

Dimitrie Bolintineanu's *Manoil*

From Literary Convention to Moralizing Lesson

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Abstract

This paper analyses the construction of Manoil, the eponymous hero of Dimitrie Bolintineanu's novel, in relation to: a number of European fictional models present in the 19th century in the 'very young' Romanian literature; to the non-competitive rapport between the realist and romanticist conventions of the time in point of character authenticity/ verisimilitude, and also to the narrative strategies which include the diary, the epistolary novel and timid attempts at introspection. Set within the framework of the narrative structures of the sentimental epistolary novel, Bolintineanu's character is constructed so as to illustrate the moralizing theme which holds that the representation of femininity may acquire both positive and negative connotations (and functions), intervening in the male character's inner and outer journey as a destructive or, on the contrary, re-constructive force.

Keywords: Romanian epistolary novel, early Romanian literature, sentimental novel, diary, influence of French literature

Bolintineanu is one of the pioneers of the Romanian novel. The novel *Manoil* was published in 1855 in *România literară*, although it had been finished a few years before and had been since the end of 1851 in the possession of Vasile Alecsandri, who intended to publish it in the journal scheduled to be launched at that time. Thus, after a few attempts made by other authors, such as Ion Ghica (*Istoria lui Alecu/ The History of Alecu*, written before 1848 and preserved only as a manuscript, which is just a sketch of a novel), or Mihail Kogălniceanu (*Tainele inimii/The Mysteries of the Heart*, confined to only an introduction, published in 1850 in *Gazeta de Moldova*), *Manoil* is the first fully accomplished novel of Romanian literature.

As a subjective, sentimental, epistolary novel – according to Nicolae Manolescu's description (2001) – *Manoil* belongs to a literary tradition dominated by Jean Jacques Rousseau's *New Heloise* (1837), Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, as well as by Chateaubriand's and Mme de Stael's novels. What draws the readers' attention is its lyrical-epistolary form, which had come to be adored by novelists in pre-Romanticism and during the first period of Romanticism, as it was suitable for introducing a new type of hero – a sentimental, melancholic and often pessimistic one, inclined towards long lyrical divagations. Later, still in

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Romanticism, Alfred de Musset (*Confession d'un enfant du siècle*) or George Sand moved from the epistolary form to a first-person narrative, which suggests confession.

Made up of two parts, the novel *Manoil* retraces, in the former half, the “sentimental education” (announcing Bolintineanu as a Flaubert avant-la-lettre) of the Romantic hero (*the poetic man*) with pure soul and sensitive, distrustful nature, inclined towards melancholy and pessimism, disgusted by life, a close relative of Werther or René, of an ardent patriotism and great passion. Here, there are some *genuine* reasons for the protagonist’s sadness: he is an orphan with a modest fortune who finds himself among rich boyars who often despise him, and who is disillusioned with his first love, a common trait among the Romantic heroes.

Un deșert amar – se confesează Manoil – este în inima mea...! aș voi să mor...! Nimic nu mă mai ține pe pământ ...!

[A bitter desert – Manoil confesses – is in my heart...! I wish I died...! Nothing keeps me on the face of the Earth...!] (Bolintineanu 1993: 32)

At grips with his society, he finds refuge in nature. Embracing Rousseau’s conviction that civilisation and culture are to blame for the corruption and unhappiness of man, Manoil condemns the books and glorifies the naturalness of the simple man:

O, cărțile...! Iată începutul durerilor mele... cum aș fi voit să fiu muncitor de aceia ce-și trec viața în simplitate și nu se comunică cu cugetările altora...!

[Oh, the books...! Here’s the beginning of my sorrows... how I wish I were a worker, one of those who live their lives in simplicity and do not express themselves using other people’s thoughts] (33).

The conventional and naïve erotic subplot is also present. Deception intervenes again when he falls in love with Mărioara, a landlord’s daughter who cheats on him. Thus, from a pure, honest and sensitive soul, he turns, in just two years spent abroad for studies, into a cynical reveller who shows contempt for any form of pure and innocent love. “*Acolo unde mi-e bine și acolo unde-mi place, acolo este patria mea, și este de prisos ca s-o iubesc, căci ea poate exista și fără iubirea mea*” [Where I’m good and where I like to be, there’s my homeland, and it’s useless to love it, as it can exist without my love] (51), says Manoil, ironizing the idea of patriotism.

At the last minute, Manoil is saved from moral degradation by Zoe, the girl he had betrothed before his leaving the country and who had remained faithfully in love with him during his departure (Păcurariu 1969: 82).

The latter half of the novel is an outline of Manoil’s ‘adventures’ in Paris, the capital of compromise and vices, which are ready at all times to make him lose his way. The pattern is borrowed from mystery novels, such as *The Mysteries of Paris* by Eugene Sue or *The Mysteries of London* by Paul Féval. It will be later used in the Romanian literary space in *The Mysteries of Bucharest* by M. Bujoreanu or *The Mysteries of the Journey* by C. D. Aricescu.

According to Nicolae Manolescu (1990), in *Istoria critică a literaturii române* [*The Critical History of Romanian Literature*], Bolintineanu's novels deserve a special place in Romanian literature as they display a melange of the popular and the sentimental, as well as an obvious break with the structures of the old novella. Therefore, their historical role is underlined first and foremost, as they represent the 'seed' for our future psychological novel, much in the way in which the popular novels are the forerunners of the social novel.

A specific trait of the novel after 1848 is this formula of the mystery novel which renders society in a mythical and prejudiced manner. The conflict does not engage verisimilar characters but heroes that embody some ethical and religious principles. The formula of the French and English mystery novel, with all its clichés enters the space of Romanian literature either in relatively domesticated forms or in forms completely divorced from the literary specificity and even from the readership's expectations. Moreover, the exercising of some writing/ reading patterns overcomes the inherent disadvantage of the beginning, and, with Nicolae Filimon's *Ciocoii vechi și noi sau ce naște din pisică șoareci mănâncă* [*The Old and the New Parvenus or Like Father, Like Son*] and with Dimitrie Bolintineanu's two significant novels, *Manoil* and *Elena*, the patterns of the new genre are born, with autochthonous substance and hybrid strategies.

The combination between the epistolary novel and the diary, as means to create the illusion of authenticity, gives Bolintineanu the freedom of dimensioning and adjoining the narrative sequences in the sudden passages from a moment to the next in the plot, in the natural insertion of descriptions, and even in the timid attempts at auto-analysis.

There are, naturally, many autobiographical elements in *Manoil*, although they are heavily idealised. *Manoil* is a renowned poet, and Bolintineanu's poems are reproduced verbatim in the narrative. At first sight, the novelist is just the recipient of the letters sent by his friend *Manoil*, who addresses him with the introductory formula "Dear B". However, the reader soon realises that the protagonist, *Manoil*, is a representation of the author, inasmuch as Alexandru Eliescu, the protagonist of the next and more accomplished novel, *Elena* (1862), is also an autobiographical character.

The unusual spatial-temporal configuration of the novel is inspired from the eighteenth-century French novels, which also constitute an inspiration for other aspects. Thus, *Manoil*, consists, in fact, of letters with specific dates which ultimately pile up in a kind of diary. Moreover, both *Manoil* and *Elena* set their characters in motion alongside a single line: love, its confession and accomplishment.

In addition, the sentimental novel "isolates its protagonists" with a reductive procedure – at its heart there is a hero who sees no meaning in struggling for his life, which is why he takes refuge on an estate, in search for women's company and the charms of nature (Manolescu 2001: 83).

In *Manoil*, the characters are not clearly defined, lacking psychological depth, and they are grouped into two opposing categories, in an irreducible contrast. Thus, the novel features positive characters, endowed with superlative

qualities (Manoil, Ana, Zoe, Smărăndița, etc.), and negative characters, also superlative in their vices (Alexandru C., the monster, and Mărioara, the prostitute). The author dismisses any shade of grey and, as Teodor Vârgolici (1972: 84) maintains, only 'paints' in black and white.

However, the elements of the sentimental novel lend the typologies – especially the feminine ones – touches that are reminiscent of 'minor' Romanticism:

Smărăndița – de 25 de ani, fără exagerare, o frumusețe rară, dar seamănă cu o floare ce în dimineata vieții sale se înclină melancolică! ... un suflet plin de blândețe, o inteligență superioară; multe cunoștințe, mai ales pentru o damă din timpul și din țara noastră!;

Zoe – nepoata Smărăndiței – o copilă de cincisprezece anișori; chipul mătușei-și, dar strălucitor de frăgezime. Ai asemăna-o cu un bobocel de roză pe care fluturii încă nu-l bagă în seamă; plină de spirit și de inimă ...;

Tudora – bălaie și rumenă ca o roză sălbatică, plină de frăgezime și de sănătate;

Mărioara este o amică a Smărăndiței: o fată de boier mare, de 18 – 20 de ani; nu este prea frumoasă, dar dragălașă ca luna lui mai! ... vorbele ei răsună ca o muzică sublimă; ideile cele mai comune în gura ei se îndumnezeiesc!.

[Smărăndița – a 25 year-old young lady who, without any exaggeration, is a rare beauty, but who resembles a flower that bends melancholically in the dawn of its life... a soul full of mellowness, a superior wit, possessing great knowledge for a lady of our times in our country!;

Zoe – Smărăndița's niece – a 15 year-old child, whose face closely resembles her aunt's, but glowing with freshness. You'd compare her to a rosebud still ignored by butterflies; full of heart and spirit...;

Tudora – fair and rosy like a wild rose, fresh and healthy;

Mărioara is one of Smărăndița's friends: the daughter of a grand boyar, around 18 or 20 years old; she's not that beautiful, but she's as cute as the month of May!... her words sound like sublime music, the most banal ideas become godly in her mouth! (Bolintineanu 1993: 8)

Obviously, in keeping with the romantic model of the age, Mărioara is an ordinary person, meant to deviate towards the negative pole of the macro-level of meaning of the novel. She rises to the expectations of the readership and becomes a famous prostitute with criminal thoughts (Antofi 2008: 72).

In what the late half of the nineteenth-century reader is concerned, (s)he wants "deceit and not the truth", as Nicolae Manolescu (2001: 92) maintains in *Arca lui Noe [Noah's Ark]*. Thus, everything that happens to the protagonist is in close relation to what was expected to happen during that age. Manoil is illustrative for the type of the parvenu made up by women. This aspect is underlined by the character's metamorphosis, which is inexplicable in the terms of realist verisimilitude. Metamorphosis may be regarded as "a sign of imitation and upstartness" if one accepts, as Manolescu does (2001: 92), the fact that Manoil openly detests Alexandru C. but secretly admires him. Manoil turns from an orphan and an intruder in N. Colescu's house into a family man. From this

perspective, *Manoil* is a novel about founding a family, and the hero walks a path of initiation up to his complete maturing.

In the beginning of the novel, Manoil is desolated by the lack of “knowing the soul of the others” of a maleficent, coquettish woman, Mărioara, who, with her angelic looks, almost ruins his life. The differences between them are clear, as Manoil has no name or wealth, he is merely a poet, satirised by her – a beautiful, blonde woman who mocks his love and soon abandons him. However, at the end of the novel, the truly angelic Zoe, “*bobocelul de roză pe care fluturii însă nu-l bagă în seamă*” [the rosebud still ignored by butterflies] (8), proves to be the one who really loves him and who offers to him a rich family, a name, an idyllic life in the country, surrounded by books and drunk with love, with no concern about “the prejudices” of those who would say that the man is kept by his wife (84). Manoil’s rise and fall are both caused by women. The sentimental thesis proposed by *Manoil* is that the woman can turn the man into either an angel or a demon.

Another modern technique often present in the structure of the 1848 novels, namely the *mise en abyme*, is made use of to announce the moral and sentimental recovery of the protagonist, programmatically designed by the actual theme of the novel (Antofi 2008: 72). It is the part in which Smărăndița appears in Manoil’s dreams:

Altădată tu erai floarea tinereimei noastre! Patria ta pusesă în tine atâta speranță!... inima ta era tânără și plină de candoare ca o fecioară; câți te cunoșteau nu puteau să se oprească de a te iubi ... iar astăzi, cel mai degradat om nu s-ar crede stimat ca să-ți strângă mana; cel ce crezuse în talentul tău astăzi roșește că a putut avea o asemenea cugetare; inima ta s-a îmbătrânit, s-a degradat și nu mai poate să bată de acum înainte decât la fapte nefolositoare! ... pentru ce ai venit în casa aceasta? Vrei să amăgești pe Zoe; pare că roșești de a fi singur în felul tău, și vrei să târăști în tina în care te afli tu ființa astă tânără și inocentă! ...

[You were the pride of our youth back in the days! Your homeland had such hopes for you!... Your heart was as young and candid as a maiden’s; whoever met you could not refrain from loving you... and today the most degraded man would not feel esteemed to shake hands with you; whoever once believed in your talent now blushes at this thought; your heart aged and degraded and is only able to beat for useless things!... Why have you come to this house? You want to trick Zoe; you seem to be ashamed of your unique ways and want to drag into the mud with you this young and innocent human being!] (Bolintineanu 1993: 56)

As for verisimilitude in the plot construction, it is completely out of the question. In *Manoil*, the situations turn inside out in a single sentence, and the author only needs a few lines, at the end of the novel, to make the good ones happy and to punish the evil (Simuț 2001: 26).

At the level of the novel discourse, the elements of Biedermeier Romanticism - the domestic idyll, the eulogy to country life and moralism - are slightly counterbalanced by the intention of monographing the Romanian society of the age, along all its coordinates, and by certain Balzacian techniques used in the construction of the characters. The latter are, nevertheless, rather rudimentary

and represent a procedure rather than a structuring function for the narrative and for the diegetic universe (Antofi 2008: 75).

If one carefully examines the clumsiness in the novel construction, the reading of Bolintineanu's novel reveals not only an active femininity, ready at all times to defy norms in order to follow the heart, but also one aware of her inferior position in the society. Thus, a woman cannot have as much freedom as a man. This discourse underlines a departure from the traditional imaginary which condemns woman as a weak being dominated by passion and feelings. The view on femininity is no longer rigid, as in Kogălniceanu's case – the feminine self is emphasised, and the interest in its subjective life increases.

The novel ends just like a fairy tale, and the negative characters get what they deserve: Alexandru C. dies in unclear circumstances and Tudora's father is accused of his death, whereas Mărioara admits her guilt and brings forth arguments, stirring the reader's sympathy, as everything is pinned on her late and hopeless love for Manoil:

Manoil m-a iubit; eu nu-l iubeam; dar el mă desprețui cu cruzime!... apoi plecă în streinătate... mă măritai cu un bărbat bătrân, crezând că-l fac să călătorească, numai să văd pe Manoil... din căsătoria asta, purceseră toate relele mele....

[Manoil loved me; I didn't love him, but he cruelly despised me... then he went abroad and I married an old man in hope I'll make him travel, just so I can see Manoil... all my misfortunes come from this marriage... (Bolintineanu 1993: 88).

To conclude, with a theme and the character construction as a product of its sentimental nature inspired from French literature, Bolintineanu's novel provides a representation of the age and follows the difficult process of Manoil's becoming as he firstly declines and is then miraculously redeemed by the power of love.

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