

Danubian Imaginary in the “*Book of the Millionaire*”

Elena Golovanova¹

Abstract: Eugene Ionesco mentioned in 1980 that the person, whom he appreciated and admired, had been one of the best Romanian prose writers of those times and, if Ștefan Bănuțescu was not yet known worldwide, the fact was due to the thing that he had been writing in Romanian, a language that had no international circulation. Autarchic imaginary universe, "The Millionaire's Book", written by Ștefan Bănuțescu, is one of the most original spaces of postbelic Romanian prose. From the tetralogy announced by Ștefan Bănuțescu under the title "The Millionaire's Book", only the first volume appeared, "The Book from Metopolis" - a novel of an imaginary territory, which had been designed as a fresco of the Romania of local myths - real and imaginary. "The Book from Metopolis" includes the world of the Danube plain between Călărași and Brăila as it was reinvented by the prose writer who knew like no other the great and small history of this piece of country. Ștefan Bănuțescu can be subsumed to a Romanian vein of "magical realism", together with Fănuș Neagu, Dumitru Radu Popescu or Constantin Țoiu. Without necessarily appealing to the fantastic, Șt. Bănuțescu builds a universe with fabulous iridescences, fixed in a timeless past. A special light bathes the landscapes and the characters, enveloping them with an aura of story. The objects have a weak but hypnotic inner flicker, and the gestures and actions of the protagonists acquire a kind of hieraticism, of exemplary significance. In Sartre's terms it could be said that Șt. Bănuțescu does not work with perceptions, but with images; the model he has in mind is not the outside world, but an inner world, recreated from fragments of memories, sensations and impressions.

Keywords: Lower Danube; imaginary territory; magical realism; inner world; impressions; hieraticism

The Danube... It is known that in Antiquity, the Danube had several names: Istros, Istru, Hister, Danaistru, in the Greek writings and Danubius in the Latin-Roman. Romanian historian Bogdan Petriceicu-Hașdeu stated that for our ancestors the name of the river meant the river carrying clouds, an idea taken from Samonicus, a Roman writer, who lived a century later than Trajan and who owned a library of 60,000 volumes, having at his disposal most of all that had ever been written before him,

¹ Associate Professor, PhD, Izmil State University for Humanities, Ukraine, Address: Repina St, 12, Izmil, Odessa Region, Ukraine, 68601, Tel.: +38 (04841)51388, Corresponding author: elena.univ@ukr.net.

said that in the Thracian language Danubius meant “cloud bearer”. For Albanians, the cloud is called *re*. In all Indo-European languages the radical *da* expresses the idea of *to give*, hence a participle form *dan* or *dana*. *Dana-re*, “giving clouds”, -the Thracian name from which the Romanians made *the Danube* and which Samonicus translated as “*cloud bearer*”.

From the oldest times, the Danube bore two names: Ister from the mouth to the Olt, i.e. in the region of Plain and the Danube from the Olt upwards, where it breaks a road between the Balkans and the Carpathians near Orșova, - was explaining Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu.

The Great river is one of the representative motifs in the work of many Romanian writers. For them the Danube is a source of knowledge and a return to childhood, the Danube space is one of magic, of all possibilities, but also of the real. By comparison one can notice the differences and similarities between the works of Romanian prose writers Ștefan Bănuțescu, on the one hand and Mihail Sadoveanu, on the other.

“Ștefan Bănuțescu, the most rigorous and one of the most gifted of post-war Romanian prose writers and of whole Romanian literature: had been envied (justifiably) by the “old” Mircea Eliade, avaricious and demanding with his writing, he raised the “magical realistic” phantasms of his native Bărăgan to the power of the refinement and the old wisdom of Byzantium, passed through the sieve and bolter of the classical and modern prose”, wrote Paul Cernat (Facebook, 2018). The lack of reference to the Danube is purely coincidental.

A huge and solid novelist, a fine essayist, a folkloric poet, a brilliant epigram writer, a meteoric pamphleteer, a thoughtful reporter and a rigorous memorialist, Ștefan Bănuțescu is a writer for all: “Life is a borderless plain; on its horizontal axis, a small vertical can always mean something”. (“Menfolk’s Winter”- “The Village of Clay”) Beyond any noble human struggle doomed to defeat and calomny, there is a victory that will survive not only the one who moved, hoped, and got weary, but even the detractors, those who will be shattered in turn by time and the sifting of things.” (“The Book of Millionaire”) “The reader must be loved as much as we can love ourselves when we do not discern the whole image clearly.” (“Correspondence”).

Ștefan Bănuțescu, born on September 8, 1926, in Făcăeni commune, Ialomița county, was the eighth son out of eleven of the ploughmen Ion and Elena Bănuțescu. In 1945 he graduated from the Știrbey-Vodă Theoretical High School in Călărași, Latin Language section, in 1952 he finished his studies at the Faculty of Philology

in Bucharest, having as teachers George Călinescu, Tudor Vianu, Alexandru Rosetti, Iorgu Iordan, Alexandru Graur.

In 1949 he made his debut in the magazine *Viața românească*, with an essay on Gogol's novels. Until 1964 he carried out an intense publishing activity: he collaborated with the magazines *Contemporanul*, *Gazeta literară*, *Tribuna*, *Steaua*, *Luceafărul* with a series of essays, dominated by a literary-cultural character; writes essays about the places of origin of classical writers: Mihai Eminescu, Ion Creangă, Ion Luca Caragiale, Liviu Rebreanu.

At the age of 39, Ștefan Bănuțescu is issuing the volume of novels *Menfolk's Winter* for which he is mentioned with the Award for Prose of Writers' Union. The volume appeared in whole or in part in German, French, English, Spanish, Russian, Serbian, Polish, Czech, Hungarian Languages. His volume of novels *Menfolk's Winter* marks in Romanian literature the transition from the socialist realism of the 1950s to the new traditionalism. Ștefan Bănuțescu preserves and uses the old thematic of evoking the Second World War, pays the price of communism by approaching an imposed theme, but adds an attraction for the archaic and traditional universe, for the ancient customs that have got a substrate pre-Christian magic.

In 1966 he becomes bursar at the University of Urbino, between 1971-1972 -at the University of Iowa City, International Writing Program, later works as editor-in-chief at the literary magazine *Luceafărul*, publishes in the magazines *Romania literară* and *Familia* the series of essays "Letters from the South-East Province", in 1976 at the Albatros Publishing House appears his volume of essays *Provincial Letters*, the title of the volume is imposed by censorship. The book will be republished under the title *Letters from the South-East Province or A Battle with Stories*, for which it he has been conferred the Prize of Writers' Union.

In 1977, at the Eminescu Publishing House, appears the novel *The Book of Metropolis*, the first volume of *The Book of The Millionaire* cycle, projected of four parts, which has been decorated with the Prize of Writers' Union for Novels. In the German magazine "Literatur im Technischen Zeitalter" in West Berlin, enormous chapters of the novel *The Book of Metropolis* have been published.

In 1983 Ștefan Bănuțescu followed the scholarship by competition at the Akademie der Künste (West Berlin), within the D.A.A.D. (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst) program.

Between 1988 and 1989, the first fragments of the novel *The Book of Dico* (the second volume of *The Book of The Millionaire* cycle), have been published in the 328

magazine *Viața românească*, as well as of the memorial cycle *Elegies at The End of The Century* (pages from the chapters *The Silver Rider and Stories from the Letter Museum*). Minerva Publishing House is printing the author's short stories in the "Library for All" collection.

In the following years, the volume of novels and stories by Ștefan Bănuțescu will appear in Germany and France in domestic languages. In 1996, Albatros Publishing House, in collaboration with Universal-Dalsi Publishing House, printed the novel *The Book of Metopolis* (3rd edition, final), with a short word by the author and a chronological table containing selective bio-bibliographical data. In 1997 ALLFA Publishing House is issuing under the title *An Imaginary Kingdom* the first edition of *Novels and Stories* that included almost all suchlike writings of the author, published in various volumes or only stamped in literary magazines. The volume included the cycles: 1. Menfolk's Winter; 2. The White Castle Banquet; 3. Another Colonel Chabert - and in the Addendum - the poems Songs of The Plain, "Lyrical Documents" of the imaginary territory on which the characters of his novelsextend and circulate. Also, in the same 1997, the author is awarded the National Prize for Literature.

Ștefan Bănuțescu passed away on May 25, 1998.

"Menfolk's Winter" - a volume of novels belonging to the pen of Ștefan Bănuțescu, appears in Bucharest in 1965. An important role in the genesis of the book was played by the author's activity as a reporter, carried out between 1949-1962, as well as his poetry, gathered in a volume only in 1968, but written earlier, concomitantly or even prior to his stories. The novels first saw the light in the press ("Gazeta literară" and "Luceafărul") between 1963 and 1965. In the third edition, in 1971, the summary of the volume was enriched with two new writings, *Temporary Lives and The House with Late Echoes*, also initially published in magazines in 1970. The final edition from 1979 includes, in addition to the known stories an addendum in which Ștefan Bănuțescu poems were printed under the title *Songs of The Plain*.

"The Wild Boars Were Gentle", the opening words of the volume, it is a mythical novel, starting from a widespread motif for many nations: that of the Flood. The phenomena caused by the overflow of the Danube are described by Ștefan Bănuțescu in an apocalyptic vision, specific to the diluvian myths, usually understood as a return to chaos.

An ancestral feeling of cosmic terror, of the end of the world is revived in people's souls, so strong that it even affects language, making it difficult and impeding

communication. Words have become useless, for they call a world that no longer exists, a world annihilated by the fury of the waters. The deacon Ichm's speech disintegrates, it seems shattered by the blizzard, his words fail to become comprehensive and fall to articulate a meaning. The theme of the novel is the confrontation between man and the unleashed forces of nature. More interested in collective issues, the author depicts a traditional human community that is stubborn to resist in an unfavorable place, facing the power of floods every year. Deacon Ichim is a foreigner who, once having arrived to the village of the Delta, identified himself with the destiny of this community. His existence is twofold: conscious and oneiric. Only in his dreams, which he does not remember in the morning, does the deacon aspire to another world, more stable and drier. However, he never thought of leaving this settlement always dislocated by the waters, but - on the contrary - he sought to consolidate it by recording its historical existence, celebrating its births and deaths, in other words, the passage of time.

The same spirit of resistance defines Condrat, the main character of the novel. He faces the waters himself as well, he also does not give up human values, wandering in a boat in search of a piece of land where he could bury his dead son. He opposes the unwavering respect for the traditions to the destructive force of the waters from an immemorial antiquity. The vital force is the main feature of Vica, the woman with a big and strong body, who joins the group in Condrat's boat. Described in a double register - realistic and legendary, Vica is a fabulous character, as if detached from the local mythology. People think that she is hiding in the reeds and that her dress has rotted, that she walks wrapped in rush leaves, like poppies, and she feeds herself by catching fish under water like otters. From Fenia's lament - Condrat's wife - it results that Vica is the "girl of the heather" and that she is a kind of spirit of the Delta, being born in the boat and having the Danube as her nurse. On the one hand, she is imagined as a water spirit - a swan or a fox - and on the other hand, as a symbol of the erotic spell ("the serpent").

There are several symbolic images in the short story, two of which are more important. It is first of all an apocalyptic symbol, that of the oak uproot and destroyed by a storm in the middle of the forest. Though dry for a long time, the villagers refused to cut it, believing it still green, even though it was no longer bore leaves. Upset by water, the tree finally reveals its inner rot. Through its hollow trunk, like through an ocean, one could stare at the "end". By the final of the novel, the second symbol appears, this time a symbol of vitality and regeneration. It is the image of the herd of wild boars and especially of an old wild boar, named by the

villagers Vasile. Gentle, agreeing to eat corn from people's palms, the wild boar had longtime been known in the area. Although old, he "didn't give up", the friskiness and desire to play did not leave him even then, in times of calamity. This deity, animal, the wild boar is here the symbol of the triumphant life, of the life that the hostile forces of the deluge cannot overcome. The joy of the villagers regarding the wild boar is a defiance of the flood, laughter is the means by which they manage to overcome the cosmic dread.

The second novel from the volume, *Dropia*, begins with some temporal clarifications. The moment described by the author is conducive to stories of all kinds. Like at Sadoveanu, the narrations take place sometimes at night, before daybreak, when people, moving in a direction still unknown, cannot see their faces, but can hear their voices. The temporal references multiply along the way, offering the possibility of a historical localization of the events. It stands to reason that we are in one of the drought years after the First World War, when the dry spell lasted from Flower Week until Autumn. There have been taking places anomalies of the weather, there was a strange phenomenon of temporal interference, an overlap of seasons.

The prose slides imperceptibly into the symbol, establishing relations of analogy and correspondence between the state of time and the inner state of the characters. The outburst of the past in the present, described in calendar terms, is also the essential feature of the stories of Miron, the main character, who is recalling his youth. Similar to other novels' authors, Ștefan Bănuțescu is interested not only in the fate of the hero, but also in the specific features of a community, a rural community in the Bărăgan Plain. What is characterizing this world, it is first of all, the unboundness to the present and the perpetuation of some ancient structures. The village perseveres (as if confirming Blaga's ideas) outside of history, it wants to preserve, whatever the circumstances, its archaic spirit.

The novels from *The Menfolk's Winter* introduce a multivalent style artist. In his texts there is always present the suggestion of a reality beyond the text, a second layer of meanings to which the reader is led by gradual revelations" (Banulescu, 1991, p. XIII). Perpessicius states: "*The Menfolk's Winter* is one of the books that will never be talked about enough ..." (Perpessicius, 1965).

The world of novels is lyrically reconstructed in the volume *Songs of the Plain* by using the same elements of nature and human atmosphere. The same symbols appear, the bustard, the slippery sands, the acacia, the stubble scorched by the sun. "Between

the volumes *Songs of the Plain*, *The Menfolk's Winter* and *The Book of the Millionaire* there are many bridges, between them circulate many symbols, motifs, human figures, in augmented and nuanced versions that develop from one writing to another and branch and deepen their meanings. The result is a unique world whose structures merge.” (Banulescu, 1991, p. XXIV).

From the tetralogy announced by Ștefan Bănulescu under the generic title *The Book of the Millionaire*, only the first volume appeared, *The Book of Metopolis* - a story of an imaginary place, which was supposed to be a fresco of a Romania of local myths - real and imaginary. “The Book of Metopolis” includes the world of the Danubian Plain between Călărași and Brăila as it was reinvented by the prose writer who knew like no other the great and small history of this piece of country.

Ștefan Bănulescu can be subsumed to a Romanian vein of “magical realism”, together with Fănuș Neagu, Dumitru Radu Popescu or Constantin Țoiu. Without necessarily appealing to the fantastic, Șt. Bănulescu builds a universe with fabulous iridescences, fixed in a timeless past.

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The world of the millionaire is a world that the prose writer shapes according to his own visionary. It is a land drawn along the mnemonic lines of the soul, a compensatory affectionate homeland, in which the author takes delighted refuge. Ștefan Bănulescu is the creator of a chronotope for personal benefit. Geographically, *The Book of the Millionaire* is located in the lands of the Lower Danube. The heavy, hot and humid atmosphere of a muddy river, slow as a leviathan, bathing a calcareous and desert land, full of thistles, fascinated other Romanian prose writers as well. The plain and the meadows of the Danube were formed in a distinct and unmistakable topos of Romanian literature, whose main feature is the openness to all horizons. Dobrogean city, Metopolis is a crossroads of civilizations, at the confluence of the Moldavian Carpathians, the Bugeac steppes and the Levantine south.

The Danubian Plain is an emblematic space in the work of Ștefan Bănulescu. *The Book of Metopolis* appears as a summation of the author's art and meditation in the direction of exploiting new valences of fable and formulating questions on the

historical and existential relationship between tradition and modernity. *The Book of Metopolis* strikes by the original way in which the most superficial appearance is annihilated by the substance it hides. The originality of the imaginary land that the author creates is endorsed by the mythical Romanian character of its geography, history and demography.

The world created by Ștefan Bănuțescu with its center in the city of Metopolis is located not far from the “Great river” that bathes with its arms the Island of the Horses and, beyond it, at the edge of the Dicomestia plain are the cities Wool Fortress and Mavrocordat, somewhere to the North lays Transylvania with Marmatia, from where he arrives in the first pages of the novel Glad, a former prisoner and woodcutter, who is bringing a cart’s wheel that will be turned by him into a machine of candle factory using tallow. This is a symbol of history, of the transformation of the world from which the Metopolis cannot escape either. A mythical symbol, the wheel of Vlad makes an express reference to Ixion’s wheel.

In *The Book of Metopolis*, each character has his own story, the novel being in fact the chain of these stories and not the connection between the characters themselves. The platform on which individual existences connect to form a world is rather the story, the word and not the epic fiction itself. Ștefan Bănuțescu’s imaginary consists of capitalist social relations doubled by an apocryphal mythical mentality and Balkan style, all against the background of a mythical, fabulous history and geography.

The Metopolis is a twilight world, it clings to the “noble” Byzantine traditions, “petrified by culture”, although its authentic traditions are the Dicomestian ones, which it despises nevertheless. *The Book of Metopolis* is not about a “secret history” but rather about a kind of “secret geography.” However, Ștefan Bănuțescu’s “geography” is a spiritual and moral one. What he does in this novel is a synthesis of the Muntenian spiritual space: fable, irony, narration and concealment. It is a mythical novel, an extremely rare species in Romanian literature. Ștefan Bănuțescu’s work presents us a moral and spiritual geography, and, at the same time, a secret geography and history.

The imaginary map of the Metopolis is at 1/1 scale, the toponymy procreates the topography, gradually from the names of places the geography of the Metopolis or of the Dicomestia is being constituted. Emblematic spaces are born: Horses’ Island, Wool Fortress, Mavrocordat, Neamțul’s Leg which is a bend of the Danube. As emblematic spaces we find an open space which is the Danubian Plain, an endless space, whose emblem is the Danube river, which carries with it all stories.

The Metopolis is an exotic space, an Eldorado for many of its inhabitants. General Glad enters Metopolis rolling a wheel that will serve him for his business, the candle factory using tallow. The wheel creates a circular space and the vision of the real world as a labyrinth. At the same time in Metopolis there is an underground space, a space where lies the priceless treasure of the Metopolisians, the red marble. *The Book of Metopolis* is the epicenter of a multistorey universe with multiple meanings that is practically built under the eyes of its reader. The sensitive difference towards Faulkner, Sadoveanu, Voiculescu, Marquez and the other officials of the miraculous South American reality comes from the author's emphatic distance to the fictional universe.

Bogdan Popescu mentioned in "The Clothes of the Other Reality," *Critical Notebooks*: "He (Ștefan Bănuțescu) left this road open, avoiding, perhaps, to continue it himself too far, so as not to alter its subtleties. But the challenge was fabulous: an imaginary space, replete of multiple possibilities to be filled endlessly; characters who rise gigantically in the mitosphere, after which they collapse into the dust; a subtle ritual of narration and different points of view of the narrators; gigantic accumulations of facts that ended in derision; a whole and fascinating spirituality that was sought after, searched, that has become, here, a common space from which a gifted writer can draw his vigour without being ashamed for not being the first to come there." (Popescu, 2003)

Șerban Tomșa stated in "Ambiguity of Literature," *Cages for Ideas*: "I stick to the idea that the novel *The Book of The Millionaire* by Ștefan Bănuțescu is one of the greatest books ever written. [...] I also share the idea of Eugen Ionesco and Constantin Țoiu that Bănuțescu would have deserved a Nobel. Ștefan Bănuțescu is a writer of great value, a Romanian equivalent of South American magicians (Tomșa, 2012). "The Ambiguity of Literature," *Cages for Ideas*, June 24, 2012. Eugene Simion in *Today's Romanian Writers*, vol. I, mentioned: "Bănuțescu's village is older than that of Sadovianu's shepherds and fishermen (Simion, 1978, p. 598)."

Eugen Ionesco mentioned in October 1980 that this writer whom he appreciates and admires, is one of the best Romanian prose writers of today and, if Ștefan Bănuțescu is not yet known worldwide, this is due to the fact that he writes in Romanian, the language that has no international circulation. An autarchic imaginary universe, *The Book of The Millionaire*, written by Ștefan Bănuțescu, is constituted accordingly in one of the most original spaces of post-war Romanian prose.

“*The Book of Metopolis* (part of *The Book of The Millionaire* tetralogy) is a masterpiece - as are most of the novels from *Menfok's Winter* and the enigmatic stories of *The Provincial Letters* collection. *The Book of The Millionaire* is not only a novel, but also a *novel-like game*. All the tricks of the “trade,” which writers usually keep secret, are used here in the sight of the world. And not for who knows what purpose, but for their beauty in themselves, similar to that of the unusable “romantic machineries” that delight poets (Stefanescu, 2005)”. “*Mutatis mutandis*, Ștefan Bănuțescu is, like Balzac, creator of a single world and, at the same time, author of a single Book - the novel in perpetual construction *The Book of The Millionaire*.” (Spiridon, 2000, pp. 8-9).

Mihail Sadoveanu is an obligatory landmark in what the poetics of the narration means, with the specification that the ballad and the lyric, the two axes of the narrative, are found in slightly modified forms in Ștefan Bănuțescu works. The ballad is somewhat found in the mythical vision, and the lyric melts into the fabulous. Common to both is the fragmentarism of Ion Neculce, the one who in “A Series of words” gathers legends, able eventually to be melted in a new chronicle of the Moldovean Country, a chronicle without those extrapolations or “fairy tales” inserts, as Miron Costin called them. The juxtaposition technique, doubled by their framing, is a certain Sadovian acquisition that Bănuțescu follows in his “Book” being, in fact, a summation of the “books” of each character, built according to other rules than the Romanian ones.

Bănuțescu’s Danubian imaginary intersects to a point with Vasile Voiculescu’s fabulous, less with the Christian side of his narrative. The greatness of the river generated a special theme, approached either from the perspective of the adventurous by Panait Istrati, or from the poetic fable of Sadoveanu and Bănuțescu, followed closely by that of Fănuș Neagu. The Danubian thematic is far from being exhausted, both in terms of the texts already entered in the reading circuit, and those that are yet to be discovered or written from now on.

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