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The Romanian Village in Peter Neagoë's Short Stories

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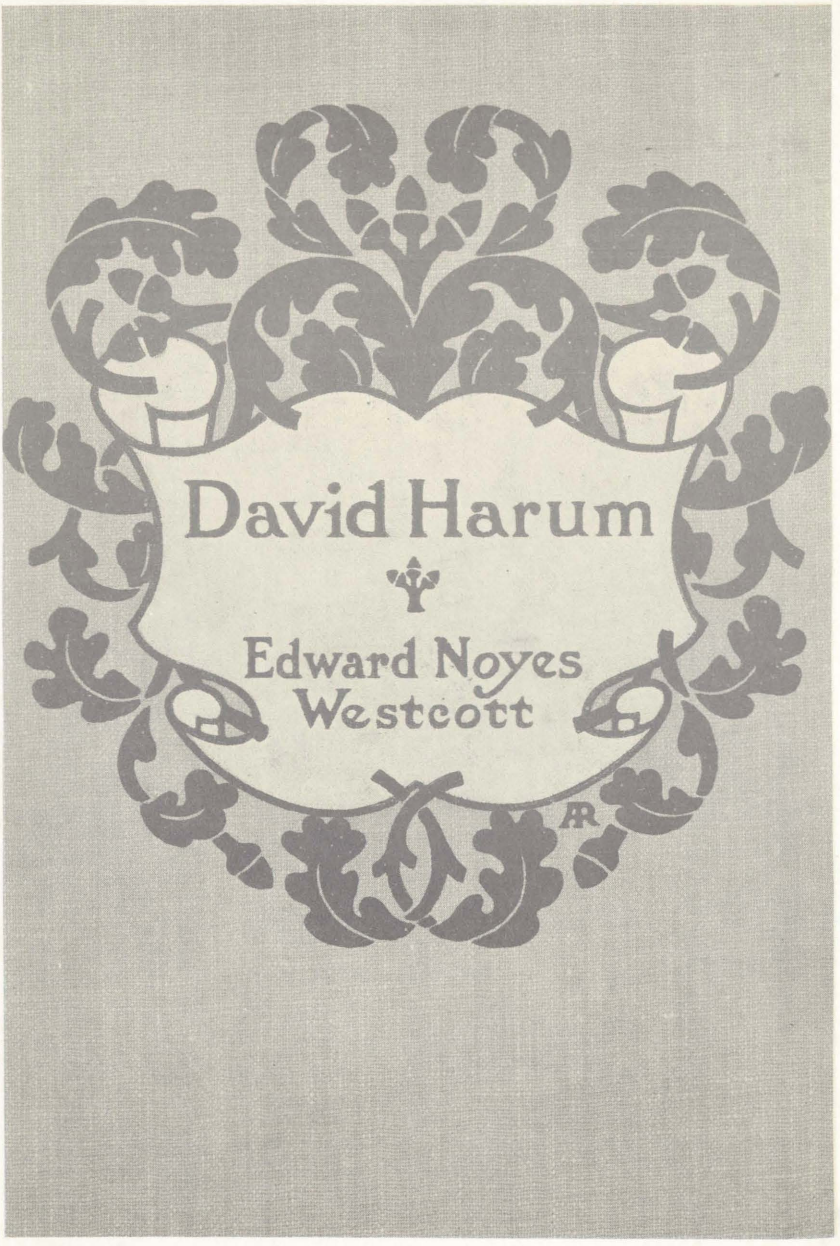

The original cover of *David Harum* – familiar to two generations of American readers. First edition, New York, D. Appleton & Company, 1898. From the Rare Book unit of the Arents Library.

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The Romanian Village in Peter Neagoë's Short Stories

by Ioan A. Popa

A Transylvanian immigrant at the beginning of the century, a painter turned writer in Paris in the late twenties, and an active force in the American expatriate movement there, Peter Neagoë (1881-1960) holds a special position in the history of letters. He was best known in the United States between 1930 and 1950 as a painter and writer, and also as the editor of an anthology of the writings of expatriates. However, because of the major theme of his novels and short stories, Neagoë belongs rather to Romanian literature. His main source of inspiration was the Transylvanian village at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Had he not written his work in English, he would have stayed in the line of Slavici, Agârbiceanu, Pavel Dan or Rebreanu, remarkable modern Romanian writers.

Syracuse University Library has a complete Peter Neagoë collection of manuscripts, letters, working sheets, published works and paintings, all presented to the University by Mrs. Anna Neagoë in 1962 and housed in the Mayfield Library. The papers are of value to literary researchers for two special reasons: 1) Neagoë's fiction concerning Romanian peasant life was much praised by critics in the thirties and forties, and represented the most notable achievement of a Romanian immigrant to this country, and 2) his activity in Paris, largely reflected by his correspondence and notes as well as the anthology, "Americans Abroad," shed fresh light on the whole expatriate movement.

Neagoë writes out of first hand experience, but he allows himself a sufficient lapse of time to have detached himself from his topics; though his main concern is to tell a story, not infrequently he lets the characters act by themselves without any interference on the part of the author. Sometimes ("Gavila's Confession," "Eyes") he makes the effort to keep himself out of sight and say nothing or very little about his characters. In other cases ("A Pattern"), he chooses a human situation of potential significance and lets it unfold in front of the reader's eyes without imposing any solution.

Mr. Popa *is a lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Cluj, Romania. During the 1971-72 academic year, he was an American Council of Learned Societies visiting research scholar affiliated with the English Department at Syracuse and pursuing his research on Peter Neagoë's life and work at the Mayfield Library.*

Peter Neagoë. Photo from the Peter Neagoë Papers in the Arents Library.

Describing country life with the grace and touch of color of a painter, Neagoë employs the terse imagery he might have acquired from the French masters in the museums of Paris or from the prose of Hemingway:

> The sleigh hummed on the smooth snow road. In the west, which they were facing, the cloud blanket was falling on the earth. It slipped over the hills and trailed on the flats. They were running into that fold of the cloud blanket. After a short time the wind came up. It came rushing on them driving snowflakes. It came stronger, the snow thick in it ("Storm," WW, p. 35).[1]

To Peter Neagoë the village is the core of life in the Transylvania of his childhood. It is an individual community, a little world in itself, frequently identified against the lack of color and uniformity of city life and representing the roots and the cradle of a nation. Aciliu is not a particular village; it is any village populated by sturdy peasants. They get up when the sun rises and work in the fields from morning until, late in the day, when the sun "is lying down," they quit, overcome by fatigue but happy with a sense of fulfilled duty. Their daily life may mean toil at the pace of the seasons, that reaches its climax in summer:

> The peasants were as active as bees in high summer. The village itself was like a hive full of honey. It was redolent with ripe straw, it glowed golden, for the wheat and rye had been harvested ("Drum Beat in Harvest Time," SS, p. 17).

At that time of the year when "children make play of useful work" and an endless tinkle pours out from the smithy and the wheels of the water mill keep turning day and night, the midday break affords rest and a sense of togetherness:

> When the sun marked midday, all activity stopped. There was a lull. Only the four water wheels at the mill turned and turned. Sitting in the shady places on the ground, the peasants ate cold string bean soup and corn mush. They scooped the soup with wooden spoons, three, four, or even six of them from the same bowl, depending on the size of the bowl. A little talk, a few words from one, a few from another man or woman, laughter too. Then the conclusion of the meal with all crossing themselves and thanking God for the daily bread ("Drum Beat in Harvest Time," SS, p. 18).

[1] Quotations are from *Winning a Wife and Other Stories,* New York, Coward McCann, 1935 (WW), and *A Selection of Stories by Peter Neagoë,* Syracuse University Library, 1969 (SS).

Work is the peasant's way of life; men and women alike work on their patch of land to provide the daily bread. There is work in the rattle of the loom or the colorful embroidery of their clothes, in their cheese making from ewe's milk up in the mountains, or in their folk art and poetry and the nostalgic music played on the shepherd's fife. They take pride in their work and, in turn, it confers dignity on them.

From there it is just a short way to a deeper age-old understanding of life and its permanent values. It is especially in the face of authority and city dwellers that the peasants find an ultimate support in the permanence of this unwritten wisdom, as they find refuge under the fragrant roof of mother nature.

But the peasant is cunning; with authorities he plays the dolt but sticks to his purpose. In "A Simple Case," Radu, the Squinter, and his two friends humbly avoid pleading guilty for the theft of a beautiful horse of the village merchant when accused of robbery not corroborated with plain evidence:

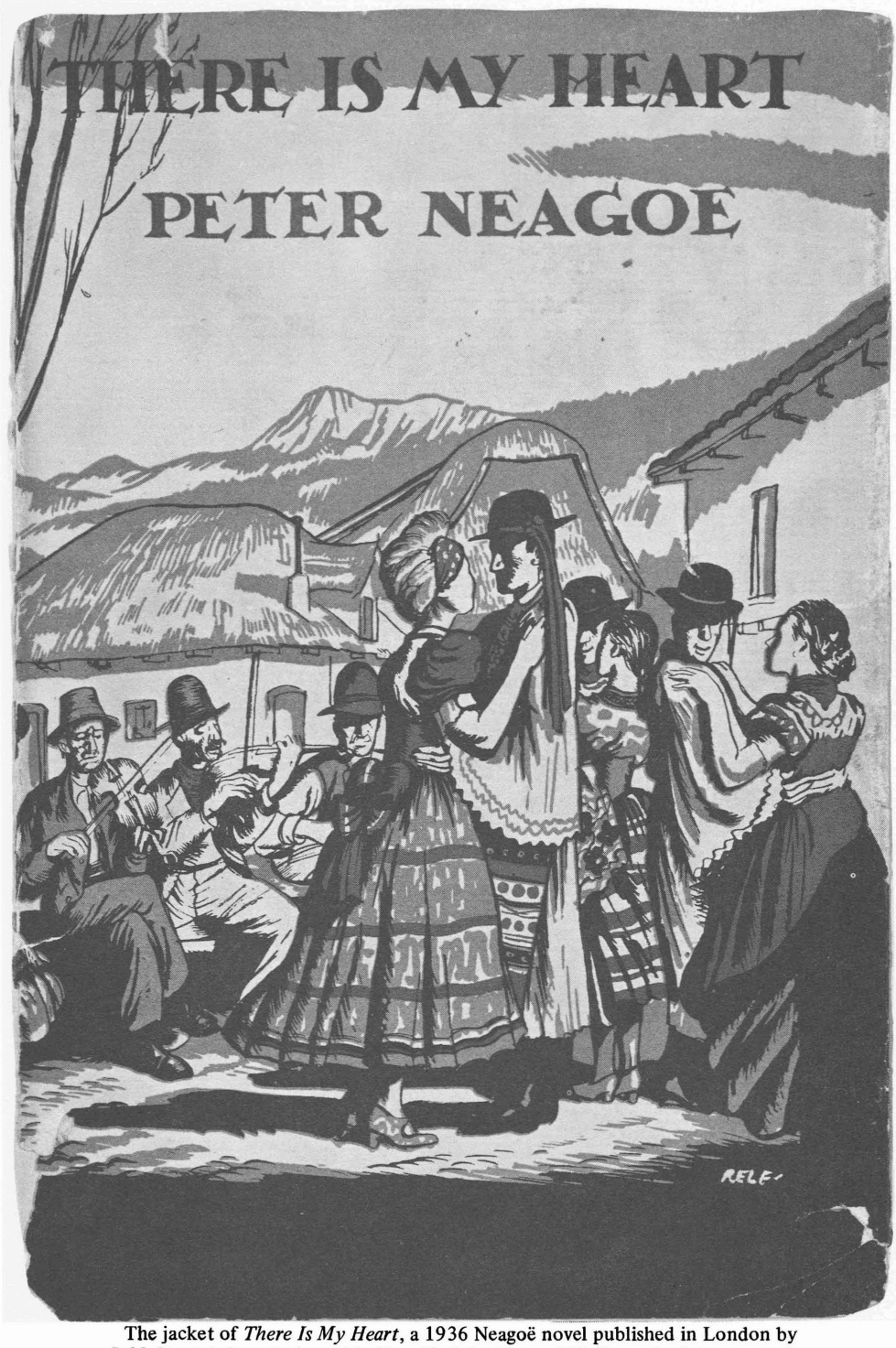
> "Answer yes or no."
>
> "To please your honorable judgeship who is kind enough to give me both yes and no, I take both with your leave be spoken and say yes and no" ("A Simple Case," WW, p. 254).

That is the naive and hilarious wisdom of Păcală (The Trickster), a popular character in Romanian folk stories, always directed against those in power or the rich the peasant always tries to avoid.

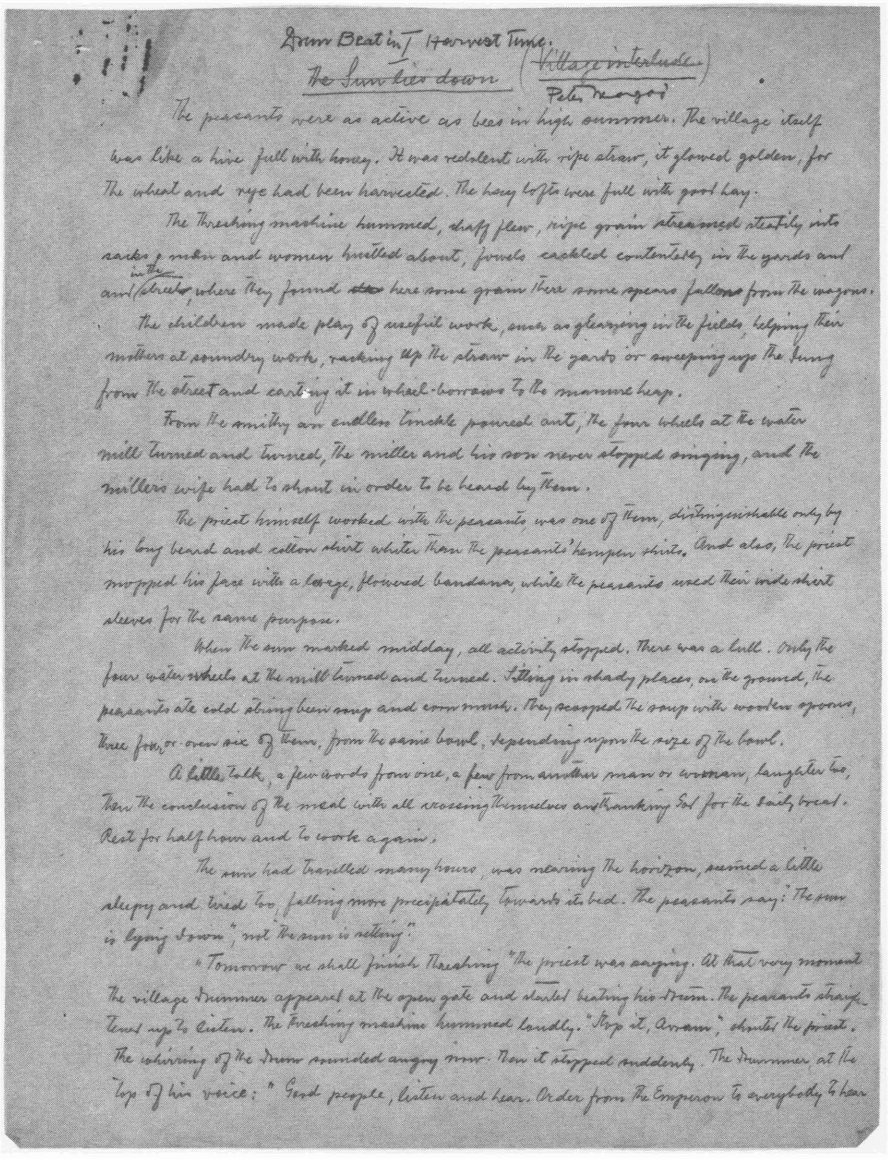
Neagoë does not try to idealize his peasants very much. It is true that a superficial reading of his work may result in an Arcadian picture framed in the author's intentions to introduce an unfamiliar setting and way of life to the American reader. But one should go deeper, beneath the surface. The peasant world is different from that of the American farmer. The bright colors, fresh air, and beautiful peasant girls are seen with the eyes of a boy whose happy childhood at the foothills of the Carpathians was a treasure Neagoë cherished all his life. His stories are an attempt to search for a lost time, and the author fails to emphasize potential social meanings. However, directness and the objectivity of observation characterize Neagoë's approach. He writes close to earth in depicting a society living close to earth. His novels deal widely with its very social structure, while the stories help create a picture out of unrelated bits.

The priest is one of the pillars of the community, but in the stories he either descends directly from Chaucer:

> Stemmed on his trunklike legs, wide apart, he looks upon the children; rumbling laughter issues from his barrel-shaped trunk. . . . He devours, his holiness does, plant and animal.



The jacket of *There Is My Heart*, a 1936 Neagoë novel published in London by J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., and in New York by Coward McCann, depicts a scene from Romanian peasant life. From the Mayfield Library.



Drum Beat in Harvest Time.
The Sun lies down (Village interlude)
Peter Neagoë

The peasants were as active as bees in high summer. The village itself was like a hive full with honey. It was redolent with ripe straw, it glowed golden, for the wheat and rye had been harvested. The hay lofts were full with good hay.

The threshing machine hummed, chaff flew, ripe grain streamed steadily into sacks; men and women hustled about, fowls cackled contentedly in the yards and in the streets, where they found here some grain there some spears fallen from the wagons.

The children made play of useful work, some as gleaners in the fields, helping their mothers at soundry work, raking up the straw in the yards or sweeping up the dung from the street and carting it in wheel-barrows to the manure heap.

From the smithy an endless tinckle poured out, the four wheels at the water mill turned and turned, the miller and his son never stopped singing, and the miller's wife had to shout in order to be heard by them.

The priest himself worked with the peasants, was one of them, distinguishable only by his long beard and cotton shirt whiter than the peasants' hempen shirts. And also, the priest mopped his face with a large, flowered bandana, while the peasants used their wide shirt sleeves for the same purpose.

When the sun marked midday, all activity stopped. There was a lull. Only the four water wheels at the mill turned and turned. Sitting in shady places, on the ground, the peasants ate cold sheep's beer soup and corn mush. They scooped the soup with wooden spoons, three four, or even six of them, from the same bowl, depending upon the size of the bowl.

A little talk, a few words from one, a few from another man or woman, laughter too, then the conclusion of the meal with all crossing themselves and thanking God for the daily bread. Rest for half hour and to work again.

The sun had travelled many hours, was nearing the horizon, seemed a little sleepy and tired too, falling more precipitately towards its bed. The peasants say: "The sun is lying down", not the sun is setting."

"Tomorrow we shall finish threshing" the priest was saying. At that very moment the village drummer appeared at the open gate and started beating his drum. The peasants straightened up to listen. The threshing machine hummed loudly. "Stop it, Avram", shouted the priest. The whirring of the drum sounded angry now. Now it stopped suddenly. The drummer, at the top of his voice: "Good people, listen and hear. Order from the Emperor to everybody to hear

First page of the holograph manuscript of "Drum Beat in Harvest Time," with the author's signature. Note the changes in title, from the original "The Sun Lies Down" to "Village Interlude" to the final title used in publication. From the Peter Neagoë Papers in the Arents Library.

> Then he belches and yawns and runs his paw over his wife's neck and slaps her . . . ("A Segment of the Whole," WW, pp. 147-48),

or is somehow reluctantly accepted by his congregation:

> . . . the bishop sent a young priest, a hungry-looking lanky man with a pointed Adam's apple sticking on his neck, as much a blemish as the original sin, the symbol of which it is. . . . The men took off hat or cap to the priest, but slowly, with somber countenances; for they said that a man like that could never bring rain with his prayers when rain is needed ("Contentment Is Silent," WW, p. 275).

For peasants have faith but are not bigots. There is a faith in which the mystic and pagan beliefs dwell together and keep them going:

> "Lina, darling, my eyes are weak, so weak. Spray a few drops in them from your breasts. It's better than dew for old eyes, it clears them like a charm" ("Storm," WW, p. 30).

The holy days are always strictly observed, but they are also days of feasting, song and dance. The Sunday white and embroidered costumes and the lively steps of Romanian folk dances appear again and again, interwoven in the pattern of the stories as additional but useful examples of skillfulness and industry:

> Lina had shirts with fine embroidery on sleeves and collar band. Even the ruffled cuffs of her shirt sleeves were heavy with silk embroidery. Her Sunday aprons were of finest wool. The patterns on them rich with deep red, black, blue and a green dark as moss ("Storm," WW, p. 27).

Neagoë dwells on simple incidents that range from the stoical acceptance of death to village gossip. But he does not deny his peasants deep feelings, proving the rich spiritual resources that lie in people whose lives seem grey and overworked. The purity of young love seen through the eyes of a fourteen-year-old boy ("Eyes") or the mystery of life revealed through a stallion to a young boy and a young girl hidden in the hayloft ("Shepherd of the Lord") are as real as Aron's fierce revenge in "Storm" or Savu's unspeakable alienation in the midst of a community where one hardly expects it in "A Pattern."

PETER NEAGOË, 1881 – 1960
From the original portrait by Anna Neagoë
presented by her to Syracuse University

A Selection of Stories by

PETER NEAGOË

ARRANGED WITH NOTES BY

John S. Mayfield

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Frontispiece and title page of the limited edition of Neagoë short stories arranged with notes by John S. Mayfield and published by Syracuse University Library in 1969. From the Mayfield Library.

The village is rich in life and seems to have been considered all the time against the bleak walls of the city which fascinated the young artist at the turn of the century. It is elemental life, which makes one think of another great modern lover of the virtues of life lived in the bosom of nature, Jean Giono. The stories are full of scents and colors: rain in the mountain distills perfume from pine, moss and soil; the base of a giant fir tree is a bouquet of flames; there is perfume of damp wool and shorn mountain grass; hair and ripe straw carry a golden light; the fragrance of hay and straw seeps in the stone of a barn's making, while even the dust is scented; a woman's breath is like a balm of healing summer breeze, as a young shepherd smells of male tallow. The eye catches the narrow slit running down from a girl's shirt collar-band and the slender body of a horse, as one hears the scythe in a dew-drenched clover field or the skylarks in the sky. There is delight and recollection that point to significant manifestations of life.

The village and the peasants are Neagoë's constant concern, but in the stories he does not pretend to exhaust his topics; the stories are only fragments of peasant life. More often than not the author is full of humor and bitter irony, but he always tries to reveal a particular aspect of the Romanian peasant's attitude, and his approach to the everyday problems of his existence.

Peter Neagoë's stories are not, like Hemingway's, a Nick Adams cycle, though, in a way, they concern the "education" and introduction to life of a young boy. The reader has to single out for himself the values that may contribute to this education: work as the salient characteristic of a healthy life, love of nature, tradition and spiritual values expressed in folk art, and a deep understanding of human relationships that makes people endure and survive.

A Peter Neagoë bibliography with some biographical material, prepared by Donald F. Sturtevant and published by the University Library in 1964, is housed with the Neagoë collection in the Mayfield Library, where it is available as an additional tool in the study of Peter Neagoë and his work.