

**TOUCHES AND TACHES: NARRATIVE EXPRESSIONS CONNECTED TO PANAIT ISTRATI'S KYRA KYRALINA****Dana RADLER<sup>1</sup>**

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***Abstract***

*Unpredictable journeys are a dominant feature in Istrati's fiction, taking the main protagonist (Stavro) from unstable yet familiar settings to exciting experiences if not sorrowful ones. Characters display coarse or delicate features, in accordance with their habitat and identity. In urban or country locations, light and dark mix with visible or hardly perceivable feelings and actions, the result being a narrative focused on or diluting facets of sensuality, power and authenticity. Male and female characters portrayed by Romanian artists in the inter- and post-war decades present similar characteristics. This paper aims to explore the tache as a key plastic sign in text and painting, drawing on Øystein Sjøstad's theory of connections between perception and reality, the result being a continuum in different artistic media*

***Keywords:*** Panait Istrati, Kyra Kyralina, tache, Romanian painting, narrative.

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***1. Introduction***

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For the Romanian fiction in the early twentieth century, Panait Istrati holds a particular place, being often debated and contested: for writing first in French, and only later in Romanian, for staying aside from the literary groups of the time, and for his political views. His own life journey is far from the typical course of the local community he grew in. Born in 1884 in Brăila as the son of Joița Istrate and of a Greek smuggler who dies when he is one year old, he grows in Brăila and Baldovinești, a village in the same area, and starts working and travelling from an early age, drawn by the vision of landscapes and stories coming from the East and the Mediterranean. Istrati promptly responded invitations coming from close friends to leave for exotic destinations, contrasting his mother's wish to build a modest yet safe existence. Extracted and reconverted from poor labourers yet gifted storytellers and his personal trips, numerous autobiographical images were either noted as deviant from typical standards, mainly in what regards the sexuality of certain protagonists, or praised for their originality and vigour (Bălan in Istrati, 2009: XVI-XX; Vrânceanu, 2011: 264-274).

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Recent contributors looking at his fiction discuss elements drawn from the Oriental repertoire (Ceban, 2006: 236-8; Preda, 2014: 54-62), aspects of translation or creation and re-creation in French and Romanian (Angelescu, 2008 71-75; Constantinescu, 2013, 153-160; Constantinescu, 2008: 51-60; Redinciuc, 2015), connections between individuals intimate with the writer (Uliu, 2011: 209-217), those related to Istrati's experience in Soviet Russia (Bălan, 1996) or the sinuous route of Istratian characters and their tumultuous experiences (Bâgiag, 2010: 201-212; Bâgiag, 2009: 231-256). The *Encyclopedia of the Novel* (Schellinger, 1998: 1121) presents his works and tumultuous life. In her recent bilingual study entitled *De vorbă cu Panait Istrati/ Parlando con Panait Istrati* (2014), Elena Lavinia Dumitru explores the writer's active journalism. What makes Istrati's works open to cross-disciplinary examination is a wide corpus of art works related to what had been recurrently described or reflected as Oriental atmosphere. Such productions cover a relatively distinct temporal and geographic space and they present notable similarities: feminine and masculine representations, familiar urban or rural *topoi*. They most often than not invite the reader into an imaginary atmosphere, a fusion of a recent past when communities in the area of Danube were populated by multi-ethnic groups with a nostalgia for heroic figures such as local *haiduks*. Romanian artists exploring such backgrounds in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth one include, among numerous other names, the following: Iosif Iser (1881-1958), Jean Alexandru Steriadi (1880-1956), Lucian Grigorescu (1894-1965), Iosif Rosenblut (1894-1975) and Ștefan Popescu (1872-1942). These artists share with Panait Istrati the vocation for authenticity and realism, while mixing in traces of a nostalgic past, highlighting Romanticized figures and settings typical for a diverse ethnic landscape. The selection of their works relevant for the purpose of this paper takes into consideration the following thematic criteria: firstly, landscapes in urban, rural settings, and around the water (the river or the sea), as well as portraits, of both men and women; while isolated individuals are presented in rich or rather simply decorated environments, some are accompanied by at least one other individual. A second criterion looks at light and fluidity of expression, which depends on both the moment of the day or night in the work under question, as well as the technique of the artist, with more robust colours and lines, or diluted, transparent tones. The third explores time frames, often suggested by routine, physical characteristics and psychological reactions; this is occasionally linked to the idea of a character undertaking a repetitive or difficult journey, or a *flâneur* enjoying a moment, despite clear hardships. Since one artwork presents elements from several thematic criteria listed above and connected to Istrati's fiction, this paper will look at meaningful aspects in art and fiction, rather than inspecting a strict inventory and grouping.

The theoretical framework of this analysis draws on Øystein Sjøstad's recent study on the *tache* as an emblematic impressionist sign. He finds that nineteenth century and early twentieth century productions work along "a complex field of meaning"

(2014: 6) intertwining denotation and connotation. According to Sjästad, to understand such a complex construction one needs to look at shape, subject matter and discourse. The topic of a painting affects one's perception upon it, but the artist of the nineteenth century was more than ever before preoccupied with the sight and what this vision communicated. This makes certain "signs" or discursive elements be "arranged in a deliberate manner" (2014: 7). To elicit the meaning of such signs, he adopts the term used by Kenneth Clark in the mid-sixties and distinguishes between modern art, able to forge signs including blots, lines or scrawls, and previous forms of aesthetic expression. As a result, the *tache* becomes "a physical, visual appearance, but also a specific way of operating as a sign that is on the verge of being a non-sign" (2014:12).

For the Romanian novelist and local modern artists approaching landscapes and characters present in Dobrudja, means of expression operate within a flexible frame and register, as suggested by the Norwegian author. What are then narrative *taches* and how do they operate when looked at from the angle of visual expression compared to a written discourse? The starting point to find the answer is then what Sjästad calls "the connection between perception and reality, and between experience and language" (2014: 13). Thus, the perspective of the leading actor, who is often the narrator, makes any human experience come close to the reader with the force suggested by a modern artwork and the versatility of an impressionist piece.

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## ***2. Landscape and portraits***

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People and places relate to each other, suggesting that one's identity is both shaped by the social group he/she belongs to, as well as by the physical environment an individual is born in and where he/she lives. In *Kyra Kyralina*, the main setting impacting the three characters, Stavro, Kyra the mother and Kyra the daughter, is their home placed in *Cetățuie* [Fortress], the remains of the old Turkish quartier. The name and the place described by Stavro correspond an architectural framework emblematic for old Brăila: a rectangular yard surrounded by high walls, with a front garden towards the street and the actual building placed between the yard and a high plateau, a natural protection in front of brutal visitors. The details of the house emerge gradually, firstly, the location and the owner: "on our side of town, in the house that belonged to my mother" (Istrati, 2010: 42), then its plan: "The house was situated at the back of a large walled courtyard. The front windows overlooked the courtyard, while those in the rear gave onto the plateau above the harbour" (44).



**Figure 1.** Lucian Grigorescu, *Citadină / Citadine*. Undated, watercolour on thin cardboard. 26 x 34 cm. Source: <https://www.artmark.ro/citadina-23729.html>

A close setting to that presented by Stavro emerges from Lucian Grigorescu's *Citadină / Citadine* (undated watercolour, 26 x 34 cm) where touches of brown mix with horizontal and vertical lines, suggesting a familiar and stable setting. No people inhabit this space, apparently captured at noon when the locals could have taken their siesta. As the case in Istrati's fiction, this space is far from being static; on the left, a particular combination of grey, beige and reddish touches point to a temporary rush of wind, a singular disturbing element on the street. The validity of the patch, as a sign getting its own identity despite its non-narrative (15) advanced by Sjästad can be applied to Grigorescu's painting and advocate for a vibrant movement: the wind or the dust whirling in the air, a fine yet typical drift versus the simpleness and stability of the house row aligned to the street. In Istrati's writing, the patch as a distinctive narrative sign consists of fluctuating feelings and impulses, and marks the life of the main protagonists to the very end. Highly aware that life can be interrupted by exterior factors at any moment, as in Grigorescu's watercolour, Stavro looks at his mother's gesture of securing the entrance before throwing what was to be the final party: "With the doors thus secured, she was filled with an overwhelming joy that I had never seen before. I now think that she knew that the happy life was coming to an end, and that she wanted to live as fully and intensely as she could" (Istrati, 2010: 50). His comment interrupts the flow of events, and casts a dynamic and truly reflexive note on the storyline. The patch is thus an invisible spot skilfully placed by the writer so that

the reader hardly notes that it could hardly be Stavro, the teenager, making such a remark, but rather an experienced narrator mixing his own voice with that of the protagonist. The result of such a fusion is what Sjästad refers to as a distinctive “sign that links perception and imagination” (2014: 17). For *Kyra Kyralina* and *Citadină*, the connective mark is the artist’s vision upon the subject. On the whole, the narrative of each artist divulges no immediate rupture or gap between the main line and a specific component; but the airflow; secondly, Stavro’s observation makes the reader more attentive to occasional details, while the artist influences the perception of the reader/looker in a manner unnoticeable at the beginning of his/her aesthetic experience.



**Figure 2.** Ștefan Popescu, *La seceriș / Harvesting*. Undated, oil on cardboard. 27 x 35 cm. Source: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/stefan-popescu/harvesting>

Both in Istrati’s writing and the representations of Romanian artists interested in Dobrudjan figures, the natural background surrounds individuals or groups so that they become a whole with it. In Popescu’s *La seceriș / Harvesting*, the heat of the summer wraps up the field workers. The light of this landscape including two front, more visible female characters, and several, distanced ones has a special quality, very close to that suggested by Istrati in *Kyra Kyralina*. The humans appear to dissolve their outlines and personal identity in the huge, golden field. The women bend to pick up the grains and their faces are hardly visible in the strenuous effort and dazzling light. The harvesters wear similar yet distinctive clothing: simple white *ii* [Romanian traditional shirts], and white kerchiefs while their skirts are distinctive in colour. The woman on the left, closer to the viewer, has a warm red one; the woman on the right, slightly behind her, has a grey piece. Their faces and hands get mixed with the wheat ears, but they are almost as red as the skirt of the

front female. The trees and the houses in the distance get some of this colouring, their shades resonating with the golden field. The position of the women and the group of distanced silhouettes prompt the viewer to start the reading of this painting from left to right, with a longer interval for the centre, and a final move to the right. The position of front characters, sketched silhouettes, trees and houses and the golden field ask for the eye to move, in a complex curve from left to right, up and down, coming back to the centre or the woman in red, and completing a final stop at the bottom area, where the golden wheat absorbs all entities. The sinuous route of the reading could suggest a repetitive action; the eye tends to finish where it almost started. This supports the reading experience as closely following the impetus and weariness of females. For Kyra and Stavro, this kind of place helps them slowly and unexpectedly recover from violent events taking place in their home: “As the harvest was over, Kyra took great pleasure in gathering together wheat kernels and making them into bundles to give to the poor old women gleaners who were bent over from working so long in the fields.” (Istrati, 2010: 68-9)



**Figure 3.** Jean Alexandru Steriadi, *Lăutari / Musicians*.  
Undated, oil on wood. 22.5 x 18.5 cm. Source:  
<http://rotenberguzunov.ro/pictura/jean-alexandru-steriadi-lautari/>

The *tache* deepens in *Kyra Kyralina* and Jean-Alexandru Steriadi's work, *Lăutari / Musicians* as a sign of what is unknown or could be questioned. Close to what Sjøstad observes about Cézanne's technique, the image of two Romanian musicians holds impressionist strokes turn into "a sign of the tension, or perhaps synthesis, between visual impressions and bodily touch" (2014: 86). The man on the left stays inclined, as if he had just taken one final step towards the second musician, whom he looks at intently while dabbing a tambourine. The leading artist appears to be the one on the right, with his silhouette is slightly bent backwards: he plays a trumpet and attempts to preserve a stable vertical position. None of them looks directly at the potential viewer: if the musician on the right plays while looking firmly in front of him, the tambourine player attentively listens to the tune of the trumpet and looks at his fellow. The tension shifts from the actors to the viewer: the painter used robust, energetic strokes for their clothing in a predominantly three-coloured palette: white for their shirts, red for their belts, scarf or top of the turbans, with both males wearing salwar and pointed shoes. Suggestively, thin strokes of beige mix with their upper and lower parts of their attire, indicating that their clothes are both comfortable, warm and rather well-used. Finer lines are used for their physiognomy, contrasting those used for their outfits: both performers are dark-complexioned, with prominent moustaches and thick eyebrows, exposing robust, hard-worked hands. They are fully engaged in their performance, yet no trace of an audience is to be seen. Do they play to train for a future performance, or is there someone at distance listening to them?

While Steriadi leaves this as an open question addressing the viewer, the representation of musicians in *Kyra Kyralina* acts as an indirect clue to life threat. Four moussafirs [guests], and three Greek musicians attend the last party planned by Kyra the mother. Before the evening starts, the beautiful and generous woman offers musicians a huge pay and alerts them about the chance of an unexpected visit: "You have in your purses five times more than what you should receive for playing all night!" (Istrati, 2010: 50). Once she indicates the high-placed escape route through the back windows, the *palicarias* examine the ground and accept the challenge. The narrator then closely follows the effect of their music at clarinet, fife and guitar on the two female hosts: "Kyra and mother lay stretched out next to one another on the sofa listening in rapture to the plaintive, then lively, Romanian *doinas*, languid Turkish *maniebs*, and Greek pastorals, all accompanied by the singing and clapping of the four *moussafirs*" (51). One comic details interrupts the narrative and hints to a real peril: one *moussafir* tells Kyra why another known companion was unable to join the group: because he had broken his ankle when throwing himself down the hill at the last party. Though this indirect reference to the unfortunate visitor generates open laughter in the group, one player appears to take it more seriously than the previous warning: "this caused the guitarist some grief, as he was fat and less than agile. He went to the window to measure the distance with his eye" (51). He seems to be reassured by the advice provided by his fellows about the technique to jump over the windows, and the event goes on with

music and dancing. However, the hint to danger materializes sooner than expected, when the two habitual aggressors, the father and first-born in the family irrupt to punish the family. Both *moussafirs* and performers rush to escape: “the gusts jumped out the two black windows, forgetting any precautions, as if outside woollen mattresses were in place to receive them” (52). Just as the blank, slightly unreal background in Steriadi’s painting, this comic element adds a witty brush over the overall narrative: the vision of Stavro the narrator. Inheriting from his mother the concept of an existence following one’s calling, be it sole pleasure only: “we are who we are because God wanted us that way” states the mother (48). The young protagonist instantly turns it into an expression of comedy and tragedy expanding over the material and spiritual worlds as he describes the effect of divine will:

*First, He wished that my mother and her daughter linger in bed in the morning as long as He wanted. And in bed was the best place to savor rolls with butter and honey and drink coffee. He ordered them next to bathe themselves, anoint her bodies with benzoin tincture, and let the vapor of simmered milk steam their faces. Then to make their hair shine, they were to massage their scalps with almond oil perfumed with musk. To improve the luster of their nails, they painted them with a little brush dipped into a cashew balm. Next, it was time to apply, with the utmost skill, makeup to their eyebrows, eyelashes, lips and cheeks. And when all this was finished, it was time for lunch, smoking and napping until the sun had set. Upon rising, they lit incense, drank syrups, and finally they began the longest part of their day in which they sang and danced until midnight (48).*

The voice of the young narrator mixes at this moment with that of the more mature protagonist, Stavro the storyteller. His vision influences the reader to adopt a transfer of ritual and duties: the believers are thus the two women keen to follow the passion of their hearts, and the series of actions performed by the two female characters replace a typical religious ceremonial. This transfer questions the ultimate divine authority and frames the existence of main characters within an unorthodox rite.

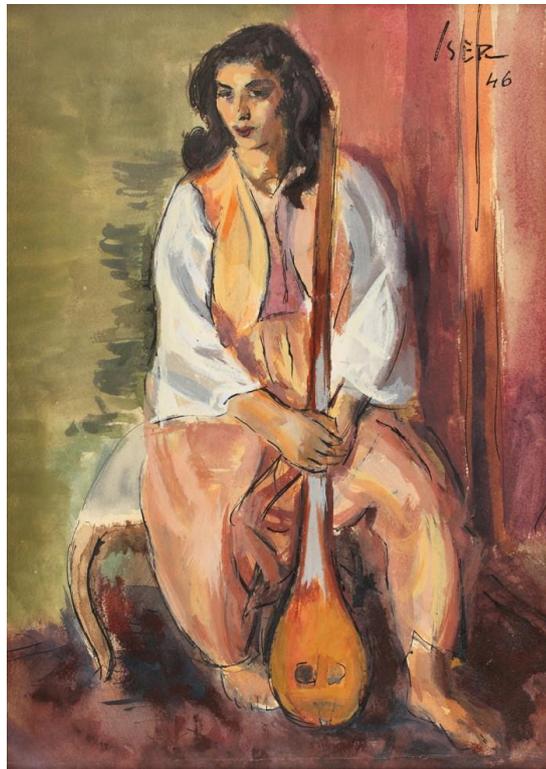
Stavro the narrator openly divulges his adoration for his sister as he later reflects this must have been an incipient desire expressed in front of an extremely beautiful woman. If young Kyra appears at the beginning to be exclusively preoccupied by beauty and entertainment, as soon as the assault of her father and elder brother results in her being locked in a wardrobe while mother was thrown into the cellar, she reveals a mood which surprises her brother. Kyra becomes obsessed with revenge, and her calm, appealing and blossoming appearance changes to a one marked by a vindictive behaviour. The short dialogue with their elder uncle makes Stavro be thoroughly surprised by her abrupt transformation:

And after a short pause, he continued, 'Tell me, child of hell, won't you be deathly afraid when you see tonight your father's head bursting into pieces?'

Kyra's eyes flashed, as red as fire, and she said, 'I will wash my hands in his blood and bathe my face with it! [...]' The two men then rose. The older one said to my sister, 'Very well, Kyra Kyralina, my sweet-breathed snake, daughter of a libertine. It will be as you wish! Your desire to bathe in blood will be realized (60).

Her state of mind is so intense, that her brother finds her behaviour at an extreme to that of his own: Stavro thinks that it would "be frightful to see" the two men murdered, while Kyra thinks it is "going to be beautiful" (64). Hiding a dagger in her clothes and throwing furious looks, she pulls all her energy to support the ambush planned by the two uncles. Although she had gone through events fully dramatic for her age and experience, the change of tone and character gives her an idealized romantic aura, at considerable distance from Istrati's realism, getting her closer to other strong female characters present in Istrati's fiction, such as Floricica, another young, attractive woman, companion of local bandits (Zephir, 2005: 10-12).

Interested to paint Romanian or Tatar women in either dark or colourful local backgrounds, Iosif Iser presents in *Odaliscă cu teorbă / Odalisque with theorbo* a partially equally idealized feminine representation. The young woman sitting on a chair, and holding a particular type of lute in her hands, has an intriguing expression. She looks sideways, slightly to her right, in a composed yet non-confrontational manner. Elegant in her white shirt and pastel vest and salwar, her image seems to reflect two separate kinds of traits: a relaxed background dominated by her quiet presence and a reflexive, deeper nature suggested by her physiognomy. The tension starts to emerge through her dark eyes, firm eyebrows and well-contoured lips. As relaxed as her body, her face shows a particular type of determination and refinement,



**Figure 4.** Iosif Iser, *Odaliscă cu teorbă / Odalisque with theorbo*. (19)46, vernis gouache and ink on paper. 29,5 × 21,5 cm. Source: <https://www.artmark.ro/odalisca-cu-teorba-21485.html>

further intriguing the potential looker: what does she look at? Is the instrument her own, or did she perhaps just get it? Since she sits on a white ottoman can the viewer interpret her position as a moment after she performed in front of an audience? She sits closer to the corner of a room whose colours match the warm palette of her outfit, and there are only four simple decorative elements around her: the ottoman, the theorbo, a warm red curtain to her left and a dark red carpet on the floor. The hypothesis of a performance appears implausible since she has no slippers or footwear and her left toes are slightly bent, typical for someone being in a comfortable space. But her refined attire and makeup suggests that that she is not in an ordinary, domestic circumstance. Her femininity is but enhanced by the combination of silk for her salwar, vest and top of the ottoman, the wooden theorbo and the thick, dark red woollen carpet. The vibrant red of her lips reflects the paler hues of her costume, and the lively red nuances contrast the coolness of the green wall to her right. Notable *taches* result from the combination of lines: curved, thin black ink outlines for her silhouette versus the straight, thicker touches of red watercolour, vertical on the curtain. Alternative horizontal *taches* are also visible in the background, the dark green strokes on the wall, close to the woman's arm, or dark red patches placed between the legs of the stool. Kyra and Iser's odalisque share several attractiveness and energy. Their postures indicate the potential of dynamism, even when movement is absent. However, if Kyra openly verbalises her hopes of revenge against father and elder brother, the odalisque's oblique eyebrows and arched lips speak about a similar determination, despite her otherwise static appearance.

As Sjästad notes when examining Manet's works, "[t]he tache is a graphic moment" (73) because it becomes a meeting place for literature and art, inviting modernism to settle in. Whereas one school of thought connecting Zola, Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried advocated pure forms, a second one inspired by Charles Baudelaire claimed the painting and literature influenced and interacted with each other. Seen from this perspective, Iser and Istrati both portray young, vivacious women inspiring beauty, energy and strong will. The graphic or written narrative captures a hidden question: whether their charm will positively impact their own lives, or if it will rather be a cause of suffering and despair.

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### ***3. Light and narrative***

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Young Kyra and Stavro say goodbye to their uncles and settle in a small but obviously not very comfortable local inn, the narrative getting a more alert pace. Although advised to stay inside, they cannot resist the call to a whole exterior world whom they never explored. The interval spent in the field is a time of healing, when the two youngsters recover after recent traumatic events. One discovery is meant to turn their destiny into an expected direction: Stavro finds out a new temptation: "The Danube attracted me like an irresistible force" (Istrati,

2010: 69). For him, the river and numerous boats along it is both a fresh as well as a gate to travel, therefore potentially inspiring experiences:

*At that time the port didn't have a dock and one could only go ten or twenty feet into the water and it would only be chest-high. To reach a boat it was necessary to go out onto little wooden piers that linked to bigger bridges. The big yachts, anchored farther out, rubbed their bows against the pontoons that supported the large bridges that were sturdily made out of blocks and boards (70).*

Stavro's urge to stay around boats and explore the area draws from Istrati's own attraction to travel and discovery. Adrian Zograffi, the teenager and adult protagonist of several stories, records his constant urge to visit the harbour and follow a sudden craving: "For a moment he stood still to gaze at the thousands of lights that beamed from the boats anchored in the port, and he felt rise in his chest an irresistible desire to travel. Lord! How fabulous it would be to find oneself on one of those boats that glide over the seas, and to discover new shores and new worlds" (8). The harbour presents thus an ambivalent representation: firstly, of a desired but forbidden zone because of his age and lack of means to travel to exotic destinations. It is also the place of hard work and low income or poor prospects. The first one is quickly grasped by Adrian's mother who warns him against travel as an insatiable experience devouring its consumer: "The little journey that you are making today will give you a taste tomorrow for longer trips and later even longer trips" (16). For her, such an impulse represents a destabilizing factor in one's pursuit for safety and welfare. To convince her son, she also mentions their gradual but steady emotional disconnection which will be observed by the divine. She does not reprimand her child, but she can hardly understand his wish.

The image of the busy port and of the boat as a gate-opener beyond its primary purpose, to travel on water, populates the imagery of Iosif Rosenblut. The artist presents urban backgrounds including wharfs and boats, or rural ones, and explores still life and portraits or self-portraits. His oil on cardboard, *In port / In harbour*, completed in 1965, proposes a particular type of *tache* around the harbour. There are two types of signs in this narrative: human silhouettes are miniscule compared to the size of the boats, which speaks about limited human physical strength versus the power of machines, including modern transportation means. Secondly, there is a fluid transition between the water and its transparent greenish blue to the earthy solidness of the quay marked by grey and beige strokes. While the natural environment is dominated by smoothness, the boats appear distinctive because of colouring: predominant black for their curved, massive bottoms, white squares for cabins placed on board and three suggestive patches of red.



**Figure 5.** Iosif Rosenblut, *In port / In harbour*. 1965, oil on cardboard. 33 x 42 cm. Source: [http://www.artnet.com/artists/iosif-rosenbluth/in-the-harbor-\\_k5otpt6J-O16RBcFdEBTw2](http://www.artnet.com/artists/iosif-rosenbluth/in-the-harbor-_k5otpt6J-O16RBcFdEBTw2)

Fine oblique black lines break the rhythm at times, suggesting wires or ropes. The boats are on a rather slow motion, except the front one close to the quay; the overall impression is of an ongoing flow of manoeuvres. Sjästad's observation is that the *tache* can be thus read as "a sign of mobility" (2014: 68). In his view, it stands for humans using various means of transport and speaks about ephemeral elements, mentioned by Baudelaire when noting that modernity implies speed and impermanence. For the impressionist creator, the reader should have a direct experience as possible:

*The artist wanted to make the distance between nature and the canvas as short as possible, so he or she needed to make choices beforehand: the size of the canvas, the range of colours, and which brushes to use. The best thing was to have a small-sized canvas and a few colors and brushes as possible (87).*

Thus, portraits discussed earlier and the river-boat binomial ask for parallel readings: the visual one, focused on shapes, colours and stillness or movement, and the second, consisting of signs, which can rely on dispersed or indirect elements, so that the viewer explores the feelings and expectations experienced by protagonists. The second type of reading has a higher level of subjectivity since results are

obviously amalgamated with the personal experiences of the reader. For example, when looking at Rosenblut's painting, the mixture of red and black challenges the reader to grasp for a deeper significance, possibly as a dichotomy placed against the overall background. From this perspective, the reading of the viewer becomes as fluid as the artwork itself. Sjøstad sees this at the core of a realist creation based on temperament: "the painters had to paint with taches, so that would start making vibrations and flicker" (86).

Just as Rosenblut's work opens to further analysis, Istrati's story follows the two characters, young Kyra and Stavro, in their call to the harbour. The voice of the teenager mixes with that of the adult storyteller, turning into an equally parallel reading of expectations and thrust perceived by the first versus the naivety and regret of the later one. Stavro the teenager finds in his trips one particular character: Nazim Effendi. Attracted by his elegant appearance, despite old age, the boy gets friendly with him and soon introduces his bored sister to the calm man. Both of them find in him more than a mere distraction: they emotionally need someone stable, knowledgeable and the aged Turk fails to reveal his true nature. One sentence acts as a particular *tache*-index, serving as an abrupt, foreseeable change: "Like many others at that time he was a yacht owner and procurer of flesh for harems. He seemed to me courteous, serious, calm and sober" (Istrati, 2010: 71). The adult narrator echoes Stavro and Kyra's lack of life experience in a short, rhetoric question after the boy delivers the news about Nazim Effendi to his sister: "Oh, why wasn't she savvier than I, more experienced? She devoured my words, and her head began swimming as much as mine, so much so that she lay awake all night in expectation of sailing on the Danube on a luxurious boat" (71).

For the two young characters, the boat of the Turk stands for more than a practical and enjoyable means of spending the day on the Danube. As in Adrian's case, they both extend their need of stability and unstoppable need to move on. This is the results of a magic of its own in the harbour: stable gain and imports, lots of foreigners, and numerous stories. The harbour, therefore the whole city, expresses its typical geography: radial streets surrounding the axis along the Danube. Its particular location influences the perception of the locals on their hometown on this multi-layered space: ages, development, and cultures. According to Bălan, Istrati adopted his own multifaceted perception of "recomposing the city from its legendary times up to the writer's present" (2012: 26). The novelist has learned to look at the past and incorporates in his writing ancient legends, extending the flavour of 'once upon a time...' imaginary, combined with the frenetic rhythm of the docks.

Kyra and Stavro aim to find a new place because of the modest living conditions at the inn, unsatisfactory for the two, as well as the annoying persistence of a new series of admirers singing at their back door in order to get Kyra's favours. Nazim Effendi comes to their rescue, silently insinuating that their life on the boat mean

lavish costumes in an Oriental interior repertoire typical for Scheherazade's nights: "carpets, brass vessels, gold-embroidered cushions, and a huge collection of weapons" (Istrati, 2010: 73). To mark the difference between this place and the promises it entails, the narrator briefly precedes it with a bleak, certainly discouraging image of the surroundings, as well as their former home, coming out in their first trip on the Turk's ship: "The Arab turned the rudder and we glided back nearer the shore. The boat passed slowly by our house that sat sadly deserted on the crest above the river. Next to it was the inn with our windows open. Next came the hubbub of the port, with its army of stevedores, its sailboats, barges and pontoons" (72). The harbour with its large or small vessels, busy people and unstable prospects resembles the narrative in Rosenblut's own painting. It becomes a blurred space, where people are consumed by their drive for income, and where only innocent protagonists, such as young Stavro or Kyra think that the river can provide endless wonderful voyages. However, just like the delicate yet pervading translucent water colouring of the artwork, the image of the harbour in *Kyra Kyralina* defines a huge space, an entire world of its own, compared to the limited, static housing space. The river quietly but firmly attracts and embraces human and material entities, dissolving their distinct identities.

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#### 4. Time frames

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In terms of space and time, the river takes those it grips into a unique direction. The final element to lure the two young characters into Nazim Effendi's plan is the Turk's rapid understanding that they hope to reunite with their traumatized mother. The narration moves to a cinematic sequence when the brother and sister learn of the failed plan against their violent parent. Ibrahim, the crayfish seller, discloses his bad news: "Cosma was ambushed by your father's men and shot dead" (Istrati, 2010: 74). Ravaged by the news, young Kyra expresses her utter distress in front of the Turk, and he instantly uses the opportunity to launch his plan, claiming that their mother could have looked for medical care in the Ottoman capital. He then offers his full support: "You are both of Turkish ancestry, through your esteemed grandfather. I will take you to Stamboul where I'm certain your mother went to get her eye treated" (75). Closed in cabins and unaware that they smoke opium hookah instead of ordinary ones, brother and sister are taken on board, on a long trip, oblivious to being captured. Once more the voice of the adult narrator interposes in the narration longer sentences following a shorter, informative one: "But we weren't going to heaven. We were on our way to Stamboul where we believed we'd find our mother and bring her back home. Where we were really going was into captivity and of our own free will" (75). The hint to heaven abandons any form of irony, as expressed by their mother at the debut of the story when referring to divine will at the moment of her marriage or the two ladies beauty ritual impertinent to an authentic religious ceremony. The final words coming from the adult storyteller indicate that free will can lead to disastrous outcomes if reason cannot balance temporary drives.



**Figure 6.** Iosif Iser, *Tataroaiice / Tatar women*. Undated, gouache on paper. 37 x 52 cm. Source: <http://www.artnet.com/artists/iosif-iser/tatar-women-wqYb4A14qgXVj9OVJoAjow2>

Delicate feminine protagonists display an amalgam of emotions, pointing to a volatile frame. Iser's *Tățăroaiice / Tatar women*, (gouache on paper, 37 x 52 cm, private collection), opens as a suggestive narrative for the two Kyra: the mother and the daughter. Iser's work links the narrative of portraits with that of a less visible dimension, time. Two women, a younger and an older one, sit down on a carpet, in warm daylight. Just as in *Odalisque with theorbo*, the background presents no specific features. They are most likely at home, in the interior yard, be it their own or that of relatives or friends. The expressive colouring matches the profile of the two protagonists: the younger one wears bright green salwar. In addition, she has a short, open vest of the same fabric, placed on top of a pink sleeveless piece of garment. She has a lively red kerchief knotted at the back of her head. Her face is inclined, with her eyes downwards, in an apparent pensive state while her body is oblique to the viewer, typical for Iser's feminine protagonists. The aged woman has a grey, sleeveless gown. A darker greenish head cloth marks adds to her head white top. Characters either share certain aspects or, on the contrary, appear in distinctive contexts. Firstly, their differentiated garments and personal colour palette speak about different age: the one in green seems unmarried, the other, either married or a widow. Secondly, they have a similar sad or pensive mood. Their eyes look down yet their body posture eliminate shyness as a possible reason. Both appear under a difficult psychological state. Even if their bodies are not tense, their crossed arms, in a more relaxed position for the young woman and a tighter one for the elderly female add to the questions coming from

the viewer: where are they? What are they doing? Are they waiting for someone else? What has happened? Are they relatives or simply locals?

Their age, life experience and possibly recent events impact their looks: the more mature female has delicate face traits: fine eyebrows, small nose, pale coloured lips, and an oval visage. The face of the woman in green presents more striking characteristics: an aquiline nose, long, black eyebrows raised to the exterior, and a more robust silhouette than the woman in grey. Although distressed, just like the female dressed in grey, the shoulders and concentrated look, fixed to the ground inspire the reading of a determined character for the young woman. Her distinctive characteristics are a well contoured mouth of a bright red, and her long, equally lively red nails. The artist creates a nuanced composition: a less colourful representation of the woman in grey, her refinement and status being marked by pale red strokes on her cheeks and neck; in contrast, the red kerchief of the woman in green supports the narrative of a resilient if not tenacious figure despite her young age. Although she appears lost in a pensive mood, the shape of eyebrows, the arch of her lips and her overall focus allude to her intense focus, rather than looking at an indistinct point, like her partner. The flow of age, beauty, status and impact on their minds thus turn the Tatar women into suitable alter egos of Istrati's two Kyra. The young woman on the left is as attractive as young Kyra, as impulsive and strong-minded as her, while resignation and melancholy dominate the experienced figure on the right.

If age formally distances the two Kyra presented by Istrati, in what concerns their apparition in front of *moussafirs*, they could be easily thought as two sisters or diverse expressions of beauty. Adult Stavro retrieves their image from the past as a precious imprint into his childhood memories:

*Ah, their faces, their eyes, the beauty of the two women! No one on earth could have put up with this. They had long blonde hair that fell to their waists, fair skins, and their eyebrows and pupils ebony brown. Though their ancestral tree was Romanian on my mother's side, three different races were grafted together: Turkish, Russian and Greek, since these groups had all dominated the country in the past [...] My mother and Kyra were beautiful enough to drive anyone mad, with their corseted waists nearly small enough to fit through a wedding ring, their swollen breasts like two melons their sumptuous hair flowing over their naked shoulders and down their backs. Red ribbons served as headbands, and their long eyelashes fluttered diabolically as if to kindle the jets of flaming desire that shot from their eyes (Istrati, 2010: 43-44).*

For Stavro, the two stand for feminine prototypes of seduction and sensuality; their time being spent to maintain their outstanding beauty in the morning, followed by long, elaborated parties with music and dance. Their existence cannot be thought outside the presence of numerous admirers. Yet time operates a fine, clear

demarcation between the two. Kyra the mother learns that violence follows personal independence and inclination for leisure and luxury in a cyclical pattern, and she accepts such forms of abuse with maternal resignation. Unlike her, young Kyra has not undergone dramatic moments in her life, and has no mercy or understanding versus her brutal male relatives. Her limited experience makes her act with hastiness, and she prompts her uncles to put their retaliation plan in practice. Details of their house are scarce except the interior marked by Ottoman pillows and rugs. The comfortable, inviting building contains a hidden area, which shocks Stavro when he goes in the cellar to rescue his mother: "The odor of mold, sauerkraut and rotten vegetables wafted into my nostrils, for nobody had been down in the cellar for two or three years. Some tortoises moved about slowly, and their eggs, a little larger than birds' eggs, were visible along the length of the wall" (55). The two siblings fall to the feet of their parent, with her whole face severely marked by the beating. Additional visual elements support the hint to decay and death: "Her nose was broken, her lips ripped, her neck and breasts covered with dried blood. Her hands, too, were bloody, and one finger was broken" (56). The red blood reminds of human frailness on earth, and the battered mother advises her children to support less fortunate beings in a thankful act to God for their good health.

In terms of narrative, if Iser's work opens the reading beyond the artist's illustration, *Kyra Kyralina* crosses the boundaries of a conventional account as it allows a highly subjective perspective for its reader. Clement Greenberg referred to the viewer as a traveller, according to Lut Pil (Ribi re and Baetens, 2001: 92-93), but Istrati declines such a modernist posture although he returns to the past and ethnic background with a nostalgic gaze. Looking in retrospect at their voyage in the Soviet Union, Eleni Samios Kazantzaki illuminates Istrati's own type of listening with the heart: listening stops from being a mere act as a form of reception often leading to a judging another human existence:

*Pana t,   l'instar des Orientaux, s'assied les jambes crois es, s'appuie tout entier sur la terre et conte. Et quand il ne veut pas conter, il  coute. Il  coute, non pas en Europ en, « qui craches dans ses poches » et garde le c eur froid et ironique. Pana t  coute en vrai Oriental « qui crache sur vos botines » mais sait  couter. Les mots transpercent sa poitrine et vont droit au c eur. Les larmes jaillissent alors de ses yeux, ou un cri rauque sort de sa gorge, ou toute sa personne, qui a beaucoup souffert, se jette dans une danse effr en e* (Samios-Kazantzaki, 2012: 88).

Telling one's life to someone else and the reception of such a narrative are thus two sides of one whole experience. No matter if performed between two people only or a larger group, the catalysing bonding it creates works as the main effect upon those involved. The *tache* then shifts to a spiritual level: the narrative, be it visual or oral, stops from being an object of contemplation and the recipient abandons himself to the tale and its meaning. The result is a unique act, perhaps mission or

quest, in which listener and storyteller get united by a shared, passionate performance.

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## 5. Conclusions

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Sjåstad's study on the *tache* brings modern painting close to the *ut pictura poesis* canon; Istrati's prose and the six selected artworks by Romanian modern artists come provocatively close to the context of the *tache* in more articulated or more hypothetically expressed signs. The main categories of analysis comprise landscape and human portraits, light and narrative means and time frames.

The textual and visual narrative present urban and rural contexts where protagonists express themselves in specific contexts: a restricted home in terms of size but thoroughly comfortable area in *Cetățuie* where pleasure and leisure govern the actions of Kyra the mother and her two children, contrasting the gloomy atmosphere of the house where the cartwright and his son live. Though *taches* vary in terms of type and recurrence, visual and written expressions in Istrati's story and Oriental characters presented by Steriadi and Iser evoke resilience beyond age and looks.

Dobrudjan grain fields help young Kyra and Stavro heal from recent unparalleled violence, for the first time in contact with an exciting natural environment. Light and narrative impact the visual or written discourse, resulting in compositions where thick or transparent strokes alternate with thin, sharp ones, or where fine black contours mark silhouettes in watercolour. Patches, digressions, suggestions, hints or bursts compose the set of discursive *taches*.

Finally, time frames shift according to the voice of the narrator. Stavro switches from impressions retrieved from a reimagined and relived past to a detailed account, occasionally interrupted by nostalgic lines or reasoning, a mature reflection of his ignorance or naivety when a child. While the first part of the story has a slower pace, the events following the violent breakup of his father and elder brother succeed at higher speed, getting the narrator closer to a cinematic vision. The reception of the reading depends on the reader's willingness to adopt and use Istrati's unusual stance as a listener and *raconteur*, as Samios-Kazantzaki has noted. For him, the distinctive *tache* of his writing stays in emotions and how they shape one's ongoing life journey.

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