

THE ROMANTIC HISTORICISM AND THE RISE OF THE HISTORICAL NOVEL IN THE 19TH CENTURY ROMANIAN LITERATURE

ALEXANDRA OLTEANU*

Abstract The present study explores the definitions and evolutionary trajectories of the novel and novella genres within Romanian literary theory and practice. It navigates through terminological overlaps and historical contexts, particularly focusing on the challenges inherent in defining the novella. Through an examination of Romanian literary history, the emergence of the novella is unravelled within the romantic historicist matrix and its successive transformation into a precursor of the novel during the 19th century. The thematic richness, stylistic diversity, and cultural significance of Romanian historical fiction are also explored, shedding light on their role in shaping cultural memory and historical consciousness. The paper also describes the hybrid nature of Romanian historical novel, illustrating its evolution amidst socio-political and cultural upheavals, notably after the revolutionary period of 1848.

Keywords Novel, novella, historicism, romanticism, historical fiction.

The Novel and the Novella

While the definition of the novel could be more efficiently achieved through correspondences with translated Western literature and through the selection and interpretation of intelligible theoretical texts, the case of the short story raised difficulties due to terminological overlaps and confusions that assimilated it to the novelistic genre. Thus, the novella becomes one of the most difficult species to define and separate from the theoretical silhouette of the novel. In the Romanian context, the origins of both genres do not imply a clear awareness of the differences

* *Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași. alexandra.olteanu@student.uaic.ro.*

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5425-2727>.

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between them, and their generic individuality was annulled in theoretical vocabulary by an uncertain and oscillating terminological inventory. However, it is certain that both the novella and the novel, in addition to the common terms of novel, romance, short story, and *romanț*, also shared a late appearance, placing them in the lineage of poetry. The emergence of the novella also occurred within the matrix of romantic historicism, and the strategies of Romanian prose writers from the 19th century transformed it into an incipient form of the novel.

The short genre first developed in Moldova, and the emergence of the romantic novella also occurred within the realm of journalistic circulation. C. Negruzzi's short story, *Alexandru Lăpușneanu*, was first published in an issue of *Dacia literară* in 1840, from where it was taken up by the editorial staff of *Curierul de ambe sexe* journal. Canonical short stories were part of the same feuilletonistic circuit followed by novels, involving certain narrative elaboration strategies to dose epic tension and gradate the evolution of the plot. In Wallachia, the short story that inaugurated the series of original writings belonging to this genre was Al. Odobescu's historical prose, *Mihnea Vodă cel Rău*, published in 1857 in *Românul*. In 1860, *Doamna Chiajna* appeared in *Revista Carpaților*. Originally, the origin of the Romanian novella is indissolubly linked to portraits of relatively obscure historical figures, an aspect that requires efforts of documentation. In Transylvania, *Foaia pentru minte, inimă și literatură* did not publish original novellas, but only translations of "historical fragments." However, the *Familia* journal published several original texts, and after 1870, with the novellas written by Slavici, it is considered that the genre reached the level of literary maturity.

The narrative structures upon which the historical novel is constructed perpetually relate to the long-analyzed distinction between the literary and the documentary, between the historical and the artistic, formulating some questions pertaining to a possible writerly deontology. To what extent can the novelist's inventions and fidelity be credited or quantified compared to those of the biographer or historian? Undeniably, actions and events, whether real or fictional, bear the distorting effort of the author's subjectivity in a dosage determined by the specificity of the narrative. The rhetorical aplomb of the narratives of the romantic era had complicated this distinction, with historical prose and artistic prose sharing enough common ground to blur, to a certain extent, the boundaries that separated them, Nicolae Bălcescu's historiography being an eloquent example of this aesthetic agreement. The documentary effort required by historical prose diminishes, to some extent, the unrestrained freedoms of fantasy, a particularity that attracts to the genre the fame of an artificial literary form, meant exclusively to serve ideological purposes.

The historical novel entails a more complex level of elaboration than the sentimental or mystery genres, as it aims to appeal to an audience cultivated with a taste for discovering national history. The historical novel has long been regarded as a significant literary form, offering readers a window into the past while simultaneously reflecting contemporary concerns and sensibilities. In this programmatic article, we seek to explore the multifaceted nature of historical fiction, examining its thematic richness, stylistic diversity, and cultural significance. Historical fiction can be defined as a genre of literature that imaginatively reconstructs historical events, settings, and characters. Unlike traditional historical narratives,

which adhere strictly to factual accuracy, historical fiction allows authors greater freedom to interpret the past creatively. At the heart of historical fiction lies a myriad of thematic elements that reflect the complexities of human experience across different historical periods. Themes such as power, identity, love, and conflict are often central to historical narratives, providing readers with insight into the social, political, and cultural dynamics of the past. In addition to its thematic richness, historical fiction is characterized by a diverse range of stylistic techniques and narrative devices. From vivid descriptions of historical settings to the nuanced portrayal of characters, authors employ various strategies to evoke the atmosphere and ethos of a particular time and place. One of the most compelling aspects of historical fiction is its role in shaping cultural memory and fostering a sense of historical consciousness. Through the retelling of historical events and the reimagining of historical figures, authors contribute to the ongoing dialogue about the past and its significance for the present.

The incipient form of Romanian literary theory is criticism, another genre articulated late, which creates and fixes the terminological inventory used in reflecting on native literature. Aesthetic judgments, classifications, hierarchies, and generic delimitations fall, therefore, within the purview of literary criticism, which is also responsible for selecting the terms that define literary genres. The most frequent generic delimitation made by literary critics is that between poetry and prose, but Romanian writers do not insist on the existence of subgeneric classifications or species within the same genre. The comprehensive nature of early Romanian literary criticism addressed general cultural aspects, proposing norms that concerned literary language, the relationship between translations and the need for native literature, alongside the sources that should inspire Romanian writers. In the first half of the 19th century, the programmatic articles of the magazines had a higher degree of generality and did not hierarchize literary genres. After 1850, interest in the novel is also manifested in the editorial policy of publications. In 1855, *România literară* journal lists among the genres that Romanian literature should develop, “national novels.”¹ This call was emerging as a cultural summons for the advancement of a historical novel that would articulate the national past. The same publication will soon apply the desideratum stated in its pages, hosting the novels of Dimitrie Bolintineanu and Alecu Cantacuzino, *Manoil* and *Serile de vară la țară*. Novels, alongside theater, were the only texts usually given the generic name in the subtitle. Thus, the categorization of a text, whether small or large, as a novel or novella, was the result of authorial or editorial will. Since the terms did not possess denominative precision, their usage was arbitrary. However, literary forms precede the names attributed to them, and in Teodor Racoccea’s *Crestomaticul românesc* from 1820, translated short stories appear, but the recommendation on the cover describes them as a “collection of all kinds of stories and other deeds, drawn from authors of various languages.”²

¹ I. Ștefan, “Din istoricul terminologiei literare în secolul al XIX-lea,” *Contribuții la istoria limbii române literare în secolul al XIX-lea*, Vol. II (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, 1958), 156.

² Original text: “[...] adunare a tot felului de istorii și alte făptorii, scoase din autori dipe osebite limbi.” I. Ștefan, “Contribuții,” 157.

An equivalent term for the short story was “nuotate,” a notion that had a short life in the discourse of Romanian intellectuals, a result of the translation of the French word *nouvelle*, which circulated in parallel with the designation of novel. The use of the term “nuotate” presented ambiguity, as the notion designated both a literary prose text and novelty or news. The first attestation of the term appears in the first half of the 19th century. In 1837, *Curierul de ambe sexe* journal published the C. Negruzzi’s short prose *Zoe*, subtitled “historical nuotate.” In the second edition of the journal, that of 1862, the initial subtitle was replaced with that of “historical novella.” The first subtitle, that of “nuotate”, may be due to the content of the text and the semantic similarity with the term “novelty” or “news,” phrases like “this very true story”³ being found in Negruzzi’s short prose. A verifiable event, declared as true, becomes the marker of a literary text classified as historical. *Curierul de ambe sexe* journal includes, in the period 1835-1838, a section of “nuotăți,” listing titles of short stories from world literature. The term “nuotate” will circulate until the end of the first half of the century, when the designation of “novella,” with the variation “novelă,” will emerge as the winning notion defining a species. In 1847, the year I. Catina publishes his three-act drama *Zoe*, inspired by the negruzian text, the designation of novella seems to be already fixed in Romanian theoretical circulation. Catina acknowledges his admiration for the “beautiful novella” written by C. Negruzzi, assigning it a different name from that which appeared in an earlier edition, as “historical nuotate”: “Reading your beautiful and deeply touching novel, so undeservedly neglected, has inspired me to write this drama.”⁴ Only the second edition of C. Negruzzi’s text, that of 1862, will consolidate its belonging to the species of historical short stories, marking and fixing in circulation a definitive term.

In the 1839 program of the *Curierul românesc* journal, I. Heliade-Rădulescu communicates a literary event, the publication on Wednesdays and Saturdays of texts of various categories, “sciences, literature, arts, industry, voyages or travels, and nuotăți or stories.”⁵ In Heliade’s journalistic program, “nuotate” is a synonym for the novella, indicating a fictional text of small extent. Also in the *Curierul românesc* journal, in an issue from the same year, the table of contents reproduces, within the “nuotăți” section, the titles of several translated novellas. Interestingly, the term “nuotate” circulates exclusively in Wallachia, oscillating between the two significations: a narrative or a news item. The acceptance of the term “nuotate” as a diverse fact, an event, also acquires pejorative connotations in the discourse of Romanian writers, and a letter signed by Heliade-

³ C. Negruzzi, *Opere I. Păcatele tinerețelor* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1974), 14.

⁴ Original text: “Citind frumoasa dumitale novelă atât de nemerită și atât de atingătoare, m-a inspirat să fac această drama.” I. Catina, *Poesii și Zoe. Dramă în trei acte* (Bucharest: Tipografia N. A. Poceti, 1847), 97.

⁵ Original text: “științe, literatură, arte, industrie, voiaje sau călătorii și nuotăți sau istorioare.” I. Ștefan, “Contribuții,” 158.

Rădulescu and addressed to C. Negruzzi admonishes the pressure to fuel, in the pages of the *Curierul românesc* journal, the “curiosity of novelties enthusiasts.”⁶

The merging of the two meanings of the term “nuotate” is a process that repeats itself with the appearance of the neologism “novelă,” which initially carries the meaning of news. In 1814, Alexis Lazăr announced his intention to publish *Novellas* designed for Romanians, namely news crafted to stimulate their interest in recent events, and I. Heliade-Rădulescu censures that the extent of means presupposed by *Curierul românesc* journal is reflected in journalistic practices, having the effect “to decide it only to satisfy novellas enthusiasts.”⁷ Only around 1840 does the term “novelă” begin to denote a literary species often confused or assimilated with the novel. In 1839, the translation of a *physiological novella* by Emile Deschamps, *René Paul and Paul Renée*, is published in Iași. In the following year, *Dacia literară* announces the publication in a future issue of the romantic novella *Mihai Viteazul și boierul Brâncovan*. In the period 1840-1842, *Curierul de ambe sexe* publishes, in the translation of Gh. Stoica, *Fata neguțătorului*, a text subtitled “historical novella.” It is certain that the notion of the short story will become fixed in Romanian theoretical vocabulary, and after 1850 it will cease to refer to the meaning of news. In 1852, Gh. Asachi presents, in a short literary plea, the reasons why he chose to present the history of the founding of Moldova in the form of the novella *Dragoș*. The modern form of the novella is a recent one, appearing only at the beginning of the 20th century, and continued to be contested by the variant of the novel.

Reflection on the Novel and the Beginnings of Romanian Literary Theory

The novel represents a decisive test of national literary maturity, crystallized as evidence of the departure from the Latin language. Through etymological arguments, Ernst Robert Curtius connects the emergence of this genre with the Romance heritage, showing that terms such as *romanz* (Old French), *romance* (Spanish), or *romanzo* (Italian) were created by the Latin educated class precisely to designate all Romance languages, classified as a linguistic unit opposed to Latin⁸. The Romance novel etymology thus brings together the attributes of literature written or translated into Romance vernaculars, as words like *enromancier*, *romançar*, or *romanzare* denote the act of translating or writing books in national languages. These books, written in vernacular languages, will in turn be called *romanz*, *romant*, *roman*, *romanz*, *romance*, *romanzo*, terms derived from the Romance root. Curtius’s demonstration also aims to consolidate the sense that the novel eventually acquires, as a popular book elaborated in a vulgar language, the successor of Latin, in which true events are reflected:

⁶ I. Ștefan, “Contribuții,” 159.

⁷ Original text: “a-l hotărî decât numai spre mulțumirea iubitorilor de *novella*.” I. Ștefan, “Contribuții,” 158.

⁸ Ernst-Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 31.

“In Old French, *romant*, *roman* means the ‘courtly romance in verse,’ literally ‘popular book.’ In a retranslation into Latin, such a book could be called *romanticus* (supply *liber*). The words *romance* and *romantic* are therefore closely connected. In English and German eighteenth-century usage, ‘romantic’ still means something ‘that could happen in a romance’.”⁹

The rise of the novel into the native cultural environment brought with it the dissemination of meanings and the role it was meant to fulfill. Serving as a fresco of life, in its human and social dimension, the novel will fulfill a function of correcting morals, combating harmful remnants and retrograde vestiges, exercising an important critical force through its digressive nature. In the interpretation of I. Heliade-Rădulescu, the purpose of the novel is to perpetuate the descent of the epic into a national language, translating its contents into the language of the masses. The epic employs cultured languages, Latin and Greek, and thus constructs an imaginary elite mode, in harmony with classical principles, a feature that limits its accessibility. To the successor of the epic, the novel, falls the task of explaining and facilitating the understanding of epic grandeur, pouring its message into a new literary form accessible to a wide audience. This vision of the new genre also occasions an original name, reflecting its origin, that of “myth-history.”¹⁰ This concept, an alternative to that of the novel, designates “a species of fabulous history,”¹¹ marking the departure from the scientific, sober register, and the prevalence of historical accuracy in favor of fantasy. The temporal, cultural, social, and individual conditioning of the novel becomes relevant in this sense only in the manner in which it subordinates itself to fiction.

The term “novel,” which Heliade will use with the variation of “romant,” would prove inappropriate from an etymological perspective, as it would refer to texts written exclusively in Romance languages and would strictly narrow down the cultural field that could produce novels, delimiting a theoretical context in which the scholar’s terminological intuition proves innovative. Through this attempt to select a term that reflects the descent of the species it denotes, Heliade advocates for conceptual clarity in defining literary forms. Resorting to examples from world literatures provides the publicist with examples of epics in prose, popular or vulgar, which would fit into the “myth-historical” genre:

“Modern literatures had prose epics such as Fenelon's *Telemachus*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, as well as the works of Walter Scott and other German and French authors of this mytho-historical genre, poorly termed romances, if they are not written in the uncultivated Latin language.”¹²

⁹ Ernst-Robert Curtius, *European Literature*, 32.

¹⁰ I. Heliade-Rădulescu, *Curs întreg de poezie generală*, vol. II (Bucharest: Tipografia Lucrătorilor Asociați, 1870).

¹¹ I. Heliade-Rădulescu, *Curs*, 13.

¹² Original text: “Literaturile moderne avură epopee în proză ca *Telemah* al lui Fenelon, *Don Quiciotie* al lui Cervantes, operele de asemenea genere ale lui Walterscott și altor autori germani și francezi sînt de generele acesta mithistoric, ce rău se zic romanțuri, dacă nu mai sînt scrise în limbaa necultă romană.” I. Heliade-Rădulescu, *Curs*, 14.

As the author of a manual on poetics, Heliade-Rădulescu intuitively theorizes the specificity of the novel and its generic diversity, demonstrating that the aesthetic purpose of the new epic species is not inferior to that of the epic. Heliade-Rădulescu's theoretical awareness, attentive to European cultural trends, anticipates the rise in popularity of historical prose in the Romanian space, alongside the role of experimentation in native historical novels. These meditations, whether systematic as in the case of Heliade-Rădulescu or Mihail Kogălniceanu, or sporadic as in the case of translators such as Simeon Marcovici, on the evolution of literary forms, show that reflection on developing genres is synchronous with their writing.

The Romanian historical novel, a local form of historical romance

The historical romance, as a literary form that romanticizes historical episodes, relativizing the issue of documentary accuracy in favor of the artistic liberties of imagination, garnered public success in the 19th century through the effervescence of sensational narratives. The protean nature of the Romanian historical novel from its beginnings, which emerged with the importation of the historical romance recipe as crystallized around the figure of Walter Scott, appeared to literary historians as an expression of literary awkwardness and the lack of experience of 19th-century novelists. The shift of emphasis, first from utilitarian, scientific readings to extraordinary stories, which carried the reading public through the most colorful, surprising, and improbable events, was relegated to the category of indicators of “popular” literature. What researchers overlooked, however, was that the multitude of details and the branching of the stories composed captivating atmospheric prose that hosted innovative lexical borrowings, counteracting the instability of the literary language, which could be attributed to the shortcomings of our early novelists’ writings.

For Jerome de Groot, the historical novel must be understood both as a cultural-educational medium and as an activity of literary delight or easy entertainment. Through captivating narratives and vivid descriptions of historical epochs, this literary genre promises readers the opportunity to immerse themselves in different centuries, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of historical contexts and the social, cultural, and political dynamics associated with them. By combining factual elements with fiction strategies, the historical novel can effectively convey complex historical concepts, facilitating access to and identification with them for a wide audience. As a hybrid genre of the historical novel, the historical romance combines the original form of popular fiction, the romance, with a sparkling historical background, tracing both past events and branching love intrigues. The model of historical fiction proposed by Walter Scott manifests as a rational one, in which the clear sense of historical process represents the central element, and individual destinies infuse it with their effervescence. The individual identities of Walter Scott’s heroes are strictly historically determined, and their freedom of action validates the supremacy of the laws of their time, a fact reflected in a certain discursive sobriety that strongly contrasts with the sentimental model created by Scott’s successors. The romance will come to undermine historical accuracy

in favor of self-sufficient past worlds, dominated by connections governed by attraction and seduction, introducing a less critical perspective on history:

“Romance is a sub-genre in which sexual or romantic desire figures high, and has often been characterised as empty and conservative, in so far as it seems to sustain the dominant models of social ordering: family, heteronormative relationships and strictly defined gender roles.”¹³

It is certain that writers such as N. D. Popescu, Ioan Bujoreanu, George Baronzi, G. Rădulescu-Niger and others had intuited the magnetism that the historical novel with a melodramatic twist could exert. They understood that history is not a rigid process and that its interpretation (or distortion) through fictional strategies represents an important resource in diversifying and educating the taste of their audience. By dramatizing power relationships in a flamboyant fantastical framework, the Romanian historical romance, apriorically rejected by the canonical configuration, contains within itself a much richer literary universe than that included in the self-sufficient canon, as it is urged to invent ingenious stratagems on every page to maintain the reader’s attention.

Sentimentalism is the thematic core of a historical romance, and love and desire form the grids through which history is filtered. Originally, the romance is articulated as a tonic and enduring debate between writers and readers on the subject of genre norms, attraction, and sexuality. Historical prose operates several mutations on this discursive core and begins to raise complex questions regarding the genre’s status as a historical or natural category, and the impact of historical and cultural context on sexual identity and the manifestation of behaviors guided by eroticism. In early Romanian novels, desire often configures the social, historical, and political universe, adjudicating its role as the arbiter of fictional heroes’ destinies:

“Romance is the original form of popular fiction. Its primary function of wish-fulfilment is the characteristic element of narratives that propel the reader into a fantasy world where a full and complete identity can be imagined. Yet romance is also the genre which has been taken least seriously in literary studies.”¹⁴

Historical fiction employing a romantic scenery regains its authority as an important literary form when its contribution to the ever-relevant debates about the meaning of history and its narratives is acknowledged. Historians and narrative theorists such as Hayden White, Paul Veyne, or E. J. Hobsbawm have drawn attention to the fact that both tradition and history are social constructs; they have been created, meaning they do not exist independently and outside of society, but are constantly reconfigured through interpretations. Therefore, both tradition and history are products of language.

The Hybridity of Romanian Historical Fiction

¹³ Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (London: Routledge, 2010), 52.

¹⁴ Scott McCracken, *Pulp. Reading Popular Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 77.

For a theoretical understanding of historical fiction, one of the preferred options of literature in the second half of the 19th century, a delimitation of the contents and categories used in its construction is required. Theoretical debates at the European level attempt to delineate the action and methods of realization of the two domains, historical and fictional, in evocative literature. Through the prism of neo-Hegelianism, Benedetto Croce will translate the relationship between literature and history into the sum of similarities and differences that scientific and fictional processing of life facts entail, emphasizing the effects felt at the level of epistemic textures.¹⁵

The label of Romanticism gains, precisely in its heyday, the universality that could no longer be limited by the chronological axes of the evolution of the artistic domain, as it becomes the clear expression of an aesthetic attitude laden with lyricism and pathos, of progressive intentions and dreamy immersions. The antinomic attribute, namely that of classicism, becomes a correlative reality for what does not fit the romantic picture: impersonality, objectivity, the absence of pathetic effusions, a stage at which Romanian historical fiction will arrive after overcoming the impetuous, reactionary-legitimist tendencies of Romanticism.

The revolutionary moment generated the entire arsenal of ideology intensively exploited by the new epic species and consolidated literary voices under the banner of a common goal: creating a valuable native cultural heritage that would rise to the expectations of its creators. The echoes of revolutionary movements, traversed by the shivers of nationalism and by social-political principles such as justice, freedom, equality, and national unity, abound in the demands of the heroes of our first novels, especially in the tales of bandits, as the founders of Romanian novels are chosen, not coincidentally, from among the participants in the 1848 Revolution, with Dimitrie Bolintineanu being a relevant example. Militant-progressive objectives and fictional polemics with representatives of the old social hierarchies or with the exponents of oppression become instructive in this regard. The bitter invective against the vestiges of the Phanariote society with noble pretensions and the ascending class of parvenus, eager to obtain aristocratic privileges, is situated at the opposite pole of the discourse that praises nature, the village, culminating in the glorification of the pure Romanian ethnic spirit, in the name of which all rights hitherto silenced are demanded.

The capricious relationship established between literature and historical processes is circumscribed by the question of the historical authenticity of a literary work, its fidelity to the events' data, regardless of its formal classification in a genre or species. However, evocative historical literature establishes its specificity and artistic scope through continuous reference to the real event-historical dynamics, but also by fulfilling the aesthetic demands implied by each genre, thus subordinating itself to aesthetic categories and predetermined stylistic legitimacy. Literary orientations and currents, artistic and ideological ideals of writers, play a significant role in the way the past is exploited, but favoring a certain way of organizing lyrical, epic, or dramatic matter takes shape through the use of these categories. The symbiotic

¹⁵ Benedetto Croce, *History. Its Theory and Practice* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921), 52

relationship between the different orbits of aesthetic values projected in literary works and the logic of social-historical processes is prominent and in ordering the moments of the novel's plot, attenuated or intensified by the specific techniques of each stage of the literary tradition's development, whether we refer to sentimental and sensational gesticulation, realistic descriptiveness, or naturalistic mechanics. The tensions and crises implied by the movements of historical processes entail a specific direction of conflict evolution captured within fictional frameworks, shaped, of course, by biographical factors as well.

In the first Romanian historical novels, the melodramatic scenario eclipses some of the descriptive sequences, shifting the focus from the successful illustration of life, history and social sequences, in its calm or combative paroxysm aspects, to the surprising episodes, marked by arbitrariness. In this regard, novelists adhere to genre schemes, counting on the effects of a well-established reception style, as "in the construction of the narrative plot, both the 'sensational' novel, the melodramatic novella, or the adventurous tale accept, even cultivate, a great deal of arbitrariness, of improbability, subjecting it to a domestication treatment."¹⁶ Commonplaces increase predictability and fulfill reading expectations, concretized in "clues regarding classification into a certain genre, the system of characters, prominent themes, the position and manner of the narrator,"¹⁷ elements of anticipation. Several passages anticipate the force of realistic scenes in the writings of Slavici and, later, in those of Rebreanu, but novelists like N. D. Popescu use romantic liberties to intensify dramatism.

The central characters of the Romanian historical novel from the long 19th century are characterised by their spiritual configuration and their penchant for reflexivity. Even characters whose roles are active and dynamic in the narrative, such as the hajduks or outlaws, exhibit meditative inclinations. The preoccupation with identity and the boundaries of self-awareness form an enduring motif upon which the novelist embroiders some of the recurring themes of his work, employing epic compositional techniques. The profound musings of the protagonists intertwine with the causal chains of historical events, often perceived as adversarial. Uncontrollable occurrences, impervious to the characters' will, disrupt their spiritual manifestations, leading them to invoke and valorize these events in tense monologues. Epic moments are captured as snapshots wherein ideals, dreams, memories, suffering, and regret converge.

The dramatic and sentimental gestures through which the characters define themselves, either through their own dialogue or through the commentary of the character-narrator, align them closely with the melodramatic archetype of the hero. These characters possess the ability to materialize aspirations and ideals, imbuing them with tangible form. In

¹⁶ Original text: "[...] în construcția tramei narative, atât «romanțul» de senzație, cât și novella melodramatică sau povestirea aventuroasă acceptă, ba chiar cultivă o doză mare de arbitrar, de neverosimil, supunând-o unui tratament de domesticire." Liviu Papadima, *Literatură și comunicare. Relația autor – cititor în literatura pașoptistă și postpașoptistă* (Iași: Polirom, 1999), 67.

¹⁷ Original text: "[...] indiciile privind încadrarea într-un gen anumit, sistemul personajelor, teme proeminente, poziția și felul naratorului." Ibid., 68.

The Melodramatic Imagination, Peter Brooks observes the plasticizing nature of melodramatic imagination, derived from theatrical excess: “Melodrama handles its feelings and ideas virtually as plastic entities, visual and tactile models held out for all to see and handle. Emotions are given a full acting-out, a full representation.”¹⁸

Since melodrama originates on stage, having its source in romantic plays, the transposition of dramatic techniques into Romanian texts brings with it an inventory of characteristic effects. The liberal nationalist perspective, entrenched by the thinking of the revolutionaries of 1848, stimulates the imagination of post-Revolutionary Romanian novelists, seduced by discourses about freedoms, inalienable rights, and the intellectual dignity of humanity. Tyranny and oppression form persistent refrains in the consciousness of heroes refractory to obedience and resignation:

“Look me in the eyes and tell me: can I love the Turks, the Russians, or the Germans? [...] Beautiful and grand dreams did we fashion, a handful of youths born and raised by these elders whom you, and many others, deem devoid of love for their nation! From their blood, what sacred love of country arose in our hearts! What longing and what fervor to revive it, to illuminate it, and to exalt it, as it was and as it ought to be! And this love, these fervors, encompassed not only our dear Moldavia, but the entire nation, and dearer still, beyond the borders of two Principalities, beyond the boundaries of three empires! From all the ancestral land, now enslaved by the pagan Turk, the papist German, and the Orthodox Russian, reduced to servitude on three sides, and the fourth transformed into a caravanserai through which the barbarous armies of three great emperors pass, from this meager piece of flesh, protected until now only by the miracle of heaven and by the greed and envy of three mad dogs, we wanted, want, and will create a country more beautiful than any other, great and reunited, self-sustaining, capable of defending and governing itself, finally reborn after four centuries of suffering, in the light of the sun of justice, of freedom, and of brotherhood!”¹⁹

¹⁸ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic imagination*, (London: Yale University Press), 1976, 41.

¹⁹ Original text: “Privește-mă în ochi și spune-mi: pot eu iubi pe turci, pe ruși sau pe nemți? [...] Frumoase și mărețe visuri mai făuream noi, o mână de tineri născuți și crescuți de bătrânii aceștia ce-ți par, ție și multora, neuibitori de neam! Din sângele lor ce dragoste sfântă de țară a răsărit în inimile noastre! Ce dor și ce avânturi pentru a o redeștepta, pentru a o lumina și pentru a o reinălța, cum a fost și cum trebuie să fie! Și dragostea aceasta, avânturile acestea, nu cuprindeau numai Moldova noastră scumpă, ci neamul întreg și mai scump, peste hotarele a două Principate, peste granițele a trei împărății! Din toată moșia străbunilor, robită astăzi de turcul păgân, de neamțul și de ungurul papistaș, și de rusul ortodox, ajunsă roabă din trei părți, iar a patra prefăcută în caravanserai, prin care se perindă soldășimile barbare a trei mari împărați, din această bucată de carne macră, ferita pân-acum numai prin minunea cerului și prin lăcomia și zavistea a trei dulăi turbați, am vrut, vrem și vom face o țară frumoasă cum n-a mai fost alta, mare și reîntregită, de sine stătătoare, în stare a se apăra și a se ocârmui singură, renăscând, în sfârșit, după patru veacuri de suferințe, la lumina soarelui dreptății, al libertății și al înfrățirii!” Dumitru Moruzi, *Înstrăinații. Studiu social În Formă de Roman* (Vălenii de Munte: Tip. Neamul Românesc, 1910), 67.

The assimilation of the revolutionary spirit is based on the axis of implicit moral guidelines, organically integrated into the aesthetic material. The mesmerizing universe of historical turmoil aims to outline a spectrum in which shadows and echoes of seductive urges to change the course of national destiny are captured, often proclaimed in the heroes' speeches.

The state of provisionality and instability of the fictional universe resides in expectant circumstances, through the provocation and anticipation of the consequences of actions and the invocations of heroes. Romantic conventionalism results from the adoption of romantic recipes and the use of sentimental-melodramatic novel ornamentation. In the volume *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks explains the abundance of conflicts of this type, personal, political, or social, correlating them with the mutations that occur in the cultural horizon of a tumultuous century that had raised the edifice of reason and claimed what Hugo Friedrich called "empty transcendence":

"The enormous narrative production of the nineteenth century may suggest an anxiety at the loss of providential plots: the plotting of the individual or social or institutional life story takes on new urgency when one no longer can look to a sacred masterplot that organizes and explains the world."²⁰

The emergence of such plots was prepared through a lengthy process of secularization, initiated by the Renaissance and amplified by the Enlightenment, which the Romantics transformed into a combative action against the unnatural order, unjust history, and corrupt institutions, which became familiar subjects, integral parts of the reader's literary competence. In the historical novel, historical reality and ideality become two domains placed in continuous aesthetic interaction and have as their space of manifestation the representations of epic poetry.

Historicism imposes itself as a preferred coordinate of romantic philosophy and literature due to increased compatibility with the evolutionary idea and with the interest in events that preceded and succeeded the years of the French Revolution. The deliberate artistic deindividuation advocated by the classics and the Enlightenment enters an impasse, and thinking oriented towards generality and timelessness loses the battle with romantic vitalism, picturesque, and dynamism. The new generation of artists demolishes the inert idol of uniformizing rigor and raises the temple of the new artistic religion of individuality. The aesthetic versatility of romantic historicism embraces and mixes all literary genres, dissipating the once-established boundaries between history, a scientific domain, a standard of reality, and literature, a realm of creative fantasy and unreality. The political, cultural, social, and philosophical implications of the artistic product will imprint clear aesthetic directions of an ideological-literary apostolate. The stylistic strategies called upon to support the rhetorical

²⁰ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the plot. Design and intention in narrative* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), 20.

framework and the fiery thematic spectrum of the hybridity of the Romanian genre become widely circulated instruments, used by the entire array of romantic writers. The agglutination of genres and registers serve the same noble purposes of art as a mediator in the lives of peoples. Evocative literary works have a primary character of pleading that combines the grace of the ideal with the violence of actions or attitudes attempting to restructure unfortunate states of fact.

The dawn of the specific historical consciousness of the romantic century appears at a moment of crisis of historicism asserted in the last period of the brilliance of dogmatic Enlightenment. The major contributions of Voltaire, Hume, or Kant, which favored a rather ironic perspective on history, were opposed by pre-romantic thinkers such as J. J. Rousseau or Edmund Burke. The latter conceived history as an integral naive part of conscious self. The paradigm shift started from aversion to inflexible rationalism and increasingly credited the empathetic, human view of historiographic methods, denouncing the mechanistic rigidity of the Enlightenment. The different possibilities of understanding and reconstructing the past raised more and more questions about the most suitable way to research history. The question of historical knowledge threw thinkers and artists from the most important European cultural circles into the arena of debates, trying to negotiate both the individual and collective meaning of history. However, to reach an understanding of history as the essence of the countless biographies, according to Thomas Carlyle's formula, the principles of the Enlightenment were to be declared obsolete by the eager romantics to tell the stories of great national or universal heroes:

"Universal History consists essentially of their united Biographies. Religion not a man's church-creed, but his practical belief about himself and the Universe: Both with Men and Nations it is the One fact about them which creatively determines all the rest."²¹

Herder will take the first step towards romantic idealism and proposes the rehabilitation of the individual character of a historical fact, with its particularities, uniqueness, and implications through the force of metaphor, correlating it with the ontological or spiritual causes that trigger events. Herder argues against the reductionist approach of trying to explain diverse phenomena by breaking them down into uniform elements or analyzing them according to universal rules. Instead, he asserts that each phenomenon possesses its own distinct character, shaped by its specific historical context, cultural influences, and societal conditions. According to Herder, the attempt to generalize or homogenize diverse phenomena overlooks the essential differences that define the specific quality or essence of each object of study, whether in the realms of nature or history. By emphasizing the importance of recognizing and preserving these crucial differences, Herder highlights the richness and complexity of human experience and cultural diversity:

²¹ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1906), 236

“Herder maintained that every activity, situation, historical period or civilisation possessed a unique character of its own; so that the attempt to reduce such phenomena to combinations of uniform elements, and to describe or analyse them in terms of universal rules, tended to obliterate precisely those crucial differences which constituted the specific quality of the object under study, whether in nature or in history.”²²

In *Metahistory*, Hayden White analyzes the significant stages that preceded the crystallization of romantic historical consciousness and demonstrates that the mythification of historical consciousness represented a double-edged weapon, used to validate hypotheses put forward by the exponents of Romanticism or those of Idealism regarding the privileging of the individual over the collective, respectively, the collective over the individual:

“This tendency toward mythification of historical consciousness was carried out in the interest of defending the individual against the collectivity in Romanticism and in the interest of defending the collectivity against the individual in Idealism.”²³

The American historian considers history a narrative and advances the premise that historiographic works have a poetics similar to narrative genres, using specific rhetorical techniques and creating coherent representations of events in their chronological unfolding. For White, historical works or stories represent verbal fictions, and their contents could well be invented or discovered, sharing many of literature's virtues. Although works of historical evocation are based on empirically validated events of the past, they continually require the complicity of the imagination to structure them into an intelligible framework. This perspective is symptomatic also for understanding the conventions of evocative fiction, showing that in the process of narrating historical events, stylistic factors, subjective impulses, and ideological implications intervene, influencing aesthetic perception.

The central hero of the historical novel from the second half of the 19th century is portrayed as a conventional romantic character, constructed to respond to both the demands of a sentimental intrigue and those of a criminal or detective nature. The suitable character receives a predefined set of qualities and abilities to guarantee success, even being transformed into a master of disguising vindictive intentions. Negative characters created by Ciru Oeconomu, Alexandru I. Alexandrescu, or Ioan Bujoreanu are devoid of any illusion of redemption or nobility. In the construction of the physiognomy and personality of the heroes, the rudimentary nature of the physiognomies and psychologies of characters built according to romantic conventions stands out. The absolute antagonist is usually portrayed in a way that leaves no doubt about his repulsive character. The apprenticeship at Lavater's physiognomy

²² Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment. Vico, Harmann, Herder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 208.

²³ Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination In Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 80.

school gives the first Romanian novels the same rudimentary portrait strategy, meant to hide nobility or infamy in the physical traits of the character.

In N. D. Popescu's historical novel, segmented by dramatic and spectacular plot twists, each change in spatial and temporal configuration, as well as every allusion to future twists of the action and any retrospective elucidation of the course of current events, acts as a coagulating factor of narrativity. In the era, the use of these strategies ensured the fluidity of epic construction and guaranteed success with the knowledgeable audience of specific narrative games of the feuilleton. The historical novel manifests the same hybrid character that we can attribute to the prose of the era in which it appears. The historical novel incorporates features of sensational and mystery prose, to which is added a love intrigue, with iridescences of melodrama, the texts attempting to accumulate all textual strategies that have proven their efficiency in Western narrative conventions. The general effect produced by reading the text is a predictable one, that of improvisation with a dramatic air, suggesting that the novelist is more interested in elaborating prose ornamented with intrigues drawn from allegorical and timeless battles successfully valorized by great literature, in a narrative exercise that, although formally placed under the banner of originality, chooses to innovate through recourse to eclectic borrowings from the foreign cultural capital of the Western novel.

Formally, chapter titles function as statements of the events through which the central character will pass or provoke, another strategy borrowed from the feuilleton novel. The imaginary mobility in the historical novel of the second half of the 19th century presupposes sudden shifts from a happy to a terrifying or picturesque stance. The episodes of the stories succeed rapidly, incorporating radical changes of attitude and perspective. The novelist discovers in this precipitate of action the saving solution for narrative discontinuities. Newspaper intuition imposes a specific organization of epic matter, meant to dose suspense and narrative tension in line with the feuilletonist tradition. Of course, this manner of literary elaboration is built on the principle of an assumed literary productivity through the embrace of conventions itself, an aspect that attaches to the novel a label of accessible genre, destined for crowds of non-specialized readers, which popularizes literary experience. In a period when the autonomy of the aesthetic had won a significant number of supporters and arbiters, the novel cannot earn a privileged place among the prestigious forms of literature with a vast tradition precisely because of its apparent accessibility and, especially, because of its significant contribution to the "democratization" of the cultural field, a process achieved by including the preferences of the public in editorial decisions.

In *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move*, Ann Rigney shows that history is not a fixed entity that we can recover and understand objectively and proposes an interpretation of the past as "an imaginative resource" - a set of stories, images, and memories used to make sense of the present and the future. Speaking about Walter Scott, Rigney shows how his stories and characters (such as Ivanhoe and Rob Roy) have been reinterpreted and adapted over time, becoming part of a cultural memory that continues to influence how we interpret concepts such as identity, history, or nationalism:

"[...] cultural memory is always emergent, dependent on being periodically reiterated and adapted to new circumstances through an interplay between particular memory sites ('reusable texts and images'), acts of remembrance, and shifting social frameworks. These memory sites are not fixed entities or finished products, moreover, but rather imaginative resources for generating new meanings and contesting old ones. They are points of relative stability within a dynamic system in which both consensus and contestation are vital ingredients and in which both forgetting and remembering come into play."²⁴

In Dumitru Moruzi's novel *Înstrăinații*, history does not even have to be a national one; it is a decorative element, a predisposed framework for subjectivization, a sign that the past is a continuous process of interpretation and adaptation. Style remains an accessory, while the narrative remains the "engine" of the novel. The revolutionary movements of 1848 in the Romanian Principalities remained for a long time a reference point in the literary compositions of the second half of the 19th century, representing a moment of social, political, and cultural transition in which most of the pioneering novelists of the period took part. The impassioned and solemn discourses on the theme of the disastrous history and the sufferings endured by the people as a result of the Phanariots and the invading foreigners receive much more effective support by attributing them to heroes who inherently challenge the injustices of the society they escape from.

Toma Pavel has achieved in *The Lives of the Novel* an epistemology of the novel, showing that the entire history of this literary form revolves around human consistency with the moral ideal: "Describing the rupture between the protagonist and his environment, the novel is the first genre to question the genesis of individuality and the establishment of common order."²⁵ Georg Lukács situates the novel, seen as transcendent phenomenality, between epic and tragedy, explaining the composite texture of the serious registers that enunciate the distortion of the worldview and the division of the universe reflected in the inner structure of the heroes, an idea that explains the dilemmatic nature of the heroes in the Romanian historical novel:

"The autonomous life of interiority is possible and necessary only when the distinctions between men have made an unbridgeable chasm; when the gods are silent and neither sacrifices nor the ecstatic gift of tongues can solve their riddle; when the world of deeds separates itself from men and, because of this independence, becomes hollow and incapable of absorbing the true meaning of deeds in itself, incapable of becoming a symbol through deeds and dissolving them in turn into symbols; when interiority and adventure are forever divorced from one another."²⁶

²⁴ Ann Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott. Memory on the Move*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 19.

²⁵ Toma Pavel, *The Lives of the Novel: A History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 48.

²⁶ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 66.

The epic poem is an illustration of a mythical age, characterized by a homogeneous, definitive, and perfect universe, “where knowledge is virtue, virtue happiness, where beauty manifests the meaning of the world,”²⁷ being enclosed in forms that do not appear as constraints, but under the appearance of diffuse human aspirations. Tragedy, on the other hand, represents a mark of rupture, denial, and isolation, in which the destinies of its heroes are subject to empirical arbitrariness, their passions imprinting them with a mundane and fallible conduct, and the possible attainment of goals becomes a limitation. Additionally, the epic contains the extensive totality of life, while tragedy tends towards the intensive portrayal of reality. The novel, as a dialectical form of the epic, which borrows traits from both literary forms, is defined both by the balance and the antagonism between character and world. The sense of community is legitimised by the fact that both the individual and the universe feel the degradation and disappearance of values and authentic motivations. The antagonism originates from the futile, even demonic, essence of the aspiration to find those authentic values, in the absence of which existence slips into insignificance. Regarding the narrative thread, Lukács explains, the adventure or quest in which the novel’s hero engages is predominantly of a biographical nature and also takes on the aspect of social chronicle. The templates of the intrigues of the first Romanian historical novels allow the central character to capture precisely this collision with the heterogeneity of the world, which produces and reveals an enhanced self-awareness amplifying the incongruence between reality and will. In Lukács’s proposed scheme, the experiences of the novel’s hero do not provide him with a sense of life, but furnish him with a surrogate, an “optimum” of proximity, and the denouement does not mean finding harmony but the bitter realization that his aspirations were far too lofty.

Lukács also elaborates a tripartite classification of novels, taking as his criterion the degree of adequacy or inadequacy between the hero and the world, resulting in three types of novels. The first category is that of the novel of abstract idealism, a fictional space for the development of a character with a consciousness unable to grasp the complexity of the world, the most suitable example being *Don Quixote*. The second type is the novel of disillusionment, “in which the character has a consciousness too vast in relation to the world.”²⁸ The last class of novels, illustrated by texts such as *Wilhelm Meister*, is that of the tension overcome, where the possibility of reconciliation between individual and world is outlined, which, although problematic, remedies the inner division of the heroes. The Marxist critic also adds a fourth category, in which the novel approaches the epic formula, giving the example of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. In this hybrid case, the reading reveals a manifesto, the utopian rejection of the norms and conventions of civilization in order to rediscover a natural community, an impossible goal to achieve on the old European continent, where the denial of culture, as in Rousseau, is also a cultural derivative and therefore a contradiction.

²⁷ Ibid., 52.

²⁸ Ibid., 29.

The mixture of tendencies that structure the hybrid form of the historical novel is, for Jerome de Groot, a compromise between the consciousness of the artificiality of the literary universe and the writers' efforts to explain worlds and events beyond the reader's experience:

"An historical novel is always a slightly more inflected form than most other types of fiction, the reader of such a work slightly more self-aware of the artificiality of the writing and the strangeness of engaging with imaginary work which strives to explain something that is other than one's contemporary knowledge and experience: the past."²⁹

The Hajduk novel, the outlaw novel and the judicial novel, as subgenres of the historical novel, magnify the role of the nation's unfortunate past in the construction of national solidarity, annihilating historiographical conventions and replacing them with romantic ones. The outlaw novel realizes a confrontation between the ideal and the human, and the symbol of modernity is the triumph of individuality, consecrated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau through the myth of the noble savage, that is, man corrupted by society, who aspires to the perfect natural state of solitude. The historical novel celebrates the individual in all its freedom and audacity of expression. At the same time, The historical fiction doubles the individualism of its heroes through a seductive plurality of openness to creating possible worlds, where individuals can live, love, imagine, develop, create, and reconfigure their existential journey.

The need to accurately pinpoint the beginning of the Romanian novel, in its conception of original creation with a finite form, has prompted numerous literary critics and historians to join the common effort of characterizing this problematic literary phenomenon, segmented by experimental deficiencies. A generous inventory of anthologies and studies has been created, which would shape the subsequent reception of the native Romanian tradition, in response to the desire to remove the veil of uncertainties from the history of one of the most popular literary genres. But as intentional level does not always correspond to that of achievements and reality, some researchers have fallen into the trap of schematism or relativization, putting essential data for configuring the genesis of the Romanian novel in parentheses or relegating them to the background, contenting themselves with recording and superficially analyzing a few of the intrigues of pioneering creations. Such a cultural archaeology endeavor requires systematic approaches, successive returns to the historical-cultural dynamics and the sequence of episodes that led to the "maturity" of our literature, beyond identifying sources of inspiration and artistic affiliation. Reception, although unified in terms of similarity of methods and procedures used, is predominantly hesitant and relativizing, insisting on several commonplaces. Observations on stylistic nature, structure, thematic figuration, and the power of objectification, valuable indeed, are consistently repeated and applied according to a fixed pattern established from the beginning, and the individuality of each text is depreciated under the uniformizing action of belonging to the same aesthetic registers. Although theoretical angles vary and different approaches are proposed, the toolkit

²⁹ Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (London: Routledge, 2010), 4.

remains relatively the same, reiterating the problems, obsessions, flaws, and qualities of decades of literary exploration.

Certainly, the authority of the Romanian canon, a belated and autotelic construction, modeled after the image and likeness of a period of peak value, has decisively influenced the criticism's approach to what we could classify as the realm of unknowns, namely the collection of texts, whether completed or not, developed since the second half of the 20th century, and bearing the label of the novel, eluding the set of knowledge deduced from the architecture of the normative model. In his famous *Elegy for the Canon* from the volume *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, Harold Bloom delimits the scope and specificity of the set of principles united under the name of canon, correlating them with their support, cultural memory:

“The Western Canon, despite the limitless idealism of those who would open it up, exists precisely in order to impose limits, to set a standard of measurement that is anything but political or moral. I am aware that there is now a kind of covert alliance between popular culture and what calls itself *culture criticism*, and in the name of that alliance cognition itself may doubtless yet acquire the stigma of the incorrect. Cognition cannot proceed without memory, and the Canon is the true art of memory, the authentic foundation for cultural thinking.”³⁰

This aspiration imposed by the American critic was to be adopted by the native cultural space, increasingly concerned with qualitatively sorting out the pieces that make up Romanian literature. However, a high level of arbitrariness is inherent, admitting that, despite its effectiveness and operability, “the canon is indeed a standard of vitality, a norm that tries to map the immeasurable”³¹. The compositional deficiencies and stereotypes of our early Romanian productions have hindered the penetration of some of them under canonical auspices. As it happens in poetry, the performers of our first novels are forced to assume often incongruent sets of writing models, as a reaction to the widespread tendency of the 19th century to melt the stages of evolution into artistic alloys that synchronize the new species with an extended and diversified palette of directions that were functioning (or were surpassed through intensive use) in universal and French literature, whose influence proves to be inexorable. In broad terms, the plot schemes are the same, and the influences are evident in relation to sources of inspiration, the novelistic formula illustrating echoes of the tradition of sentimentalism, as manifested in Rousseau's *Nouvelle Heloise* and in the novels of Chateaubriand or Madame de Staël, with the inflections of Wertherism, to which is added the model of adventure and mystery literature, present in Eugène Sue's *Mysteries of Paris*, or *Mysteries of London*, by Paul Féval. Balzacian and Stendhalian realism represented yet another preferred formula, sometimes found alongside all other tendencies in the same novel.

³⁰ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon. The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace&Company, 1994), 35.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 86.