

## EPIC AND EPOS IN THE HISTORICAL NOVEL *THE JDEERS BROTHERS*

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*Abstract: Mihail Sadoveanu treats history not as a reality that belongs to immemorial times, but as a phenomenon that is in continuous movement and evolution. The writer meditates on the facts of national history from the perspective of the future, of a permanent contemporaneity. The medieval history of Moldova during the reign of Stephen the Great is a chain of intrigues, crimes and wars, which only the wisdom and strong authority of the ruler manage to avoid, even if he has to fight against so many external forces. The existing life at the royal court together with the servants and those who live there are described with great talent and unparalleled artistic mastery by our great novelist. The Lord took care of his subjects like a father of sons, and the subjects loved and respected him like sons to a father. The integration of the destiny of the Jders family, in the extensive Sadovenian construction, is done with the aim of completing and highlighting both the greatness and personality of the ruler Stephen the Great, as well as to demonstrate the strength and endurance of the family at all levels of social and administrative organization.*

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The appearance of Sadovenian work in our literature takes place at a time of spectacular development of literary creations on an international level, of the realistic and modern novel, whose prominent representatives were Flaubert, Zola, Gogol, Kafka, Proust, Joyce, Thomas Mann.

Thus, according to N. Manolescu, the talent of a remarkable storyteller and prose writer is added to that of a novelist, because Sadoveanu "does not exclude the novel either, a structure conceived in its established forms for the evolution of interwar Romanian prose." (N. Manolescu, the study of Mihail Sadoveanu - preliminaries to a monographic synthesis of the work in vol. Sinteze de literatura romana, Bucharest, Didactică si Pedagogică Publishing House, 1981, p. 9.)

Mihail Sadoveanu is considered the creator of the historical novel in our literature because through his novel *Frații Jderi*, (*The Jders Brothers*) (1935-1942) the author elaborated one of the most successful writings on this topic. "The historical novel - wrote G. Topârceanu in 1916 - is a genre in which our great writer excelled. The power of evocation, the epic talent and the love of the past, on the one hand, and on the other, the assiduous observation of reality and the gift of creating types, living people, from the shadows of the past, are qualities that indicated M. Sadoveanu as the only one of our writers today, meant to try and succeed in this genre." (D. Vrabie, *Literatura pentru copii*, Integritas Srl. Chișinău, 2009, p. 222.)

From the point of view of the ideatic construction, *Frații Jderi* (*The Jders Brothers*) can be divided into the novel of formation (that of Ionuț Jder), of reign

(Stephen the Great), of the Court, of family (Jderi) and of the heroic ritual and of heroism.

As a historical time, the author places his work in the 15th century, dominated by the overwhelming personality of Stephen the Great. As a geographical space, most of the narrated events took place in the north of Moldova, only a few characters reached Crimea, Poland and the south of the Danube. Regarding the historical documents that the author consulted in writing this novel, Vistian Goia specifies that "... the evocation of the past is accompanied by the melancholy of history, by nature and the folklore framework, by wisdom as a philosophical principle. However, the lens through which the past was interpreted, in large part, from the chroniclers, from N. Bălcescu, B. P. Hasdeu and N. Iorga, whose work the prose writer was no stranger." (V. Goia, *Literatura pentru copii și tineret - pentru institutori, învățători și educatoare*, Editura Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 2003, p. 200)

The world that the author presents in the novel is typical for medieval works with historical subjects, being made up of nobles, ladies, soldiers, hunters, workers, monks, slaves, gypsies, monks, merchants, rulers, etc.

The legendary frame of Stephen the Great emerges distinctly from all the others, through indirect protagonists, through multiple references and to previous reigns. This is a character conceived on two levels: real and symbolic. Considered by interpreters and literary analysts to be both an epic, a historical novel, an adventure novel, as well as a folk poem and a realistic novel, *Frații Jderi (The Jders Brothers)* is the novel of a formation, of a reign and of a young man. The axis of the epic is the couple Ionuț Jder - Stephen the Great.

The writer tries to demonstrate in the *Jders Brothers*, through cultural symbols and artistic images, the shaping and constructive role of religious humanism on moral and aesthetic values. Thus, the month in which Stephen the Great ascends the throne was the month of April, being on *Holly Thursday*, in the week of the *Savior's sufferings*, who sacrificed himself for the salvation and upliftment of humanity. Considering the solemnity of this moment, we can consider Stephen the Great's conception in the role of the leader for the people as fully justified - that of "giving light without receiving anything in return." Stephen the Great appears as a demiurgic personality, being endowed by the popular imagination with a strong, authoritarian and domineering force.

The title of the novel supports the organicity of Sadoveanu's artistic vision and the cultural evolution in relation to the social in enclosed societies. Named a historical novel, *Frații Jderi (The Jders Brothers)* appears both as an epic and an epos, because the characters' destinies are integrated into the destiny of the collective. According to G. Lukacs, the world of the epic "is a homogeneous world, whose substantial unicity cannot be disturbed even by the divorce between man and the world, between Me and You." The soul is situated, like any element of this rhythmicity, in the center of the world; the outline boundary that is drawn essentially is not different from the outline of things." (G. Lukacs, *Teoria romanului. O încercare istorico-filozofică privitoare la formele marii literaturi epice*, Editura Univers, București, 1977, p. 38.)

The epic structure of the novel also derives from the rituals and ceremonies specific to the medieval world, which accompany the feudal forms of life existing in the novel. These have a magical, purifying function, doubled by a solemnity that gives a sacred character to profane acts. Being close to nature makes people healthier and stronger.

Some recent archaeological research carried out even at the princely courts of Suceava, Iasi, Hârlau, Neamț, of Stephen the Great, fully confirms the cultural and spiritual dimension of feudal life in this novel. The life at the royal court together with the existing interpersonal relationships are described in detail by the author. The rendering of the vision of the family, from within the upper levels of the community, creates a supra-individual collective character: the people. Edgar Papu and then Nicolae Manolescu noticed and mentioned that the common social structure of the gentile communities in the Sadovenian historical novel is the surprised family in all levels of social organization. (N. Manolescu, *Sadoveanu sau utopia cărții*, Editura Eminescu, București, 1976, pp. 187-190) The Lord took care of his subjects like a father of sons, and the subjects loved and respected him like sons to a father. (E. Papu, *Frații Jderi*, în: *Gazeta literară*, nr. 44, XII, 28 octombrie, 1965)

Living in a world full of symbols and mysteries, man has always felt the need for a lifestyle according to the cosmic clock. The themes and motifs that we encounter in *Frații Jderi* (*The Jders Brothers*) can be found in many novels and historical stories: the motive of the initiatory journey, the motive of the inn, the travel memorial, the motive of the stranger.

Considering the existing differences between the novel and the epic, we can observe a morphological scheme of the fairy tale, present as an external pattern of the composition, being absorbed by the particular conception of the adventure. "The novel absorbs the world as a reflection of the totality, in order to attack, then, the last citadel, namely the abysses of the human soul." (N. Frigioiu, *Romanul istoric al lui Mihail Sadoveanu*, Editura Junimea, 1987, Cap VI, p. 172)

The novelist is the third person narrator, on an objective-impersonal position, and the epic implies a simultaneous manifestation of the world together with the heroes' destinies. As in the older epics, the real plan of events is anticipated by different menaces: the earthquake before the war at High Bridge; the sudden appearance of fog and mist in the eve of the battle; the tearing of the miracle-working icon during the reign of Lord Duca.

Temporality is the primary element that ensures the organicity and uniqueness of the Sadovenian historical epic. Duration refers to itself as its own substance. During the six years (1468-1475), in the *Jders Brothers*, people transform amazingly: they mature, grow old, then die. Thus, the uninterrupted perpetuity of life is integrated and established within the same existential symbols.

In *Vremuri de bejenie*, (*Hard Times*) and *Neamul Șoimăreștilor* (*The Șoimăreșcu*), the emphasis is placed on the research of individual behavior, following the mime, gesticulation and experiences of the fighters. "The conflicts are of a political nature, such as those between Stephen the Great and his opponents, between the partisans and

traitors of Ion Vodă The Worst, existing in *Frații Jderi (The Jders Brothers)* respectively, in the novel *The Falcons*, then the conflicts of an moral nature, presented in the form of the struggle between duty and passion, such as the erotic passion of the Potcoava brothers for Ilinca, the daughter of the traitor Ieremia Golia, that desired by the Younger Jder for the maid Nasta, finally, conflicts of social nature, such as the one in the Neamul Șoimăreștilor, etc. They reflect a heterogeneous, dynamic and troubled world, specific to the historical novel." ( V. Goia, *op. cit.*, p. 201)

As for the character Stephen the Great, he is built differently from others because he has an overwhelming personality, dominated by attributes such as bravery, visionary and justice. "Attributing to him Byzantine culture, authority, wisdom, military skill, honor and generosity, Stefan is raised above all, accumulating the chosen qualities of an entire people, that's why he resembles epic heroes, embodies in the consciousness and faith of those around him." (*Ibidem*, p. 201)

The other characters are briefly outlined, the author limiting himself only to presenting their inclinations and conceptions typical of the medieval world of the respective period.

There is also the adventurous character who likes traveling and after which he is initiated into the art of friendship and interpersonal relations, of love, of weapons, all of which lead him on the path of maturity. Ionuț, the Younger Jder, fully meets all the specific qualities of this type of character.

For M. Sadoveanu, coming back in time is made precisely from the desire to reach the moment of genesis, to the initial impulse of mythical time. Thus, the conscious elaboration of the past, as indispensable, constitutes only one aspect of historical science and historical characters, such as Stephen the Great or Nicoara Potcoava, do not exhaust themselves in conservation, their look at the past pushes them towards the future, strengthens their hope that happiness exists. "on top of the mountain they climb with the cross behind them".( N. Frigioiu, *op. cit.*, p. 32) Historical continuity and integral subjectivity are the same things between the dominance of the real and knowledge being a complete synthesis. The protagonists of the first histories "lead their author conquered by exceptional feats." ( C. Ciopraga, *Mihail Sadoveanu - Fascinația tiparelor originare*, Editura Eminescu, București, 1981, p. 253)

The masterpieces start from the simple man, the man of fundamental coherence: this man of action, moralist, thinker, integral man, thus representing a plus in the perspective of memory-recollection and joining the historical novel to the epic. To perceive national history in its organic movement, in geography and in people, the call to Eminescu and Sadoveanu is indispensable.

The Sadovenian historical novel represents the crowning of the natural evolution of the historical forms of life in Romanian culture.

In an article about Eminescu's historical vision, George Munteanu emphasized the colossal power of inclusion of the Sadovenian epic. Describing the "painting of the dismantled" of the Moldavian sweethearts from Bogdan-Dragoș, the well-known critic concluded: "Perhaps only Sadoveanu, after Eminescu, could have proved in this overwhelmingly suggestive way, the sense of what we mean by national epic, the

sensation of witnessing directly to making the history of your own people like another Genesis."(*Eminescu și eposul național*, în *Luceafărul*, nr 3/1976)

Sadoveanu sees history not as a past reality but as an eternal phenomenon in eternal motion. The writer analyzes on the facts of national history from the perspective of the future, of a permanent contemporaneity. The medieval history of the country is a chain of intrigues, crimes and wars that only the bright reign Stephen the Great manages to avoid, even though he has to fight against so many external forces. Although victorious, Stefan has to overcome the tragic moments caused by the loss of people. At the end of the *Frații Jderi* (*The Jders Brothers*) trilogy, Stephen, the ruler, must note the passing to the other world of Nechifor Căliman, along with his sons, the clerk Manole Jder, and his son Simeon.

Without theorizing, Sadoveanu scrutinizes, closely, the national history but saves himself from sentimental romanticism through humor, in his trilogy, Lord Stephen is more of a legendary hero from the stories collected by Ion Neculce (*Few Words - O sămă de cuvinte*), a demigod and a man of world in the same time, than a chronicle hero.

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