attention are: the famous *Littre*, *The Universal Dictionary of the French Language*, in three volumes, a very bulky *Dictionary for Self-Taught Men*, in two volumes, and the *Anthology of Tradesmen-Writers*, that is different from those who began directly as writers. The anthology also contains a few pages from his work.

Therefore we can say that, despite his adventurous existence, Panait Istrati was a passionate reader, a true *man of books*.

III. In the final section of our paper we shall briefly refer to the posterity of Istrati's work. Does the author remain in the memory of future generations? Can his artistic message keep its value intact? What significations are lost or are added to the profoundly autobiographic character of his oeuvre? These, and others, could offer an edifying answer. But on the one hand, the extremely dispersed information, sporadically expanding over more than half a century, and, on the other hand, the authentic mutations, including those of mentality, produced in the wake of the media revolution (through the new communication technologies) make an exhaustive research virtually impossible. In spite of all this, even an 'overview' of the thematic subject could prove beneficial.

18 From the same category of rare, bibliophilic books, were kept in the writer's library: *Presentation des Haïdoucs*, published by Rieder (copy H from the series 15 noted marked from A to Q, on Van Gelder paper and not distributed on the market; a copy *hours commerce* from the short-story *Kir Nicolas*, printed by Sablier Publishing House and illustrated by Picart Ledoux (general edition of 758 copies); *Domnița de Snagov*, *Codin*, *Chira Chiralina* in Bulgarian (copy no. 1 from the 4-copy edition of the translator, a childhood friend of the Istrati); *Issac*, Joseph Heissler, 1927, Strasbourg copy no. 7 *hours commerce* with the drawings of Dignimont, of which several coloured by the painter Paul Iské. Among them, there are also *Les Chardons du Baragan* (copy 1) Grasset, 1928, on Annam de Rives paper; *Mes departs*, printed by Gallimard, 1928, in an edition of only 905 copies, *Vers l'autre flamme* (Rieder, 1929, copy no. 24 of the limited edition of 25, on Madagascar type paper, *Pescuitorul de bureți/The Sponge Fisher*, 1930, in Dutch (715-copy edition) and *Tsatsa Minca/Aunt Minca*, volume published by Mornay in 735 copies. The latter has a rather interesting (literary) story. The illustrator of the edition was the Swiss painter and photographer H. de Boissonas. Boissonas, who, among other things, was the first cousin of Billili (Marie-Louise Bad-Bouvy) came to Brăila to do research for the book. The watercolours in the volume, considered 'charming, but lacking originality' (see "L'Arc", no. 86/87, 1984, p. 182) are actually so faithful to reality that even today the visitor of the museum-house can check the detailed similitude between the anthropomorphic lions of the Thuringer House, nearby and the illustration in the book. On the occasion of the centenary of the writer's birth, the members of the Association of French bibliophile Pharmacists commissioned the engraver from Timișoara V. Pintea to make the illustrations for the bibliophilic volume *Ciulinii Bărgănelui*. In fact, the writer's wife obtained other bibliophilic copies published long after the Istrati's death and added to the book collection: *Chira-Chiralina* and *Moș Anghel*, printed in France (1958) by The Associated Book Traders, *Ciulinii Bărgănelui*, printed on paper *bouffant de luxe* in Switzerland, by Famot, with illustrations by Jean Kerlérroux.

19 Unfortunately, the copy from the regular edition of *Chira Chiralina*, bought by Istrati when it came out in the bookshops, was lost. On the guard page, Istrati had written the following words, as a kind of testament: 'This copy, come out in the bookshop windows today, was bought by the two of us, each contributing 3 francs and 50 centimes and leaving 25 de centimes tip for the shop-assistant, so that he, too, can be happy in his own way, just as we are happy in our own way. Panait Istrati, Paris, 30 May 1924, in a bistro in Saint-Germain de Prés Square and near Diderot's statue, who, from his pedestal, tells the honourable prelates a disagreeable history'. Next to the title, Istrati had added: 'copy not for sale'. The only evidence of the existence of this self-dedication on the volume is the sale offer for this book (accompanied by the facsimile text) at an Parisian auction house.

After the writer's death, his work actively continued its destiny. Confining ourselves solely to his presence in the last sixty years, Alexandru Talex<sup>20</sup> offers in the volume *Panait Istrati, Cum am devenit scriitor/How I Became a Writer*, an impressive bibliography of a few thousand titles. Concentrating the seventy pages of Romanian and foreign bibliographic references, it results that fragments or the writer's work as a whole have been included in diverse anthologies, arousing the interest of numerous publishers from all continents. If we limit the references to the European space, Panait Istrati was massively published in Czech Republic, Slovakia, Denmark, Switzerland, Holland, Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Sweden, Hungary, Germany, Great Britain.

The year of the centenary of the writer's birth, 1984, represents, as was to be expected, a corollary of the preoccupation for the man and his work. The writer is reclaimed by the cultures of three countries (Romania, France, Greece) and celebrated with pomp in four. Switzerland joins the aforementioned countries.

If his belonging to the Romanian and French cultures is certified by Panait Istrati himself, the Greeks<sup>21</sup> invoke his paternal blood ancestry. We do not think we would be mistaken in saying that after the author's departure in the world of shadows, Istrati's work became a bridge between three cultures. At the same time, he raises the same vivid interest in other countries as well. It is significant that translations from his work continue to be a priority in European countries. This is what happens in Turkey, where the success of Istrati's posterity was among

the greatest. In the Czech Republic, he has been and remains one of the most frequently translated of Romanian writers, through the medium of French.

Because Istrati was a writer engaged on the socio-political front of the time he lived, what becomes particularly significant is the way in which his personality is presented in the dictionaries and encyclopaedias from the former Soviet Union, now become Russia, a country where the perception on his work and especially on the writer's life is one of the most spectacular. In the Russian culture, Istrati's destiny continues to be capricious. The perspective on his work (and life) reflects, until 1989, especially his uncompromising attitude towards Soviet politics, clearly described in these tomes. After starting by revealing his 'healthy', proletarian descent and biography<sup>22</sup>, and widely presenting his literary work, in the following year the 'climate' changes drastically, with the authors affirming: 'very soon Istrati is proved to be one of the most vicious renegades, his interviews, and then his books, becoming some stupid, cynical and counter-revolutionary calumnies'<sup>23</sup>. The treatises published in those years note that, 'returning in the West, he launched wicked calumnies against the Soviet Union and subsequently carried out counter-revolutionary propaganda, convenient for the international counter-revolution'<sup>24</sup>. Or that, 'in collaboration with Trotskyist counter-revolutionary agents, he wrote a series of revolting calumnies against the Soviet Union'<sup>25</sup>. Later, in 1966, I. A. Kojevnikov, the author of the dictionary<sup>26</sup> article about Panait Istrati,

20 Al. Talex, *Panait Istrati, Cum am devenit scriitor*, Scrisul Românesc Publishing House, Craiova, 1981, continued by the second volume at Florile Dalbe Publishing House, București, 1994. The information included does not go beyond the ninth decade of the last century, so we can assume that, if updated, the picture would be much richer.

21 Due to the biographical connection (the Greek descent of the writer's father), in Greece the centenary of his birth was celebrated with the highest honours, and the author was to be reclaimed as a son of Hellas, in the locality Faraclata on the Kefalonia island, the birthplace of Gheorghios Valsamis. After the French model, a *Panait Istrati Association* was set up there.

22 *Malaia Sovetskaia Ențiklopedia*, Moscova, 1929.

23 *Literaturnaia Ențiklopedia*, Moscova, Izdatel'stvo Kommunisteskoj Akademii, 1930, pp. 643-647.

24 *Malaia Sovetskaia Ențiklopedia*, t. 5, Moscova, Oghiz, R.S.F.S.R, 1936, p. 58.

25 *Bolșaia Sovetskaia Ențiklopedia*, R.S.F.S.R, 1937, p. 103.

26 *Kratkaia Literaturnaia Ențiklopedia*, t. 3, Moscova, Izdatel'stvo Sovetskaia Ențiklopedia, 1966.

writes among other things: 'The petit-bourgeois meaning he attached to liberty hindered the Romanian writer's understanding of the new relations between man and society which were instated in the Soviet Union after the October Revolution'. The sentence is repeated almost identically in *The Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* of 1972<sup>27</sup>.

Things have not changed too much in contemporary times, especially since the publishing of the book by Vitalii Șentalinski<sup>28</sup>, about the 'literary archives of the K.G.B.', brings up his relations with some of the Russian writers. The connection of G. Sandomirski and Boris Pilneak with the dissident writer proved fatal<sup>29</sup>.

As far as Romania is concerned, the political influence exercised authoritatively by the U.S.S.R in the countries of the communist bloc has direct consequences for the destiny of Istrati's work. Istrati will be rehabilitated in his own country after a long silence. What was necessary was a propitious moment, which coincides with the year when Hrușciiov takes the political command and officially condemns Stalin's personality cult. Against the background of a tendency of national emancipation (from the tutelage of Soviet politics), the publishing of Istrati's writings is prefaced by a short article published by Geo Bogza<sup>30</sup>. Then, a part of the work is re-edited, starting with *Ciulinii Bărăganului* (1957). The preface to the volume was the literary historian Mircea Zăciu, incidentally also the first coordinator of *Dicționar [integral] de Scriitori Români/ The Dictionary of Romanian Writers*. However, he affirms that the current against the writer's rehabilitation was still very

strong. The old reasons and the political contextualizing from *Spovedanie pentru învinși/Confession for the Defeated*, precluded any initiatives. It is again Mircea Zăciu<sup>31</sup> who explains why, even if he is included in the small dictionary elaborated by the Zăciu collective under the title *111 scriitori români* (1978), Panait Istrati is taken out at the last moment.

Istrati, the man and the work, appear properly represented, in the ample texts of analytical synthesis in *Dicționarul Scriitorilor Români*<sup>32</sup>, being fully restored him to absolutely all his rights, accompanied by a rich iconography, a synoptic table of his life and work, with critical and bibliographic references, etc. in *Dicționarul General al Literaturii Române*, (DGLR)<sup>33</sup>, edited in 2005.

Lastly, we must make a few additional observations on Istrati's posterity in France, the writer's country of literary adoption, where the Association „*Les amis de Panait Istrati*” has carried out for a few decades an intense activity of pious cultivation of the memory of the great writer. Their example complements the editorial activity of the same country, which essentially contributes to achieving a complete image of the writer's work, especially due to the extraordinary prestige that French culture enjoys in the world. As in Romania, in France the interest for Panait Istrati's life and work is manifested in a most nuanced manner. Among the numerous dictionary and encyclopaedias published over the past years, which we have been able to consult, we mention: *Dicționarul Lafont-Bompiani*, dedicated to works of literature, contains, presented in detail, the novels *Chira Chiralina* and *Ciulinii*

27 'He presented the Soviet reality in a distorting manner, which made many true friends of the U.S.S.R. to disavow the author' (*Bolșaiia Sovetskaia Ențiklopedia*, Izdatelstvo Sovetskaia Ențiklopedia, 1972, p.583)

28 Vitalii Șentalinski, *La parole ressuscitée*, Paris, Editura Robert Lafont, 1993.

29 Emil Iordache, *Panait Istrati și mâna lungă a K.G.B.-ului*, in „*Români literară*”, no. 17, 2001, p. 21.

30 Geo Bogza, *Mai mult decât fugara clipă*, în „*Contemporanul*”, 12 oct., 1956

31 *Entretien avec Mircea Zăciu*, în „*Cahiers Panait Istrati*”, no. 13, Cercle Panait Istrati, Valence, 1996, pp. 379-383.

32 *Dicționarul Scriitorilor Români*, Editura Fundației Culturale Române, București, 1996, tom. 2, pp. 215-218.

33 *Dicționarul General al Literaturii Române* (DGLR), vol. III (E/K), Univers Enciclopedic Publishers, București, 2005, pp.689-697. In all this period (1989-2009) there appear in Romanian culture tens of literary dictionaries. In each of these tomes, the author and his work are presented in rich detail, but not always with absolute objectivity.

Bărăganului. *Le Grand Larousse Universel*, (1989), recalls, besides his literary work, his 'violentul indictment against Soviet society'. The writer's presence in other Larousse series is signalled by Romulus Rusan, in a text introducing a new and outstanding *Dictionnaire du communisme*: 'From among those who remained blinded for life it mentions Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Neruda, Siqueros, Hikmet. But it also evokes the names of those who came to their senses (Panait Istrati, André Gide)<sup>34</sup>'. Brief texts on the writer's life and work also appear in *Encyclopaedia Universalis* (2002) and *Le Petit Robert* (2007)<sup>35</sup>

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Consequently, we can conclude that, separated from the human being who created it, Istrati's oeuvre continues its destiny. Its messages, the echoes of the life incorporated biographically in the writing and the reverberations of an art seen as 'our sole light and maybe our sole hope of universal perfection, (...) capable of changing, in the course of centuries, the ugly face of the world', urge us to reflect on humanity and the examples of history. A history full of examples, but in an ever greater hurry.

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