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HISTORY AND FICTION IN THE NOVEL *THE PRINCE*



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History and Fiction in the Novel *The Prince*

Abstract: Eugen Barbu's novel *Princepele (The Prince)* is a complex work that depicts the Phanariot era in 18th-century Bucharest. The author used numerous authentic documents (church texts, chronicles, letters, official acts) but stated in the "Warning" that he did not aim for a faithful historical reconstruction of a single reign. Critics consider *The Prince* to be akin to several novel types (historical, *bildungsroman*, pamphlet, epistolary, allegorical), serving as a synthesis of them without being definitive for any one category. The documentary material is processed, modified, and enriched with invented facts, characters, and descriptions, all integrated into a new structure. Eugen Barbu employs the collage technique and is not interested in historical truth, occasionally altering old texts to convey a different message. Critics such as Eugen Simion and Emil Manu have labeled it an "atmosphere novel" due to the extremely meticulous descriptions of ceremonies, intrigues, costumes, feasts, and the city plagued by the plague, demonstrating vast research into the 18th century and the Istanbul of that time. Many critics consider the historically charged pages merely a pretext, with the work's true theme being power, thus becoming a meditation on this idea. *The Prince* is considered a parable, with the biography of Ioan Valahul symbolizing the historical destiny of the Romanian people, situated at the confluence of the Occident and the Orient. Furthermore, the novel has been categorized as a parable of the human condition.

Keywords: historical novel, parable, allegory, *The Prince*.

Istorie și ficțiune în romanul *Princepele*

Rezumat: Romanul *Princepele* de Eugen Barbu este o operă complexă care redă epoca fanariotă din Bucureștiul secolului al XVIII-lea. Autorul a folosit numeroase documente autentice (texte bisericești, cronici, scrisori, acte oficiale), dar a precizat în „Avertisment" că nu a urmărit o reconstituire istorică fidelă a unei domnii. Criticii consideră că *Princepele* se înrudește cu mai multe tipuri de roman (istoric, *bildungsroman*, pamflet, epistolar, alegoric), fiind o sinteză a acestora, fără a fi definitoriu pentru niciunul. Materialul documentar este prelucrat, modificat și îmbogățit cu fapte, personaje și descrieri din imaginație, integrându-se într-o structură nouă. Eugen Barbu folosește tehnica colajului și nu este interesat de adevărul istoric, schimbând uneori textul vechi pentru a spune altceva. Critici precum Eugen Simion și Emil Manu l-au numit „roman de atmosferă" datorită descrierilor extrem de minuțioase ale ceremoniilor, intrigilor, costumelor, ospețelor și ale orașului bântuit de ciumă, demonstrând o documentare vastă asupra secolului al XVIII-lea și a Stambulului acelor timpuri. Mulți critici consideră paginile cu încărcătură istorică doar un pretext, tema reală a lucrării fiind puterea, devenind astfel o meditație în jurul acestei idei. *Princepele* este considerat o parabolă, biografia lui Ioan Valahul simbolizând destinul istoric al poporului român, aflat la confluența dintre Occident și Orient. De asemenea, romanul a fost catalogat ca o parabolă a condiției omenești.

Cuvinte-cheie: roman istoric, parabolă, alegorie, *Princepele*.

Written over a period of seven years, starting in 1962, and published in 1969, Eugen Barbu's *The Prince* (*Principele*) is a novel that portrays the Phanariot era by "copying from everything" (an idea expressed in the "Warning" placed at the beginning of the book), yet it does not represent an anthology of texts referring to a specific reign or historical period. All the material used by the writer is processed, modified, and enriched with facts, characters, and descriptions derived from imagination. Everything is integrated into a new structure, a new pattern that seems to relate to all types of novels (historical, bildungsroman, pamphlet, epistolary, allegorical), without being definitively one type, but rather a synthesis of all. In other words, the book is "a synthesis, a fairy tale, and a lyrical work". *The Prince* begins as a historical novel, evoking a period that can be chronologically placed at the end of the Phanariot era, in 18th-century Bucharest.

The vast majority of critics have attempted to answer the question of whether Eugen Barbu's book is a historical novel or not, with differing results. Most proceeded from the author's declarations made in the "Warning": "In the author's desire to render the Phanariot era as faithfully as possible, he informs the reader that he has used fragments from old church texts, chronicles of the time, as well as authentic documents ranging from private letters to official acts. In this regard, he makes no claim to originality, just as he did not intend to make a faithful historical reconstruction of any reign. This novel is a synthesis, a fairy tale, and a lyrical work at the same time; whoever wishes to interpret it otherwise does so only at their own risk".

Starting from Eugen Barbu's idea of rendering the atmosphere of the 18th century as faithfully as possible, researchers conclude that the novelist sometimes goes as far as reproducing the old text, which he occasionally changes to convey something different than the chronicle, indicating he is not interested in historical truth. Through the technique of collage, Eugen Barbu utilized everything that the documents and chronicles of the time could offer him. Some critics have compared the text of *The Prince* with its models in comparative studies.

Opinions are divided regarding the success of the Phanariot era reconstruction. Emil Manu [8, p. 227] and G. Dimisianu [5, p. 131] believe that the novelist attempted a faithful rendering of the 18th-century atmosphere and achieved it through the use of fragments from church texts, contemporary chronicles, authentic documents, and private letters. Termed a "period print" by Nicolae Dragoş, an „atmosphere novel" by Eugen Simion, or a "fresco" by Emil Manu, *The Prince* is abundant in descriptions of extreme meticulousness realized through endless series of enumerations. The descriptions of ceremonies, court intrigues, period costumes and women's jewelry, Gargantuan feasts, youth parties, hunting scenes, the princely retinue, travels throughout the country, peasants with petitions on stakes, church treasures, the interiors of princely palaces, boyar houses (such as Baron Meitani's house), old courts, the city plagued by the plague and the full tables offered to the dead, and the decapitation of the Prince – a description that juxtaposes the garbage with the splendor of the princely palaces – are proof of exceptional documentation on the 18th century. Through the image of the Phanariot ruler's enthronement and the information provided about the customs in Istanbul, Eugen Barbu demonstrates extensive knowledge of Istanbul during those same times. The aforementioned details, along with the avalanche of Turkish and Neo-Greek words, might entitle one to speak of a historical work.

Al. Piru does not share this opinion; for him, neither the vestments nor the archaisms make *The Prince* a historical work, "because the historical novel represents a written plea for an era, for an event, for a personality from the past".

In Romanian literature, the historical novel has two directions of evolution, which were analyzed by Dumitru Micu in his study, "The Contemporary Romanian Novel". The critic believes that the main difficulty raised by the creation of the historical novel is respecting the real biography of the historical personalities who

inspire the writer. Nevertheless, the novel is a work of fiction; its role is to interpret and generalize the data taken from reality. Therefore, it cannot limit itself merely to unearthing past events and personalities, nor can it create legends. Dumitru Micu divides the writers of historical novels into two categories based on their source of inspiration. Some recruit their characters from the penumbra of history – these are lesser-known people, about whom data is limited and scarcely verifiable, thus giving the writer the freedom to unleash creative imagination. The critic provides examples of such works here: *Alexandru Lăpușneanul* by C. Negruzzi, *Răzvan and Vidra* by B.P. Hasdeu, and *Despot Vodă* by V. Alecsandri. Others use the biographies of well-known, first-rank historical figures, such as the novel *Peter I* or the drama *Ivan the Terrible*.

Eugen Barbu, through the figure of the Prince, does not present a specific personality belonging to the past; he synthesizes, in the guise of his hero, the figures of all Phanariot rulers. The book presents the reader with a large number of secondary characters drawn from reality. The novelist extracted the necessary data for their creation from the chronicles and documents of the time he studied. Most characters are based on a very small amount of information, and for the construction of some, the writer started only from a name that impressed him with its sonority. "The Prince's Notebooks" contain lists of such names that inspired certain characters for Eugen Barbu. For others, such as the boyar Dudescu, messer Ottaviano, and the astrologer Ioan Valahul, the information derived from documents is much more numerous. Eugen Barbu's book includes a series of imaginary characters such as the Prince's mother, Evanghelina, his wife Haricleia, her family, and the ruler's children. These have no real basis.

Dumitru Micu identifies two main directions for the development of the historical novel: one romantic, the other realistic. The romantic direction brings a predilection for the picturesque and the chromatic, for adventure and enigma, into Romanian writing. Realists abandon these in favor of precise depiction, extending to the presentation of the smallest details of historical events. Dumitru Micu applies this theory to the works of two Romanian writers: *A Man Among Men* by Camil Petrescu and *Nicoară Potcoavă* by Mihail Sadoveanu. The first work fits well into the category of the realistic historical novel, but difficulty arises when the critic attempts to categorize the second writer's work, about which he states that it belongs to realism but also contains numerous romantic elements. The characters are also constructed realistically, as they do not lack weaknesses. They are armed with a specific understanding of the foundations of the world, thus becoming symbols of an ancient wisdom. Dumitru Micu observes Camil Petrescu's appeal to verified historical data and his attempt to restrict the role of fiction as much as possible. The writer enters the atmosphere of the era through laborious investigations. Proposing to create the image of Nicolae Bălcescu, Camil Petrescu researched all historians' works referring to the first half of the past century, the press of the time, and the works of writers from Muntenia. While Camil Petrescu prefers newer times that can be studied in detail, Sadoveanu is attracted to those historical periods that allow for the deployment of imagination.

Eugen Barbu cannot be aligned with either of these directions because there is an indecision stemming from an agglomeration of elements that cause him to pendulate between these types of writing. He approaches Sadoveanu through the narrator's placement within the era, the local color, and the period atmosphere (achieved in the scenes presenting the characters' clothing or meals), through enigma, through ambiguity, especially in the dialogue between the Prince and the Messer, and through the picturesque and chromatic elements in the scenes of the butterfly invasion, the arrival of the plague, the enthronement, and the description of the parties, interiors, clothing, and dishes. To exemplify these points, a fragment extracted from the chapter *The Plague* is reproduced below, a chapter that contains images of the table

dedicated to the dead: „Everything that was best in the world was thrown to the dead on the long tables, and tired eyes watched the rotting of the fruits because death and its dead did not come to the forced, empty feast. The peaches, yellow at first, turned purple or red like sores, the artichokes hardened (...). The golden melons taken out of jars decomposed in the merciless heat, the raisins looked like a yellow bake on the shining tables on the fourth day. The figs no longer looked as they did at the beginning and smelled heavily, rotting".

The appearance of Ottaviano and the depiction of his preoccupations, the inscriptions in Arabic and Persian, the Kabbalah images on the walls of Baron Meitani's house, and the party at Mogoșoaia transformed into a Sabbat, remove the book from the sphere of the historical novel, in the view of Liviu Leonte.

Critics have viewed the historically charged pages merely as a pretext, with the true theme of the work being power, making the novel a meditation on this idea. The symbol of the sign of power was seen in the image of the princely palace and in the person of the prince, and for Cornel Ungureanu, the Prince's fatigue is the fatigue of power. The book has also been commented on as a meditation on transient power, patriotism, and violent death, by Ion Vlad and Cornel Robu. For Laurențiu Ulici, the novel is nothing more than a Platonic dialogue, constructed similarly to the one featuring Socrates as protagonist, therefore based on the inequality of the positions held by the two discussion partners. In the critic's view, the dialogue becomes dictatorial, with the power residing in the hands of the Prince. The ideas that dominate this confrontation come from Machiavelli's writings, as Cornel Ungureanu observes, or from philosophers of the time, thus giving the novel the character of a philosophical work. Emil Manu [8, p. 231] brings into discussion the concept of power held by each character individually. Ioan Valahul represents the peasant's vision of it, which by extension becomes the vision of the Romanian people. On the other side is placed Messerul Ottaviano, who brings to attention an initiatory conception, which is why he is compared to Satan himself. Ioan Holban outlines two facets of power: one is the conceptual power materialized in the text through Ottaviano's destiny, the other belongs to instinctual power present in the book through the image of Malamos [6, p. 46]. *The Prince* is a parable about the rise and fall of despotic Caesarism, the primary element of which, in Eugen Simion's view, would be the Phanariot.

The reception of the literary work broadens its boundaries, becoming much more comprehensive by elevating a local case to one that can appear anywhere in the world, hence by evolving from the particular to the general. According to this idea, for Emil Manu, the parable of Ioan Valahul's biography coincides with the parable of the historical destiny of the Romanian people [8, p. 232], a people under the influence and at the confluence of two totally different worlds: the West and the East, as Simona Antofi stated: „Situated at the intersection of geopolitical, economic, and cultural routes of the West and East, annexed to the Eastern Question, the Romanian space has always manifested two apparently opposing, but in reality complementary, tendencies: one centrifugal, of refusal of the West, and the other centripetal, of synchronization on all levels with the Western world". From this perspective, he analyzes the destinies of the three central characters of the novel. Their end is interpreted as symbolic. The Messer's death is the death of the idea of the initiate in the secrets of the universe, the Prince's death is the death of the idea of power, and Ioan Valahul's retreat into the mountains is not seen as a death, but as a parable of life. Bugariu Voicu cited *The Prince* as a parable of the human condition (illustrated by the Phanariot ruler's destiny) and analyzes it from this perspective in his article published in the journal "Astra".

Regarding time and plot, critics agree that these are circular. The most commonly used examples are the beginning of the novel (with the atmosphere of decay and decomposition caused by the arrival of the plague, the recollection of the Prince's enthronement and Ottaviano's

arrival in the country) and its end, dominated by the same apocalyptic feeling and the news of the enthronement of another Prince and the arrival of another messer in the country, this time from the East. A.D. Munteanu sees this as a meditation on the theme of cyclic history, arguing that when "the cycle ends, we retain not the facts, nor the silhouettes of the characters, but pure significations". This movement of history is akin to the eternal return, "a cyclic regeneration of time and its forces". Time becomes, in another article by the same critic, the symbol of destiny, „of social putrefaction" [10, p. 218]. Simion Bărbulescu defines time as one of uncertainties, of waiting, and for Titus Moraru and Călin Manilici, it is "a suspended time". In the article „Time and History," Popa Marian distinguishes between a time of individual and collective existence and a cosmic time.

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