

# The Marketed Birth of a Genre: Nineteenth-Century Definitions of the Historical Novel

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## Abstract

*The article investigates the nineteenth-century Romanian historical novel as a hybrid, self-reflexive and widely popular narrative form, situated at the crossroads of Western models, local traditions and an emerging mass readership. It contends that early Romanian historical narratives do not primarily underscore temporal distance or historical 'otherness', but rather foreground the spectacular, moral, ideological and sentimental impact of the story itself, thereby relativising perceptions of the past. The evolution of the historical novel is traced through the diversification of its subgenres, especially the hajduk and outlaw novel, where sensationalism, sexuality and violence infiltrate the private sphere and become central devices for intensifying social and affective conflict. Through readings of texts such as Constantin Mille's autobiographical novel Dinu Milian and the outlaw narratives of Panait Macri and Ilie Ighel, the article identifies a shift from romantic heroism towards more naturalistic explorations of amorality, rebellion and social crisis. The article argues that the Romanian historical novel constructs its own tradition through processes of borrowing, adaptation and cultural reworking, converting its generic impurity and commercial appeal into engines of aesthetic innovation, so that the historical novel emerges not merely as a medium for representing the past, but as an active agent of social imagination, capable of reconstructing and contesting familiar representations while paving the way for literary*

*modernity and for metafictional modes of narrative self-reflection.*

**Keywords:** Romanian historical novel, ideology, novel subgenres, social imagination, literary tradition

## NARRATIVE AS AN OBJECT OF LITERARY DESIRE

The historical novel may be defined as a literary form that secures its popularity by conjuring an impression of historical otherness, an impression it amplifies through recourse to the normative experience of the everyday and contemporary existence, an interpretive practice that has become a guiding principle in the reading habits of audiences enthralled by narratives of the past (Olteanu, 2025: 45). The earliest Romanian historical narratives, novellas and short stories that prepared the ground for the rise of the novel, often relativise the idea of historical difference. Under the influence of Romantic historicism, what really matters is not temporal distance, or the span of centuries separating present from past, but the story itself, which gathers moral, ideological or sensational meanings. The protean nature of the Romanian historical novel throughout the long nineteenth century is sustained by the subversive potential of a form that borrows conventions from other genres in order to produce narratives as dynamic as possible and appealing to a broad reading public, as is visible, for example, in the

work of novelists such as N. D. Popescu, Panait Macri and Ilie Ighel. The difficulty of defining the historical novel stems from the volatile and unusually capacious boundaries of a genre that fuses diverse thematic configurations, discursive strategies typical of other literary modes, and narrative conventions that transfer the past from the pages of obscure chronicles into novels designed to satisfy the curiosities of readers for whom reading is at once entertainment and aesthetic experience.

The world of rivalries and amorous scandals, of passionate chains of fate and petty intrigues that unsettle the apparent equilibrium of a realm governed by its own laws, is unveiled by the sensationalist pen of the novelist schooled in journalistic plotting. In *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Peter Brooks describes the phenomenon of the invasion of private space and the construction of objects of desire in the eighteenth-century novel, showing that the act of writing converts the horizon of intimacy into a public sphere, thereby laying bare a previously hidden life to a multitude of prying eyes:

The novel, then, can make private life the object of its concern only through invading the private sphere by opening it up to the irrevocable publicity of writing-imagined so often in the eighteenth-century novel by the publication of a private correspondence. Novelists demonstrate again and again that they are acutely conscious of this paradox through their thematizations of the struggle of privacy and its invasions. (Brooks, 1993: 32)

Bracketed narrative decorum, even when expressed merely as reluctance to render in detail characters' inner lives or bodily elements, yields to a histrionic ethos and to descriptive sensationalism, evident in the nineteenth-century novel both in amorous episodes, where sensuality predominates, and in scenes of cruelty, injury and

violence; in Ilie Ighel's bandit novel *Banditul Simion Licinski* [*The Bandit Simion Licinski*], the sensual and violent episodes attain their highest aesthetic value precisely because they evade the dominant, thesis-driven subtext of socially engaged prose. Taboo subjects such as sexuality demonstrate how intrusion into the realm of private life happens and as the Romanian novel becomes more specialised and its genres more clearly demarcated, novelists employ sexuality and violence as discursive devices to intensify their characters' social dramas or to impart a distinctive hue to the narrative, as seen in the work of Panait Macri, Ilie Ighel and G. Baronzi, who utilise the imagery of sensuality to magnify its function as a refuge for those ostracised by conventional social arrangements. In Ilie Ighel's novel *Banditul Simion Licinski* [*The Bandit Simion Licinski*], the future thief, who will prove capable of the most atrocious cruelties, succumbs to the forces of love alongside his paramour Sara:

No, neither of them had ever before reflected on anything, never had the settled idea crossed their minds to quiet that thing which possessed them with fury. When they were apart they felt no need, no passion that made them think ill, but now, in the hardening of rebellious senses, in the frenzy of uninterrupted kisses that glued their lips together, in the warm, eager clasp of their tense arms, pressed to one another as if nailed, they were lost in the infinity of unfamiliar, unperceived longings, in delights they had never dreamed of, which drew them so near that their minds had never once contemplated it, casting a leaden veil over their reason. They trembled and clung as though they would shatter, break one another to pieces.<sup>1</sup> (Ighel, 1890: 25; author's translation)

<sup>1</sup> Original quote: 'Nu, nici el, nici ea nu cugetaseră mai înainte la nimic. Nici odată prin gândul lor n-a străbătut ideea hotărâtă de a-și potoli acel ceva, care-i stăpânea cu furie. Când erau departe unul de altul nu simțeau nici o trebuință, nici o patimă care să-i facă a gândi la rău. Dar acum, în

Preserving the moral aims of hajduk literature and its historical tableaux, Ilie Ighel understands that the sensation novel's formula does not exclude naturalistic determinism, which he incorporates into his prose even as he frequently exaggerates it to portray absolute evil; Ighel's characters are denied any illusion of redemption or nobility, and the moral schema in his outlaw novels becomes progressively simplified, a tendency partly explainable by only sketchy or uneven knowledge of the real bandits' biographies later fictionalized. The social bandit abandons the aura of avenger or protector of the oppressed and, yielding to dark desires for power and personal prosperity, becomes an embodiment of formidable evil, a figure that does not repel the collective imagination but, on the contrary, fascinates it. The public responds with equal enthusiasm to the image of a pariah-hero who replaces the near-dogmatic moralizing of the hajduk. An effective indicator of public interest in Ighel's portrayal is the reception in contemporary press and the character's subsequent emergence in popular culture. In the prefaces to the two novels recounting Simion Licinski's adventures, Ilie Ighel describes the impact of this bandit's figure on the collective imagination. In such a context the model of an alternative society built on utopian principles and natural law reveals its inconsistency in favour of amoral individualism. The bandit retains his status as a social outlaw not through moral exemplarity but by becoming a symbol of violent revolt that refuses communal constraints, a generalized rebellion aimed not only at a corrupt authority but at a vitiated world as a whole, the bandit claiming himself a product of that world (Olteanu, 2023a: 260).

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încegarea de simțuri revoltate, îndârjite; în transportul sărutărilor necurmăte, care le lipsea buzele cu furie; în strânsoarea caldă și poftitoare a brațelor lor nervoase, lipiți unul de altul, ca bătuți cu ținte, se pierdură în nesfârșitul unor poftite neînțelese și nesimțite încă, unor plăceri nevisate, care-i apropia unul de altul atât cât mintea lor nici că cugetase vreo dată, care le întinse ca o perdea plumburiu peste văzul lor. Tremurau și se strângeau ca și cum ar fi vrut să se sfărâme, să se rupă în bucăți unul pe altul' (Ighel, 1890: 25).

Jerome de Groot contends that readers of historical novels consent to receive a repertoire of tropes, settings and ideas that are alien to their own experience yet intrinsic to the genre (De Groot, 2010: 10). Consequently, although the historical novel often relies on realist conventions to depict the world and social relations, it registers more subtle temporal distances and conceptual divergences than other forms of literary fiction, producing in the reader a productive estrangement by combining fictional strangeness with factual authenticity:

This question of a fundamental 'estrangement' intertwined with a clear rational 'cognition' seems a clear analogue for the work that historical fiction undertakes, the compound between the two in the present case leading to something like 'faction', a conjunction of the fictional uncanny and the factually authentic. (De Groot, 2010: 10-11)

This awareness of historical difference and estrangement manifests itself to the same degree only in literatures with a substantial tradition of historical fiction. In the nineteenth century, the Romanian historical novel invents its own form by modelling itself on translations drawn from the Western novelistic repertoire and, at the same time, creates a readership that it gradually renders conscious of the workings of its conventions (Olteanu, 2025: 50). The Romanian novelist's predilection for historical scenes that belong either to grand national history or to minor, personal or urban histories is legitimised not only by the prestige of Romantic historicism, but above all by the possibility of combining the literary conventions specific to popular fiction with the authority of the historical document and with a more or less instructive mode of reading. The very generic hybridity of the novel, which amalgamates various formulae belonging to several subgenres, makes any taxonomy governed solely by thematic criteria difficult. The poetics of the serial novel

entails sets of strategies that enhance its commercial dimension through the text's ability to initiate a shrewd game with readers' expectations and curiosities: each textual unit is constructed according to a template of effectively calibrated narrative suspense, and each chapter ending is structured around chains of mysteries, reversals of fortune and revelations. Although such sensationalist flourishes shape the specificity of the Romanian narrative, the poetics of the everyday exert another decisive influence on the novel. As a symptom of cultural modernity, tasked with encapsulating the dynamics of a romanticised daily life, the novel mirrors the professionalization of both the writer and the public.

Reading and readers are formed through a fusion grounded in the literary exercises of the novelists. In *Le roman du quotidien: Lecteurs et lectures populaires à la Belle Époque*, Anne-Marie Thiesse investigates the role of popular literature and of the novel in forming and reflecting everyday life from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Drawing on contemporary confessional accounts, she shows that the serial novel becomes a key reference point within the universe and sociability of women, since the rapid reading of briskly flowing instalments fragments the monotony of existence (Thiesse, 2000: 15). Novel reading thus emerges as a symptomatic practice of social modernity and functions as an equivalent of political conversation, the preferred form of entertainment for men. For Margaret Cohen, the sentimental novel similarly appears as a reaction against masculine hegemony, embodied in the realist novel:

[...] why were there no French women realists? In the course of excavating the novelistic practices surrounding the emergence of realism, I have discovered that the absence of women writers from the nineteenth-century realist canon is accurate: Balzac and Stendhal's female contemporaries

overwhelmingly steered clear of realist codes. Their avoidance of realism did not, however, mean their insignificance or absence in the contemporary novel. Rather, we will see women writers, George Sand among them, prominent in forging a form that was realism's principal competition across the 1830s and 1840s and that I call the sentimental social novel to emphasize its continuity with early-nineteenth-century sentimentality. (Cohen, 2002: 8-9)

The connections between literature labelled as popular or mass-market and the social novel concern the intimate, sentimental dimension of narratives that gloss the relations of social, familial or political authority. The writer of sentimental novels, the forerunner of the romance novel, capitalises on an exaggerated projection of the affective sphere, relying both on the reader's complicity and on the surprise generated by the dramatic scenarios set in motion. The nineteenth-century novel combines a reassuring dose of the familiar with the disruptions produced by melodramatic intrusions. As a late-emerging genre that does not obey the decorous rules of its literary predecessors, the novel claims for itself a tonic insurgency in relation to the authority of aesthetic value. Its hybrid nature, sustained by a commercially inflected rise, consistently eludes literary, formal and rhetorical constraints, from which it distances itself with sovereign indifference. Roger Caillois examines the relationship between the social and the novelistic in terms of the novel's capacity to reflect the morphology of society, constructing a dynamic image of societal dilemmas that seek to dissolve that very society like an acid. Following Caillois's reflections in *Approches de l'imaginaire*, one may argue that the novel both constructs and deconstructs representations of the familiar. The central aim of fictional prose, in his view, is to "authorise" a mode of existence that is rebellious

par excellence and that is as defiant as it is apparently familiar (Caillois, 1974: 150).

This somewhat thankless position, which appears to disrupt the harmony of ‘noble’ genres with a solid tradition, such as poetry or tragic drama, has led to numerous attempts to confine the novel’s insurgency within an operative theoretical formula of a normative kind, designed to neutralise its freedom by generating a set of rules that would homologate it alongside the other genres. The novelistic narrative establishes itself as a literary medium that legitimises itself through its capacity to transfigure social relations. The subgenres that hybridise the historical-novel form, such as the hajduk<sup>2</sup> or bandit novel, exemplify the entire process of symbolically reconverting the figure of the new hero, the outlaw (Olteanu, 2024: 345). This new heroic model is articulated through the figure of the proscribed character, who rejects the pre-existing order and calls for its violent dissolution, thereby signalling the presence of a social and historical crisis; the mythical roots of novelistic heroism are masked beneath the vehemence of revolt and cruelty.

### NARRATIVE SELF-CONCIOUSNESS IN ROMANIAN HISTORICAL NOVELS

The history of the Romanian novel thus intertwines with that of metafiction, mediated by the inflections of the voices agglutinated in both literary narratives and paratexts. This textual self-consciousness, so vibrant even in the first decades of the new epic genre’s emergence, demonstrates that the novel is not merely a reflective instrument but, as Caillois also observes, functions as a vigorous literary ‘agent’ that restructures and challenges conventional

representations of the social, compelling a close examination of its internal mechanisms. One should recall here *Dinu Milian* (1887), an autobiographical novel by Constantin Mille that resembles nothing else in the novelistic production of its century: the conventions of memoir literature are combined with the strategies of the social novel, mobilising several types of discourse (social, national, ideological), all assumed by a character-narrator who contemplates his childhood, adolescence and intellectual formation with affable, ironic and critical detachment. The autobiographical novel *Dinu Milian* (1887), together with its sequel, the volume *O viață* (1914), are the only literary texts that Mille signed with his real name.

Through *Dinu Milian*, a novel that reached a fourth edition even before the publication of its second part, Mille constructs a fluid narrative recounted in the voice of a young man who justifies his revolutionary ambitions by reference to biographical dissonances; the story opens with an idealised evocation of his early years and proceeds to the events that disrupt the tranquil course of Dinu’s family life, as the affable image of childhood is unsettled by the course of history. The abdication of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the ruler who had united Moldavia and Wallachia and laid the foundations of modern Romania, which brings significant social and political changes, and the bankruptcy of a father devoid of business acumen confer upon the hero the status of scholarship student, a social stigma within the aristocratic world to which the family is determined to lay claim. His school years, marked by portraits of authoritarian, mocking and violent teachers and by interactions with equally ruthless classmates, before whom he learns to impose himself by their own means, by force, alternate with episodes from a family life fraught with drama:

I stood motionless, stupefied, the professor pressing my shoulders to the ground, under the weight of the Frenchman’s hand my knees

<sup>2</sup> The term *hajduk* (also *haiduk*, *hajduke*) likely derives from Hungarian *hajdú* (see Merriam-Webster, s.v. „haiduk”) or from Turkish *haydut* meaning ‘brigand’ (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1911: 820, where it is written *haidūd*) and in the Balkans and Eastern Europe (16th–19th centuries) came to denote irregular outlaws or freedom fighters who combined banditry with resistance to Ottoman or feudal authorities, later gaining heroic folk-hero connotations in literature and oral tradition.

began to give, but my tight trousers, fastened with garters about my thighs, would not allow me; from the renewed pressure, from the renewed insults, this time I fell to the ground, I felt the urge to flee the world, but where to go? to do so I would have had to pass among the boys' ranks, and it seemed preferable to remain there with my cheek in my hands, accustomed as I was to the indulgence and comforts of home, I felt myself in the midst of hell.<sup>3</sup> (Mille, 1887: 25; author's translation)

A devoutly bigoted mother and an authoritarian father, who loses his mind when confronted with the increasingly visible consequences of the poverty he seeks to conceal, endeavour to keep Dinu Milian away from childish entertainments and from people outside their social class, in the hope of ensuring that he acquires a rigid education corresponding to the status they believe they still possess. The disparate episodes of childhood and adolescence are ordered according to the legitimising needs of the socialist intellectual's discourse. Although many of the events are not fixed with chronological precision, this autobiographical novel also makes use of specific dates, which lend the text a distinctly memorialist accent, and the author frequently inserts essayistic passages and cultural references through which he intimates possible interpretations of the events he is about to recount.

The novel offers a dramatically shaded account of the scholarship student's condition, which the hero comes to know only after the onset of his father's illness, through a letter announcing his expulsion. His experience as a schoolboy stems from his parents' desire to discipline him,

more from the intention to provide him with an education than from any pedagogical vocation, and to detach him from friendships with common people deemed unworthy of his social standing. The evocation is articulated by the voice of a mature Dinu Milian, who draws on his formative experiences to bring to light a world hostile to the egalitarian impulses of a young man from the aristocracy. Precarious living conditions drive the hero into a series of rebellions against every form of authority, whether familial, educational or political, and the episodes of revolt are all triggered by the experience of being a scholarship pupil, to which the hero's memory returns at each decisive moment of his life. The novel closes with the protagonist's departure abroad, disgusted by the social life of his country.

Milian's narrative voice formulates a violent social critique, born of the conviction that an imminent reconstruction of the community is necessary. The second volume of the autobiographical novel, *O viață [A Life]*, recounts Dinu Milian's return to Bucharest, to the capital where he intends to build a career and secure the means of subsistence. The narrative tone is more balanced and reflective than in the first volume, dominated by the violence of rebellion and a strongly contestatory spirit; the narrator's voice is detached and ostensibly objective, acknowledging that the two years spent in Brussels and Paris 'civilised, shaped and educated' him. With a freshly obtained doctorate in law and the 'red flag in his pocket', Dinu Milian is compelled to seek ways of earning a living: he obtains a post as a contributor to a newspaper and awaits, with some hope, the arrival of clients in need of his legal expertise. The rhetorical effusions of the first volume are replaced by a constant preoccupation with survival in the capital city and by the assumption of a form of existence adapted to the responsibilities of adulthood. The appearance of a novel such as Mille's can be explained only by a cumulative deployment of procedures that compensate for the absence of an established

<sup>3</sup> Original quote: 'Eu stau în picioare îndobitocit. Profesorul mă apasă de umere la pământ. Sub greutatea mânei franțuzului genunchii vor să se îndoie. Pantalonii însă strâmți și prinși cu calțavete pe pulpe, nu mă lașă. Din nou apăsare. Din nou ocări. De astă dată cad la pământ. [...] Îmi venea să fug în lumea toată. Dar pe unde? Pentru aceasta ar fi trebuit să trec printre rândurile băeților și tot mai bine eram acolo, cu obrazul între mâini. Deprins cu alintarea și viața casei, mă credeam în mijlocul iadului' (Mille, 1887: 25).

tradition, an inventory of techniques composed of translations, adaptations and cultural assimilations that lead to the elaboration of texts that are more or less original. The boundary between originality and adaptation is fluid and is embodied in the ‘hypermnnesia of the novel’, a feature specific to every text in the genre, in which the memory of its origins persists *in nuce* (Axinte, 2011: 74). The origins of the Romanian novel must therefore be sought not only in the ensemble of compensatory strategies to which writers resort in the absence of a tradition, but also, and above all, in the historical, cultural and social processes that impel its emergence.

#### STYLISTIC VERSATILITY AND SUBGENERIC DIVERSITY IN ROMANIAN HISTORICAL PROSE. FROM HAJDUK TO JUDICIAL NOVEL

Prejudices against the subgenres of popular or mass-market fiction have persisted since the very period in which they were composed and published. At the time, hajduk novels offended contemporary moral sensibilities through the violence of the events they depicted, and literary critics who were contemporaries of Ilie Ighel, Panait Macri or N. D. Popescu read such works as a form of literature which, by virtue of its themes and incidents, scandalised a public interested in didactic, moral and scientifically useful reading. Large print runs and commercial success, however, refute the intuition of critics and literary historians who failed to grasp that readers fond of ‘innocent pleasures’ valued easy entertainment and moral lessons camouflaged in the diatribes of a histrionic narrative voice. The effectiveness of social criticism and the essayistic verve displayed by the authors of popular novels were stubbornly ignored by the informed arbiters of taste. The criticism and literary historiography of the following century homogenised and classified the subgenres of Romanian popular fiction either by reproducing the verdicts of earlier critics or by

retrospectively superimposing the literary achievements of their own time onto the clumsy efforts of writers who were sketching the dawn of a new species in the national culture. Within Romanian literary history, Macri has been assimilated into an aesthetic lineage branded as mediocre, and these distinctly unflattering judgements, recorded by *Dicționarul literaturii române de la origini până la 1900*, have inevitably shaped the reception of his novels:

[...] like N. D. Popescu and Ilie Ighel-Deleanu, he writes several narratives, some pretentiously entitled novels, about early-century hajduks, attempting to justify his prose by appealing to its social-educational usefulness. [...] Drawing on events involving crime, robbery and immorality, subjects eagerly exploited by the reporter hungry for sensation, Macri publishes a multitude of serial pieces in widely circulating periodicals. A writer without talent, Macri is the author of a literary output in which scenes of violence abound. (DLRO, 1970: 534-535; author’s translation)

Each genre experiences a particular period in which its popularity reaches a peak, a stage followed either by disappearance or by dissolution and absorption into another novelistic subgenre. A telling example in this respect is the hajduk novel, which undergoes a spectacular development in the second half of the nineteenth century. The hajduk novel emerges as a representative subgenre of the early phase of the species, its period of efflorescence extending from 1855, the year of publication of C. Boerescu’s *Aldo și Aminta sau Bandiții* [*Aldo and Aminta or The Bandits*], to 1885, when the fame of narratives centred on rebellious noble bandits, making way for new epic models (Olteanu, 2024: 357). After almost half a century of dominance in the literary field, the hajduk novel is assimilated into the bandit novel, which takes over its plot structure and themes

while replacing the iridescences of romantic narrative with the incisions of naturalism. Published in the transitional alphabet, the novel *Aldo și Aminta sau Bandiții* [*Aldo and Aminta or The Bandits*] marks a symbolic shift toward constructing a literary mythology that incorporates the image of a glorious past, the aspirations of post-revolutionary nationalism, and the prospect of a future destined to fulfil the goals of the 1848 generation. Boerescu's hajduks belong more to the category of contemplative, dilemmatic spirits prone to meditative excess than to that of fighters seeking battlefield glory, their portraits rendered as stereotypes composed of romantic clichés that metaphorically emphasize moral and physical superiority. The leader of the band and paternal figure, Captain Brav is individualized by 'his noble body, whose majestic brow surpassed that of his companions, and in whose penetrating eyes one saw the fire that animated the free man'<sup>4</sup> (Boerescu 1855: 10; author's translation). The plot dissipates into several insufficiently delineated directions without a coherent gradation of conflicts, while the reflective hajduks dominate the action with their abyssal meditations, increasing the construction's implausibility. The collective portrait of the gang is likewise framed by the thanatic physiognomy of the romantic hero for whom death constitutes a primary dimension of existence.

The works of N. D. Popescu are cohesive, making full use of sensational elements and the novelty of startling situations, and they reveal a heightened sensitivity to the popularity of certain texts to which the author repeatedly returns as well as to the shifting literary preferences of his time; his role as chief archivist provided N. D. Popescu with rich historical material to adapt to the expectations of public taste. Although he begins from historical documents, as is common in most post-1848 prose, Popescu's popular novel goes

beyond mere romanticization of events. The novelist repeatedly shows concern for the balladic core of the hajduk myth and more often than not succeeds in creating an atemporal atmosphere akin to the world of folktales. Yet the cultural archetype of the hajduk proves especially effective in conveying nationalist principles, and its strong receptivity to local specificity quickly transforms it into a national myth. Romantic imagination readily envelops the conventional, coarse physiognomy of the bandit with the legendary aura of the perfected hero, whose appearance reflects exalted moral qualities. The evolution of the hajduk figure from the unflattering literary posture of an unremarkable man to the guardian-image of the oppressed nation is explained by the ascent of the novelistic imagination. N. D. Popescu's hajduks fight not merely for abstract patriotic principles, as Boerescu's bandits do, but are often drawn into conflict by personal motives, the action of *Iancu Jianu, căpitan de haiduci* [*Iancu Jianu, captain of hajduks*], tracing the hero's thirst for vengeance after the abduction, rape, and death of his sister, the protagonist fleeing to the mountains and becoming a hajduk as the consequence of a private vendetta. This new posture as a social outlaw also feeds his cruel, monstrous side, continually demanding punishment of oppressors insensitive to peasant suffering, and the thirst for revenge directed at the *serdar*<sup>5</sup> who dishonoured his sister expands to encompass the entire social category to which he himself belonged, the boyars of Phanariot descent or those who emulated the practices and lifestyle of officials from the Phanar. The bloody scenes sustain much of the novel's thesis, their function being to demonstrate the punishments that hajduks administered to

<sup>4</sup> Original quote: '[...] nobilul său corp, ce purta o frunte măreață, întrecea p-al soților săi, și în pătrunzătorii săi ochi se vedea focul ce anima pe omul cel liber' (Boerescu, 1855: 10).

<sup>5</sup> A mid-level military and administrative rank in the pre-modern Romanian principalities (Wallachia and Moldavia), roughly equivalent to a local commander or captain, often with both military and policing responsibilities. The term is of Ottoman origin, from Turkish *serdar*, itself from Persian *sar-dār* ('head, chief, leader') (Somel, 2011: 576).

outsiders whom they regarded as sources of evil and corruptors of the Romanian popular soul:

Since Vodă Caragea ascended the throne, a considerable number of Greeks had overrun that small town and, by harassment, forged documents, all manner of injustices, and other stratagems, had wrested from the hands of the poor Romanians their small estates, livestock, and houses, and in some cases even their lives; Jianu intended to bring ruin upon these Phanariots and his will was fulfilled: on a dark night, returning over the mountain ridges from a raid he had carried out as far as Rucăr where some Székely had taken refuge, he and his comrades suddenly burst into the town, joined by many of those left dispossessed by Greek avarice, fell upon the houses of those predatory neighbours, overturned and scorched all that stood before them and killed all the foreigners; they spared the women but bound them so they would not be dangerous, and they restored the Romanians to the possession of their rights.<sup>6</sup> (Popescu, 2021: 21; author's translation)

Iancu Jianu is not a contemplative figure drained by abstract torments but a strategist who builds his renown on personal example, the setting and props functioning as essential elements of punitive scenography and the captain of the hajduk band selecting them with care, as if weighing the effect of his bloody gesture; concern for the resonances of their actions transforms the hajduks in N. D. Popescu's novels into actors

intent on shaping posterity's view of their exploits, the band's members responding with admiration to the captain's victories and striving to transmit them as effectively as possible because they perceive themselves as integral parts of the legendary apparatus constructed from the adventures of the outlaw-avenger.

The model of the social bandit described by Eric E. Hobsbawm thus shifts from the hajduks' struggle on behalf of the community towards the fascination exerted by the bandit's cruelty, reconfigured as a symbolic form of resistance to corrupt authority (Hobsbawm, 1969: 62). After the protective figure of an athlete of spectacular escapes such as Iancu Jianu<sup>7</sup>, a character like Simion Licinski,<sup>8</sup> confidently claimed by popular culture, comes to replace heroism with the instinct for survival and the impulse to sacrifice moral principles. If N. D. Popescu (1843–1921) perfected the hajduk narrative by shrewdly exploiting the strategies specific to the sensation novel, Ilie Ighel (1870–1938) lends a naturalist colouring to the social rebel, who no longer lives under the illusion of anachronistic heroism but seeks, at every turn, to defy the forms of authority, whether state or familial. The historical novel, that literary construct which dominates for more than half a century, functions as an umbrella genre that gathers under the aegis of its narrative diversity a

<sup>7</sup> Iancu Jianu (1787–1842) was a celebrated Romanian hajduk (outlaw/folk hero) active in Oltenia during the early 19th century. Originally a merchant's son, he turned leader of a band of hajduks who resisted abusive boyars and Ottoman officials, redistributing wealth and defending peasants. Jianu became a legendary figure in Romanian folklore, celebrated in ballads and stories for his bravery, chivalry, and sense of justice. Later in life he accepted a pardon, settled as a landowner, and his exploits inspired plays and poems that helped shape the national romantic image of the hajduk (Olteanu, 2024: 350).

<sup>8</sup> Simion Licinski is a ruthless, charismatic outlaw in Ilie Ighel's novel *Banditul Simion Licinski* [*The Bandit Simion Licinski*], and, according to Alexandra Olteanu, he embodies both social revolt and moral ambiguity, being portrayed as a skilled, fearless bandit who challenges corrupt local elites while committing brutal acts that complicate simple hero/villain readings. Olteanu emphasizes his role as a cultural symbol, a product of rural injustice and folkloric outlaw tradition used by Ighel to interrogate violence, honour, and community responses to oppression, and the character functions narratively to expose social tensions and problematize romanticized notions of the hajduk, the literary figure being inspired by a real thief of the same name from Dobruja (Olteanu, 2023a: 257).

<sup>6</sup> Original quote: 'De când se suise pe tron Vodă Caragea, năpădise asupra aceluia oraşel o sumă oarecare de greci care prin şicane, hârtii mincinoase, nedreptăţiri de tot felul şi alte tertipuri răpiră din mâna bieţilor români moşioare, vieţi şi case, iar unora chiar viaţa. Pe aceşti fanarioţi Jianu voia să-i dea pierzaniei şi voinţa sa se realiză: într-o noapte întunecoasă, întorcându-se pe coamele munţilor de la o călcare ce-o făcuse tocmă la Rucăr unde se ascuseseră câţiva secui, el cu camarazii săi năvăliră fără veste în oraş, se uniră cu mai mulţi din cei lăsaţi pe drumuri de lăcomia grecească, se năpustiră asupra caselor acelor vecini răpitori, dărâmară, pârjoliră tot ce le ieşi înainte şi uciseră pe toţi străinii: pe femei le cruţară dar le legară ca să nu fie periculoase, iar pe români îi repuseră în stăpânirea drepturilor lor' (Popescu, 2021: 21).

multitude of subgenres engaged in a continuous process of transformation. Discussing the origin of literary genres, Tzvetan Todorov argues that such generic entities are not static but develop in response to social and historical contexts and are subject to the pressures of social conventions and readers' expectations (Todorov, 1990: 23).

Admirers of the hajduks will attribute to them every human and combative quality the novelists can imagine, and the numerous ballads inspired by their bravery are illustrative of the way in which the exemplary destiny of the social bandit is perpetuated. Bands of hajduks emerge in turbulent historical periods, displaying a normative moral stature clothed in the hues of an anachronistic ideal; their refusal to acknowledge and their defiance of unjust authority transform these bandits, kin to Robin Hood, into emblems of social revolt that corrupt boyars must fear. In his *Istoria literaturii române*, Gh. Adamescu situates the penetration of hajduk ballads into local folklore in the Slavonic era, correlating their rise in popularity with the particularities of the historical context:

Popular poetry portrays them as powerful and generous men and admires in them the resolve that the people felt themselves incapable of in those times when tyranny had brought them low and when the multitude of misfortunes made them believe they were destined to suffer forever. We should note that the miraculous does not feature in these ballads, yet something of the miraculous quality marks almost all of these heroes. (Adamescu, 1920: 31; author's translation)

The literary historian also sketches, intuitively, an initial distinction between the spiritual portrait of the hajduk in the ballad and that of the hero in more recent epic creations, including the novel, indicating that the character evolves in line with the literary form it generates, appropriating the struggles and aims of each

century, at times cloaked in allegory. The versatility of the fronts on which the hajduk, the glorious hero of the Balkan space, fights determines the ways in which tradition will relate to this type of rebellious figure, so confidently claimed by a rich popular culture. The outlaw novel emerges from the literary trunk of hajduk prose and proposes a different set of motives for the characters' actions: cruelty is no longer euphemised through the hyperbolic exaltation of noble character, while passionate impulses, selfishness and murder anticipate the hajduk's retreat into a society of outlaws that opposes the official social model. Revolt against authority and the acquisition of the status of avenger are not latent traits of the bandits in Panait Macri's novels but roles assumed together with the new position they occupy within the hajduk band. The character's development follows a sinuous trajectory that relies on reversals of fortune and melodramatic intrigue: although initially distinguished by exemplary morality, the character comes to commit a deliberate atrocity that excludes him from his community and forces him to take to the forests and the mountains. The character created by Macri in *Ghiță Cătănuță, căpitan de haiduci* [*Ghiță Cătănuță, captain of hajduks*], compresses the traits of melodrama heroes, the elegiac fervour of the romantic demon, and the wounded dignity of the marginal whose initiatives are censured by social norms. Ghiță Cătănuță's gesturality, by convention, acquires the ritual attributes of initiation, the novelist cadences the narrative with a brisk spirit that propels the sequence of events toward a striking denouement, the future hajduk is fully aware of the effects of his crime and his selfish motives give way to both amorous fulfillment and societal vocation, Ghiță Cătănuță sees in hajduking the chance to become the man Vidra would desire as well as the avenger who will set right the evil he witnessed passively as clergyman and subordinate. The monologue in which he reveals his intentions borders on madness, he casts aside his weapon and knife and,

in an ecstatic state, speaks to himself and his victim, his discourse ranges from the curse of the Phanariot origins of the parish clerk to the sacrilege committed by the latter in daring to have loved Vidra, culminating in plans to become a hajduk:

I have long known what a vile lineage the Phanariots are; yes, it was a grave wrong that I loved Vidra, yet your fault was great as well. [...] No, she needs a young man, a hero, and from this day forth I shall be that hero; I will go into the forest and there I will kill all those who have brought our country to its knees. I have long heard the people's laments and many widowed mothers have often come to me with tears in their eyes to tell how their daughters were violated by Phanariots and Turks. They begged me to call down God's wrath upon these defiled men, and I prayed many times. From today, however, the smoke of incense will be replaced by the smoke of gunpowder and the sound of bells by the crack of rifles; your blood, this blood I have shed for the first time, has opened in me a taste for killing, and I will kill without cease, without mercy, without fear of sin, wherever I see a foreigner.<sup>9</sup> (Macri, 1883: 10-11; author's translation)

Panait Macri's outlaw novel, aligned with the Romanian noir tradition, is a work in which the conventional Manichaeism built on a straightforward opposition between good and evil

is subtly reconfigured into a more nuanced dynamic shaped by the oscillations in the characters' motives. As Juliette Raabe argues, in a permanent order society itself constitutes the good, which the individual opposes (Raabe, 1970: 293-294). The very act of resisting the existing social order thus places the individual outside the morality that determines good and evil. The bandit's amorality also signals the demise of a society governed by a traditional morality grounded in solidarity, self-sacrifice, egalitarianism and patriotism. The world populated by bandit-heroes no longer conforms to principles such as generosity, patriotism, social equality and the protection of the weak, which governed the epic universe created by C. Boerescu in *Aldo și Aminta sau Bandiții* (1855) and, to some extent, that constructed by N. D. Popescu; instead, it brings about a decisive abrogation of the regime of illusions concerning justice and nobility. The classic scenario of a society dominated by the force of law collapses into a space where the authority of chaos and insubordination to conventional morality is ever more forcefully asserted. The genesis of the Romanian historical novel branches out into composite subgenres that produce hybrid texts combining formulae specific to several subgeneric traditions.

The delimitation of these subgenres is most often carried out according to criteria such as thematic configuration or the structuring of epic material; another criterion employed in marking subgeneric boundaries is the label assigned either by the author or by the publishers. Subtitles frequently guide novels towards an overly general classification, the most common generic label being simply that of 'novelă' ['novel'] or 'romanț original' ['original romance']. Another recurrent subtitle is 'episod istoric' ["historical episode"], which specifies, to some extent, the type of narrative offered to a readership capable of distinguishing between the various kinds of plots characteristic of popular literature, fuelled by a growing interest in the serial form (Olteanu,

<sup>9</sup> Original quote: 'Am auzit eu de mult ce neam spurcat e acela al fanarioților! Da, e o greșeală mare că iubesc pe Vidra, greșeala ta însă era și mare. [...] Nu, ei îi trebuie un flăcău, un voinic, și de azi înainte voinic voi fi și eu! Mă voi duce în codru și acolo voi omorî pe toți acei cari îngenuchiară țara noastră! De mult aud plângerile poporului și multe mume văduve au venit adesea la mine și cu lacrimile în ochi îmi spuneau cum copilele lor au fost siluite de fanarioți și turci. Ele mă rugau să chem urgia lui Dumnezeu asupra acestor spurcați și m-am rugat de multe ori. De astăzi însă, fumul tămâii va fi înlocuit cu fumul prafului de pușcă și sunetele clopotelor cu trosniturile puștilor! Sângele tău, acest sânge pe care am vărsat pentru prima dată, mi-a deschis pofta de a omorî și voi omorî într-una, fără cruțare, fără frică de păcat, ori unde voi vedea un străin!'" (Macri, 1883: 10-11).

2023b: 284). The sentimental novel represents yet another generic label circulated by editors and authors, its melodramatic intrigues clearly signalling its subgeneric affiliation. Mystery novels and hajduk narratives usually display their generic allegiance in the title itself, whereas a hybrid form par excellence, such as the outlaw novel, incorporates in its thematic and structural configuration elements specific both to the hajduk subgenre and to the criminal or judicial novel.

For Jacques Derrida, the literary genre presupposes an indissoluble link with a law, implying an 'institutionalised classification, an applicable principle of non-contamination and non-contradiction'; yet, as Derrida explains, the paradox of the literary genre resides in a flexibility and instability that lead to the transgression of generic boundaries. Discourse and language are by nature fluid and operate through difference and differentiation from other forms of artistic communication, and the existence of an 'automatism of difference' justifies the inter-influence and 'impurity' of genres (Derrida, 1992: 221). In his view, the law and force of the literary genre permit the destabilisation of a relatively homogeneous construct, within which the transgression of boundaries becomes the rule rather than the exception. Fredric Jameson's approach conceives literature as an expression of the relations that obtain between human collectives and the modes of production. In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson understands literary genre as a symbolic expression of conflictual experiences with the various modes of production operative in particular epochs:

As for romance, it would seem that its ultimate condition of figuration, on which the other preconditions we have already mentioned are dependent – the category of worldness, the ideologeme of good and evil felt as magical forces, a salvational historicity – is to be found in a transitional moment in which two distinct modes of production, or

moments of socioeconomic development, coexist. Their antagonism is not yet articulated in terms of the struggle of social classes, so that its resolution can be projected in the form of a nostalgic (or less often, a Utopian) harmony. (Jameson, 2002: 135)

In his article 'Anomalies of Genre: The Utility of Theory and History for the Study of Literary Genres', Hayden White emphasises, following other theorists, that literary genre cannot be defined in rigid terms, since it is subject to multiple social, cultural and historical variables that generate so-called generic 'anomalies', that is, deviations from the normative reference points which typically define genres. Drawing on Michael Prince and Ralph Cohen, White contends that genre is a concept 'resistant to theory', inherently contestable, and that it conceals a fascination with generic purity (White, 2003: 599). In the case of the Romanian historical novel, generic impurity and thematic diversification through aesthetically insurgent subgenres render the definition of this highly influential nineteenth-century form particularly problematic. The volatile boundaries between aesthetically valuable literature and *paraliterature* have constituted another sensitive point in attempts to delimit precisely the literary sphere of the historical novel, which for a long time was regarded as belonging eminently to high literature by virtue of its higher degree of documentation and artistic elaboration. The most influential novelistic genre of the nineteenth century retains a compact character despite its composite physiognomy, which agglutinates a multitude of thematically divergent subgenres, some inspired by Western cultural capital and others regional or national, shaped by local social traditions.

The inter- and transnational character of the novel likewise complicates its definition as a genre. Margaret Cohen (2003) underscores the international nature of the novel, distinguished by its cosmopolitan thematics and by an itinerant

poetics that transcends national literary traditions. The novel's stake appears to lie not in its transformation into a national variant, but in its circulation as a poetic template that comes to operate within distinct cultural and literary fields. For Cohen, the novelistic genre cannot be identified, at least at the level of form, as having national roots even when its contents stage imagological constructs specific to a given nation. Her chosen example is the influence of historical realism, a trend which, although it inspires numerous local variants, offers an international literary 'currency' to all novelists who adopt it:

Even at historical moments when images of the nation have been offered on the level of the novel's content, however, national identification was never true on the level of the novel's form. [...] There are local variants of historical realism, certainly, but it is striking that those novels most closely associated with imagining the nation are using an 'international' literary currency, much as modernism was to become the 'international style' in the domain of visual culture and the decorative arts in the following century. (Cohen, 2003: 481-482)

The Marxist inflections of Cohen's theoretical framework become apparent when she introduces a further 'travelling' genre, maritime fiction, which reflects conflictual relations of production, trade and labour and thereby enables the codes of Walter Scott's historical novel to be displaced into the supranational space of the open sea. Yet Margaret Cohen's model is vulnerable in that it begins from a thematic criterion, used to delimit historical fiction, and then allows this to be replaced by criteria of geographical location and mobility which, despite their underlying dynamism, tend to confer on the genre a predominantly regional rather than universal character, in tension with the scholar's stated

aims. Maritime fiction<sup>10</sup> can plausibly be subsumed under historical fiction, but not vice versa (Cohen, 2010: 43). Nor would relations of labour and production, combined with spatial criteria, prove any more productive for an analysis of the Romanian historical novel, suggesting that, notwithstanding its international circulation, the genre is prone to regionalisation and local refashioning, appropriating the imaginative modes of the cultures in which it takes root. Mieke Bal accordingly maintains that any generic taxonomy is inherently fallible and should be handled with caution, and she proposes instead the notion of narrative as a cultural mode of expression, intended as an alternative to the conventional rigidity of genre theory:

Time span is also significant in the fabulas of narrative texts. A first, general distinction might be the one between crisis and development: the first term indicates a short span of time into which events have been compressed, the second a longer period of time that shows a development. Neither of these two forms in itself has clear advantages over the other. It has sometimes been said that development is more realistic, more in accord with the experience of real life. This seems doubtful, to say the least. In reality too, moments of crisis present themselves, moments during which, in a brief instant of time, the life of a person or an entire nation takes a decisive turn. (Bal, 2017: 178)

Since narrative is a cultural mode that transcends the boundaries of literary genres, it also encompasses scientific and artistic domains, including anthropology, academic criticism, the

<sup>10</sup> Maritime fiction is a body of prose narratives (novels and short stories) centred on the sea, seafaring and shipboard life, often structured around voyages, naval combat, trade, exploration or piracy, with the ship and the ocean as key settings and symbols. The genre has been influentially theorised by Margaret Cohen, especially in her book *The Novel and the Sea*, where she analyses how sea narratives shape the modern novel's poetics and imaginaries (Cohen, 2010: 22).

visual arts, cultural studies and film studies. The theoretical model proposed by the scholar offers several perspectives from which the novel may be classified, starting from rhythm, focalisation, structure and historical determination. The labels attached to novelistic genres in Bal's account are those canonised according to thematic criteria (detective, war, spy novel), historical criteria, or affiliation to a literary current (realist, romantic, postmodernist novel, etc.). In the quote above, Mieke Bal distinguishes between the crisis novel and the novel of development (Bildungsroman), the two categories being differentiated by the duration of the narrative: the crisis novel encompasses a short period of time in which a compressed action unfolds at a rapid pace, whereas the novel of development focuses on an extended period that accumulates sufficient narrative material for the transformation of the characters. Applying this distinction to the nineteenth-century Romanian historical novel and its subgenres yields a predictable result: the crisis novel predominates, offering dynamic narratives, unfolding within a short span and closing with a precipitate denouement, features justified by commercial strategies transplanted from journalistic discourse. Another unusual text belonging to the same category of the novel of development is *Dinu Milian*, a veritable Bildungsroman in which Const. Mille combines fragments of his own biography with a reflective discursive rhythm that closely registers the historical and social changes witnessed by the young socialist.

### CONCLUSIONS

The dominant ideologies of the nineteenth century find an effective resonance chamber in novelistic discourse by way of the affective investment elicited in the reception of literature with historical subject matter. Visions of history are shaped by projections derived from the ideological narratives circulating in popular

culture or mass culture. In this sense, the illustrations that often accompany the text are designed to stimulate immersion in a novelistic scenario that appeals not only to the intellect but above all to the emotions. Beyond its more or less facile entertainment value, the historical novel provides an exercise in the imaginative modes through which people in different periods come to identify with a particular kind of historical representation. Everyday behind-the-scenes history gains authority and often overtakes official, supposedly objective history, absorbing its events and prominent biographies. In good Romantic fashion, high history, derived from documents, lends narrative legitimacy to its backstage counterpart, transforming an engaging story designed to satisfy the curiosities of a readership captivated by sensationalist allure into an instrument for familiarising readers with period settings and social and cultural practices. Literature with a historical subject thus entails not only imaginative but also affective modes of history, which itself becomes popular, an artefact of fictional reworking. The novel contributes to the construction of a collective cultural and social identity to the same extent that it engages with the dimension of historical transformation. In *Spectacular Realities*, Vanessa R. Schwartz describes the 'spectacularisation' of urban life in fin-de-siècle Paris and identifies it as the principal cause of the emergence of mass culture. As a dynamic, predominantly visual form, popular culture is the consequence of the urban spectacle, which mediates the interaction between producers of cultural goods and their consuming public, a relationship brokered by the press:

The printed word provided access to modern Paris for an increasingly literate population by constructing Paris as an image. The interlocking relation between the boulevards and the press fostered a new curiosity among a large and diverse population to first read and then see things for themselves and created a

culture in which individuals from different classes and of both sexes were expected to derive pleasure from the same sights and experiences. (Schwartz, 1999: 16)

What underscores the hybrid nature of the Romanian historical novel from the very outset of its crystallisation as a normative literary genre is the spectacular dimension of historical reality, overaccentuated to the point of saturating the scenarios circulated by popular fiction. The existence of an inventory of scenarios and novelistic formulae is itself a symptom of modernity: literary preferences become an indicator of literature's transformation into a commodity destined for consumption by a heterogeneous public. Those formulae that prove their success on novelistic terrain enter an evolutionary process designed to secure their popularity. The subgenres of the historical novel are as mobile as the historical-fiction genre's capacity to encapsulate seemingly divergent literary tendencies. Each subgenre, whether the hajduk, outlaw or mystery experiences a period of ascendancy before being absorbed into a newer form, more versatile thematically and more closely attuned to the social realities of its time. Within the complex literary metabolism of historical prose, the ideological imperatives of the hajduk novel, which articulates a nationalist discourse directed against a baleful history, are absorbed into the vehement social critique popularised by the bandit novel, which abandons the earlier heroic model in favour of a forceful denunciation of social crisis that comes to justify violence.

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