

## The Danube – An Axis Mundi for the Balkan Space

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**Abstract:** *Since the concept of Balkan aria has appeared, there were a lot of disputes concerning its frame and its borders. No matter which theory we agree with, there is always a constant symbol of the Balkans – the Danube, a long river running through many capitals and European countries linking the west to the east of Europe. Having in mind this image, the authors' of this paper aim is to decode the literary signification and analyse the way in which the signification of the river is mirrored in different Balkan contemporary prose writers' work. Among them a special chapter is dedicated to Elias Canetti, born in Ruse who lived and wrote in Vienna, depicting two completely different image of the legendary Danube.*

*The main research question refers to the symbolic value of the Danube image. The research is a multidisciplinary one as it is based on an economic and socio-political analysis of the role of the Danube Commission and operates with tools specific for literary theory, sociolinguistic and multicultural studies. Due to the frame of such an academic work just a small number of writers' work is used as case studies meant to illustrate the literary value of the Danube image.*

**Key words:** Literature, Symbols, Multiculturalism, Danube.

### LEAD IN

A concept much used today is that of Balkan culture. Its frame and its content are deeply linked to other social, political or cultural ones concerning the Balkan aria or the South- East part of Europe. It is quite clear that the above mentioned region got the name from the Turkish word Balkan, which means a wooden mountain range. At the same time, it is obvious that the name refers less to a specific geographical space, but to a special spirituality, a way of living, thinking and talking. As for the borders of the aria, the disputes seem endless. There are several causes of this fact, but we are not going to list them, as they are not the subject of the analysis of this paper.

In this paper the author's intention is to present an element which contributes to the unit of the region, one that over the centuries, no matter of the so often mentioned three cultural strata, or if the rulers were the Byzantine or the Ottoman Empire or the region is represented by many independent countries, this unique element remained an outstanding image. That linking element with a rich symbolical value, part of the image of the Balkans is the Danube, a long river running through many capitals and European countries linking the west to the east of Europe. Now at the beginning of the third millennium its economic role is not as strong as it used to be, but it is still associated with different concepts that shape the Balkans' profile, it still represents something special defining the multi-faced profile of 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The working hypothesis which led to the main research question refers to the symbolic value of the Danube image. Using as a background some historic and economic data, referring to some outstanding Balkan writers who were impressed by the image of the river which crosses Europe from Germany (West) to the Black Sea (East – Balkan) we tried to decode the symbolic values of its image in a postmodern era.

The research is a multidisciplinary one as it is based on an economic and socio-political analysis of the role of the Commission of the Danube River and cultural significant. Because the final result refers to symbolic literary values the research operates with tools specific for literary theory, sociolinguistic and multicultural studies too. Some texts written by well-known contemporary writers are used as case studies in order to define the supposed symbolic value. Having a common cultural heritage, dominated by the Ottoman Empire for centuries, sheering a communist past, countries people of the Balkan countries try to determine the differences between them as well as elements that are linking them

## SOME HISTORICAL FACTS

During the ancient time a lot of important cities were built along the river Danube. One was the ancient fort of the Roman Sexaginta Prista (located on the contemporary area of Ruse), other are Axiopolis, Dorostorum<sup>36</sup>, Dinogetia. They were part of a large chain of fortresses, built on old Greek or Hellenistic constructions, reinforced by the Romans, used till the collapse of the Byzantine Empire all having a lot of common characteristics [1]. One of the most important cities of the region was Histria<sup>37</sup>. At the beginning a rich Greek colony, then a Roman city and harbour, in the end a Byzantine one, collapse because the bay turned into a lake. This large number of cities proves the river importance as a border between regions and also as an important factor in economic development as well as a navigation channel. The Danube is a frontier and a linking road.

## COMMISSIONS OF THE DANUBE RIVER

Since Ancient time when the region was dominated by the Roman Empire, the navigation on the Danube had a major effect on the area development in terms of socio-economic and political point of view. Even during the Ottoman Empire settlements as Ruse or Silistra (Dorostorum) developed because they were situated along the Danube [2]. The empire ended on the Danube, because Wallachia and Moldavia were just under suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire. The major political and economic forces of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottomans, the Russian and the Austrians were connected by the river.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the relationships between Western Europe and the Balkans changed and as a consequence the role of the Danube was redefined. Due to a crisis of wheat, England has to look for other resources and they discovered the richness of the Balkans. The Black Sea ports were still ruled by the Turkish administration, so the transport on the Danube was the best solution. The activity was so intense that it needed certain regulations. In 1856 The **Commissions of the Danube River** were authorized by the *Treaty of Paris*. One of these international commissions, the most successful, was the **European Commission of the Danube**, or, in French, **Commission Européenne du Danube**. This fact was of major importance for the economic development of the whole region. Its economic influence was due to the fact that Western countries, mainly Great Britain offered a large financial and technical support for the countries situated along the low part of the river. An aspect that has to be mentioned is that the commission was absolutely neutral from the political point of view along all the conflicts and war which developed in the region up to the Second World War when it was disbanded [3].

Nevertheless, the commission was deeply involved in the life of the countries along the river. An outstanding example is the unification of Moldavia and Wallachia. The works of the committee are published in Bucharest in 1858 in a book called *The Danube Issue*, volume accompanied by a very detailed map. The strict legal regulations helped the economic development.

## ROMANIAN VISION

In order to define the image of the Danube in Romanian collective imagination several prose writers are quoted. The list is much longer, but the author made a personal selection. We will start at the beginning of national literature, in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Vasile Alecsandri<sup>38</sup> in one of his best short stories *Balta Alba [White Pound]* presents a gentleman coming from Western Europe in Wallachia. The character lives a

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<sup>36</sup> The earliest saints of Bulgaria are Roman soldiers executed at Durostorum during the Diocletian Persecution (303–313). It is known as Silistra.

<sup>37</sup> Histria is derived from the Latin word Hister, meaning Danube

<sup>38</sup> Vasile Alecsandri is a Romanian writer who lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He represents the generation of the revival of national literature under the influence of French romanticism.

fantastic adventure which starts during a trip by ship on the Danube when first had heard about Wallachia and its people [4]. He is fascinated by the Danube mythical universe to which the author adds the strange image of Bărăgan<sup>39</sup> and that of sunburned hills of Dobrogea.

After more than one century in Stefan Banulescu's<sup>40</sup> novel *Cartea de la Metopolis* (*The Book from Metopolis*), the Danube is a silent, mysterious and mythical presence "the river flow calm, mastering its bed" influencing the life of all those living along its way. The author is impressed by the fact that "streets all absurd returning to river" [5]. The richness of the region, its glory and decadence are due to the river. All fairy tales and traditions are connected to him. The name of the city are imaginary by they recall ancient ones as Axiopolis and Dorostorum.

The writer Petru Popescu<sup>41</sup>, impressed by the grandeur of the river, wrote a novel *Copiii domnului* (*Children of God*), where the river is seen as an obstacle against country's enemies, mainly the Turks. In his novel the Danube is a mythical and friendly presence and becomes symbol protector of the people living on its shores "All monastery villages and forests, thrown down like feathers lost from the nest, and the hills bare fit into the Danube Bend [6]. The author depicts the multicultural universe composed of Romanian, Turkish, Bulgarian, Serbs, and Tatar the result of the river's capacity to unite people.

What makes Petru Popescu's image different compared to other Romanian prose writers is the fact that he describes not only the river bed but also the swamps along its shores. It is a strange environment, having an ambiguous existence between land and water "between the monastery and the village, between the monastery and Tatars between the monastery and the world - swamp. Deep and tangled crossed by one path' [7]. The symbolical value of the image is obvious and suggestive for the whole country atmosphere at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### THE DANUBE IMAGE IN CANETTI'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WORK

One of the most important writers who caught the image of the river in their work is the winner of the Nobel Prize, Elias Canetti. He was born in 1905 in Ruse and spent his childhood here (1905-1911), until the family moved to Manchester, England. After his father death his mother moved again, first to Lausanne, then to Vienna. His whole life he was very fond of Vienna, where he was a student and started his literary work, but never forgets his childhood Ruse.

In his book *The Tongue Set Free*, Canetti recalls his early childhood memories, the way in which he started to learn several languages and how German turned into his favourite one. The image of the Danube dominates the background of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Ruse life. Large carts with barrels use to bring water from the river to be used for housework. His nanny was of Romanian origin and she had come from the other side of the river bringing strange and beautiful fairy tales. In his family people use to tell stories about crossing the frozen river by carriages, wrapped in furs. Canetti' mother used to tell that she took part to such an expedition.

As Canetti mentions the river linked the city to Europe, or in other words, after the Danube began Europe. People went or came from Vienna or other important Western cities, by ship. When he settled in Vienna with his mother and brothers, Canetti came to visit his family in Ruse by ship, along the Danube. In the novel *The Torch in my Ear*, retells the story of his last return to Ruse. This time he travels with one of his uncles and is

<sup>39</sup> A large and at the time savage plain in SE of Romania

<sup>40</sup> Stefan Banulescu is a contemporary Romanian prose writer who tried to present the twilight glory of the Byzantine civilization as it appears in modern times. His novels depict a mythical and fantastic world which is the result of a melting pot between folklore and ancient / Byzantine heritage.

<sup>41</sup> Petru Popescu was a very fashionable writer in the 70. Then he emigrated in USA and has become a successful script writer at Hollywood. In the 90 he came to Romania several times and published 3 books. He is one of the most successful writer of the Romanian exile.

fascinated by the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the travellers [8], a completely different world compared to Vienna. But this world was similar to that of his childhood, similar to his grandfather Canetti, a picturesque image of Ruse Sephardic Hebrew colony.

Canetti spent a lot of time in Vienna, a city he loved as much as his mother, but the strange fact is that he does not impressed by the river Danube presence as much as in the chapters dedicated to his childhood in Ruse. Only once he mentions that Jews living in Vienna use to go on the Danube Channel banks to throw pieces of papers on which they wrote their sins.

## CONCLUSIONS

The South–East part of Europe is dominated by the Danube which links it to “other Europe” because it comes from the West (springs from Germany) and flows into the Black Sea in the Balkans (Romania). The Balkan space which is so diverse linguistically, ethnically and religiously is ordered by the river's presence. Due to its different symbolical values it links people and cultures, helps them to know each other.

Reading some of the most important pages written about it, analysing the economic impact of the Danube commission it is clear that its role was an important one and contributed to shape the region's profile from both cultural and economic point of view. At the same time, it should be underlined that there is a whole mythical world that developed in literature from various Balkan countries and had the image of the river as a starting point.

One may consider that the river importance decline nowadays, due to the diminishing value of the river shipping. Probably its economic role is not as important as it used to be, but is symbolic image is as strong as ever.

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