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**Alex Drace-Francis. *The Making of Mămăligă: Transimperial Recipes for a Romanian National Dish*. Central European University Press, 2022. ix + 215.**
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Alex Drace-Francis's ambitious book on the Romanian national dish, *mămăligă*, has an unassuming title beneath which, however, lies a highly detailed account of the rich cultural history of the dish and its significance for Romanians. The author's view of Romania may be characterized as "materialistic," as is clearly illustrated by a remark of his, which may have been made in jest: "Clearly, Romania has advanced since the 1990s, yet I yearn for something concrete: the return of my wallet that disappeared on my first train trip from Botoșani to Iași."[1] The theft may have sparked his curiosity about *mămăligă*, a cornerstone of Romanian cuisine, and it turned out to be a blessing as he authored a remarkable book on the dish, replete with historical richness and personal stories.

*The Making of Mămăligă* explores the ubiquitous presence of the dish as a national phenomenon as well as its polysemy as a cultural identifier. Drace-Francis correctly points out, in his Introduction, its complex functioning as "an indicator of ethnic identity, social status and mores," also underscoring its untranslatability (3). His approach is trope-based and rests on the conviction that "the study of food has secured by now a respectable and well-established footing as part of the study of human societies and collective experiences" (5). The organization of the book reveals a chronological principle related to the evolution of the importance of maize flour from 1492 to the present day. The chapters feature useful drawings, graphs, and pictures and reflect the important events associated with the spread of this type of food from its origins in southern Mexico to the Romanian lands and its transformation from an imported product to a symbol of cultural identity.

In Chapter 1, entitled "The Maizing of Moldavia and Wallachia," the author establishes a relationship between the presence of maize in the mentioned regions and personal names (26). He aptly explores the appearance of the Romanian word *mălai*, maize flour, in personal and place names and manages to date it back to the fifteenth century (27). The word is one of the most frequently used today, especially by Romanian hostesses, who would almost always accompany it with a disarming smile announcing to the innocent guest that he or she is going to be treated to a *mămăligă* based dish after which the latter is bound to develop a love or hate relationship to *mămăligă*. In the case of the former, love for everything Romanian is guaranteed; in the case of the latter, he or she would be well advised to leave the country immediately. As pointed out earlier, Romanians themselves do not hold an unequivocal stance on the dish and in Chapter 2, Drace-Francis pinpoints the historical reason for this love-hate relationship with *mămăligă*, namely the fact that initially maize flour was used both for feeding people and animals (36). It was very cheap because there was no demand for its being exported and it probably should have been exempted from taxation (36). This linking of the inhabitants of Wallachia and their beasts of burden through the consumption of maize flour underscores the humble origins of the people as well as their perceived equal position to the domestic animals in being servants to the land that feeds them both the same food. The heading of the subsection "Theorizing Maize: Didactic Literature, 1796-1813" in Chapter 3 is particularly interesting, as it deals with the cultural aspects contained in the writings of authors who, having recognized the importance of maize and maize flour for Romania, discuss the significance of names in various regions of the country.

Due to its widely spread use, maize has also become the topic of myths: the consumption of its

[1] My translation. H. B.

flour is directly related to longevity (67). Furthermore, the cultural relationship between the food and the people can be found in personal names: apparently, people called "Mămăligă" are mentioned in some sources (68). Also present in the well-known jocular exchange based on rhyming, "*Cum te strigă? Mămăligă. Cum te cheamă? Zor de zeamă*" ("How are you called? *Mămăligă*").[2] Being such a readily available cheap product also turned this type of food into a saviour from famine in the nineteenth century (72), which also indicates that well-managed maize production could always prevent famine unless it was artificially induced. Also, paradoxically, as maize became an exportable product both prevented famines elsewhere and raised the risks of famine in the lands claiming maize production. These dynamics of maize, as accentuated by the author, were clearly perceptible in Romania where they sometimes led to popular revolts. Although strongly suggesting independence, *mămăligă* could be linked to submission in the nineteenth century as remarked by a German traveller who managed to map its increased use as important food within the confines of present-day Romania, thus providing the locals with "equal endurance" (89). By the end of the nineteenth century Romania was primarily agricultural and "of 84 percent of the population who did not live in Bucharest, nearly everybody worked on the land" (98).

Chapter 6 takes us to the beginning of the twentieth century, emphasizing the organic bond that Romanians had already built with maize flour, as well as the problems that could develop if it were disrupted. Many village names in Romania testify to the shortage of maize and its consequences from that period, in places such as Flămânzi ("famished"), today a town in Moldavia close to Botoșani (106). Chapter 7 is of particular interest as it provides the descriptions of *mămăligă* dishes and their making over the years. The author discusses the accounts of both foreign and Romanian travellers, highlighting the bond they formed with the locals and the sense of community fostered by the dish among Romanians. One such traveller, Andreas Wolf from the vicinity of Sibiu, "praised the practicality of *mămăligă* from the peasants' point of view – it kept them healthy, provided good nutrition without excessive effort, could be used to feed their livestock as well as themselves, and more particularly afforded them some freedom of movement" (119). Speaking of recipes, *mămăligă* dishes could be "upgraded" by adding chopped pork, wine sauce, sliced mushrooms, or grated cheese as is the case with *tochitura dobrogeană* ("Dobrudjan minced meat").

The meticulous descriptions of the various uses of the *mămăligă* dish in the Romanian lands culminate in Chapter 8 which delves into its metaphorical usage. The reference to *mămăligă* in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) in its opening part testifies to the thoroughness of the effort. As Drace-Francis correctly observes, whether Harker obtained a recipe for the *mămăligă* he ate in Bistrița, we can never know since "*mămăligă* is a scene-setting note, rather than a protagonist or cliff-hanging element central to the narrative" (131). Indeed, already possessing the traits of a national dish, its presence is a marker of national identity, and one expects to see it everywhere when it is time to eat. The author goes on to provide numerous examples of the presence of the dish in Romanian literary works and paintings, noting that despite its reputation as a poor man's meal, King Carol I is reported to have eaten *mămăligă* at an important inauguration (134), thus identifying with both humbleness and Romania. Observing the absence of maize on national emblems, but its presence on the shields of rural communities, Drace-Francis correctly concludes that the dish has developed a stable duality (136). It is fascinating to note that while *mălai* has come to signify plenty, *mămăligă* "is frequently invoked in derision or shame" (137). His exploration of numerous proverbs related to both words has established two different registers in which the former is associated with positive experiences, while the latter, with negative ones (138-140).

*The Making of Mămăligă* reads like the making of Romania through consuming maize and if there is truth in the famous saying that one is what one eats, then Romanians are portrayed truthfully through the cultural history of their most emblematic national dish. As Drace-Francis suggests, the sense of shame that Romanians may have while eating *mămăligă* is due to self-awareness and so they reveal themselves as being poor while being humble. However, the humbleness cannot outweigh the shame, so this phrase appears to remain invariably imbalanced. Still, some Romanians may also discover that in

[2] The second sentence is impossible to translate since the first word does not have a meaning in the phrase while the second means juice, usually from cabbage. H.B.

any given epoch being poor may be linked to being honest and then eating *mămăligă* can finally be done with all the relish this excellent simple dish deserves.

Alex Drace-Francis's book, with its ample textual evidence, numerous historical references, and intimate details is a delightful read and will certainly be of interest to both the Romanian public and non-Romanian readers. It is something palpable which should serve as a compensation for a wallet that once went missing.

**Department of English Philology** **Hristo Boev**
**Shumen University**

**CORRESPONDENCE:** Assoc. Prof. Hristo Boev, PhD, Department of English Philology, Shumen University "Bishop Konstantin of Preslav," 22 Cherveni Eskadroni St., Shumen 9 700, Bulgaria. @ h.boev@shu.bg