

## Danubian Exoticism in “Europolis” by Jean Bart

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**Abstract:** The exotic and maritime Romanian novel is represented by only few titles; among them we can mention: “Europolis” (1933) by Jean Bart, “All Sails Up!” (1954) by Radu Tudoran and “The Mediterranean” by Panait Istrati. While “All Sails Up!” is a novel of hope and escape, a novel of adventure on the seas and oceans of the world, “Europolis” can be considered a novel of return, of provincial failure and lost hopes. That is why the word “nothing” is repeatedly and obsessively used as a leitmotif of futility and transience. However, this is a charming and melancholic book about Sulina and its people. A picturesque and exotic world, populated by Romanian, English, Jewish, Greek and Armenian merchants and sailors, opened towards the water land between the Danube Delta and the Black Sea.

**Keywords:** Danube; port; exotic; Levant; picturesque; tradesmen

*Motto: “Here ends, like an animate being, the old Danubius, which was worshiped by Antiquity, considering it a sacred river, a king river. The Danube is classic, eternal ...”*

*(Jean Bart)*

The most representative and interesting part of Jean Bart’s work (his real name was Eugeniu Botez) is undoubtedly the one describing ports and sailors. His first novel – “*Log. Marine and Military Stories*” (1901), the travel memorial to America – “*Over the Ocean*” (1926), “*Maritime Stories from the Ports’ World*” (1928), “*A Romanian Ship. The School Ship Bric Mircea*” (1931), the monograph – “*The Danube Book*” (1933) represent both fiction and documentary.

Published shortly before the writer’s death (12th of May 1933), the novel *Europolis*, translated into numerous languages, combines fiction with the documentary about Sulina at the beginning of the 20th century, more precisely the

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'20s. The action of *Europolis* is placed at the mouths of the Danube, "where the old Danubius loses its water and name in the sea", as the quote on the book cover says. In this town and Danube port there was even a European Commission and the maritime trade was really flourishing.

Inspired by the period when Eugeniu Botez was a director of Welfare Assistance and captain of Sulina port, the book is written in an austere style, with stylistic conciseness. However, realism is mixed with lyrical descriptions of the sea, which remind of Pierre Loti's novels. Paul Cernat rightly mentions that: "Unlike the French writer, Bart does not pour rose water on the oriental world presented in the novel. Characters' Bovaric illusions are firstly mimed with grace, then denounced with bitter irony and misanthropic melancholy." (Cernat, 2010, p. 17)

In this world, the cosmopolitan Western civilization mixes with the provincialism of the Orient, just as the land of the Danube Delta mixes with the Black Sea waters; but unfortunately, this is a closed world which destroys peoples' dreams, hopes and destinies. A picturesque and entrepreneurial world with Romanian, Greek, English, Armenian and Jewish merchants and sailors, but also a suffocating and poor one, living on the spit of land between the Danube Delta and the Black Sea; a whole world depends on the "whims" of the river. Paul Cernat described *Europolis* in a remarkable way: "*Europolis* is a very nice vintage novel about transience, illusion and failure, a novel in which the mixture of the Levantine world from the mouths of the Danube represents the social background. A picturesque and melancholic book, whose exotic freshness will make many generations of readers dream." (Cernat, 2010, p. 20)

In one of his reviews, Șerban Cioculescu considered *Europolis* an excellent "regional novel" and a "romanticized monograph of Sulina, a manual of living ethnography, that enriches both literature and sciences." (Cioculescu, 1933, p. 9) The description of the port life is indeed remarkable: the lives of sailors and garrison officers, harbor workers, merchants, porters and smugglers, officials and local intellectuals, the intrigues, the exotic mixture of ethnic groups (especially the Greek one), sailors' habits are accurately and graphically portrayed and the picturesque description of landscapes gives the text a touch of lyricism.

Many cinematic sequences are special and written with real talent, for example the one in which Mircea brig reaches the bank of Sulina: "However, the life of this small cosmopolitan port is original and interesting. It has a special charm and picturesque. It is the only place in the country where you find the real life port. The

other ports are only towns. Sulina is only a port, it does not have a town. The entire population feeds from the port's life. Neither does it have anything in common with the rest of the country. Here's a colony life. A mixture of races. All nations, all types and all languages." (Bart, 2010, p. 91) Șerban Cioculescu considers that: "Mr. Jean Bart is one of the best architects of our novel." (Cioculescu, 1933, p. 9)

Jean Bart builds his narrative by collecting episodes, all of them suggestive, in order to evoke the unrest and turmoil of the port. There are some symbolic aspects in his novel; we see the pride of the Greek colony in fierce competition with the native and Jewish merchants, with humorous conflicts due to vanity and their political preferences. We see the active life of the port, full of charm and adventures, but also the fate of the adaptable sailors, in conflict with the nature elements and with men. As a professional, the sailor inside Eugeniu Botez inspired the writer, knowing the nature of the port life and catching it in a collective image. The environment in which the action is placed is typical for the heroes' mentality. Readers will read the pages of the book as a psychological documentary, as a reconstruction of an age which has structural differences in relation to that of today.

George Călinescu wrote about *Europolis*: "A lively novel, full of intense movement. The anecdotal nature creates a certain atmosphere. The intrigues of the colony, the lives of smugglers, of porters, the naval environment, the cabarets, the port's underworld society are portrayed with great competence." (Călinescu, 1941, p. 598) Jean Bart placed the action full of movement and intense feelings in the small port as he knew its life in all aspects and in the smallest details. In this interesting and unique place, he shows us a number of characters, each of them with his distinct physiognomy, human beings who love or hate and are animated by intense passions. The main heroes are Levantine Greeks and their vivid imagination predisposes to dreaming and their hot blood makes them have sudden manifestations.

Even Pompiliu Constantinescu considers that: "Through the drama affair of the Greek Penelope and the Afro-American Evantia, *Europolis* is an interesting contribution of our provincial novel." And Mircea Tomuș: "Jean Bart's novel connects us to a significant chapter of our literature, the literature of the provincial town: Sadoveanu's and Cezar Petrescu's stories and novels, George Bacovia's and Demosthenes Botez's poetry." Indeed, we should mention Cezar Petrescu with: *Gone without Address* and *Patriarchal Town*, Geo Bogza with: *One Hundred*

*Seventy-five Minutes in Mizil*, or Radu Tudoran with: *The Town with Poor Girls* and *An Eastern Port*.

In the port of Sulina, we find some proud Greek women from the Bosphorus (the unhappy Penelopa Marulis, one of the tragic heroines of the novel), nurses from England like Miss Doty and Miss Sybill, Italian men like the engineer Marini and his family, French men like Alfons Briquet. We are also witnesses of the sad destinies of Nicola Marulis and his daughter Evantia (the main characters of *Europolis* and best accomplished from a literary point of view) and also the couple Penelopa - Stamati. Their return from America (in reality from French Guyana) is regarded by people as a salvation. Everyone tries to please Nicola and come with all sorts of affairs, without suspecting that the so-called American is just a penniless widower formerly convicted for murder. The contrast between the community's huge illusions and the depressing reality is both comic and grotesque. The fact that the citizens lose their illusions and hopes makes them have feelings of hatred and this affects Evantia a lot (the young, innocent and rebellious daughter of Nicola and a black slave from the colonies).

In *Europolis*, Penelopa and Evantia live their lives which are atypical for the provincial town, being somehow similar to the fate of women in Sadoveanu's stories: *Wilted Flower* and *The Water of the Dead*. But their destiny has a tragic shade; Sadoveanu's heroines ended up in a monotonous life, with the bitter feeling of betrayed hopes, with the consciousness of futility and helplessness; this is what the water of the dead symbolizes. These people's lives are the lives of the living dead. But Penelopa and Evantia have more difficult lives. The former one, after an attempt to save herself through love, ended up in the seawater. Evantia, with the special beauty of an exotic flower, was "wilted" by people's wickedness and died after passing through lots of sufferings: "There, in the marshy land of the Delta, remained buried a part of his life - Evantia ... A poor exotic plant ...plucked...transplanted...it did not acclimate...it withered ...suffered ...died ..." (Bart, 2010, p. 268)

Here is a suggestive excerpt about this woman, also called the Black Mermaid: "Wherever she appeared: on the street, on the quay, at the beach, she would take everybody's looks - exotic plant, a rare species animal. A fine, graceful silhouette; although still a child, she was well built, fully grown like a southern plant, with rich tropical sap." (Bart, 2010, p. 76) And another fragment: "The hall was teeming with people. An oven-like air. Blue tobacco clouds of smoke were floating over the

heated heads. Odour of alcohol, perfume and sweat. When suddenly the black woman appeared on the stage – Eva, as people called her in the hall. She got thunders of applauses whenever she started performing. Her exotic, strange dances were Negroes' old dances, which she had learned in childhood in the country where she was born. She had a natural talent; she didn't only dance with her legs, but with her entire body and soul." (Bart, 2010, p. 249)

The gradation of the psychological process, then the general disillusion and the hatred for the American man returned poor from New World may be considered an important merit of the book. This process includes an entire gallery of characters, representative for this little universe which is the Danube port in the age of the capitalistic fever: Penelope, Evantia, Barba Toni, Stamati Marulis, Doctor Barbă Roşie, Nicu Politicu, Olimbia, the Greek consul, Deliu and Nicola.

Nicola's brother, Stamati Marulis, pilot on the Danube for many years, became the owner of a respectable cafe in the port. Home and family represented a halt between the trips on water and ports with beautiful women were more familiar. Constantin Mohanu said that: "*Europolis* is essentially an erotic novel which doubles, if not often overshadows the port town built on the social element and human documents. The erotic novel is actually the true vocation of the author, here Jean Bart's artistic psychological intuition is fulfilled. The author intends a philosophy of love in the stendhalian manner." (Mohanu, 2001, p. 289)

This is what the character Barbă Roşie says: "What an absurd claim have the naive romantics, who get lost in the metaphysics of love! It is ridiculous to ask from love more than it can give. Who does not know that love is destroyed by its own burning. I have never understood why a supernatural, occult, sacred and divine origin is looked for as far as love is concerned, when its essential base is of purely organic nature ... physical need... the appetite of the instinct ...blind will ...the genius of the species." (Bart, 2010, p. 126) And the Patriarch adds: "Love is the most complex of all feelings. None of the theories issued until today satisfies us. An exaltation of desire and sympathy? Malady? Ecstasy? Intoxication? It is sure that love gives the deepest and most intense human joy." (Bart, 2010, p. 126)

Caught in this immense general crisis (as the port is dying slowly), *Europolis*, the cosmopolitan town of Europe, is actually the main character. Sulina's agony is in accordance with the agony of the old world, the downfall being suggested by the short epilogue: "Yes!...this town is doomed...towns themselves have life and death...a human settlement, under our eyes, doomed to disappear. Sulina's gate was

closing completely and forever. The town is withdrawing, defeated in the battle with nature. Sulina abandoned is disappearing as a town.” (Bart, 2010, p. 269)

Returned from Cardiff, the navy officer Neagu meditates on the past, deploring Evantia’s destiny. Her daughter, with Creole features, looks at the future with innocence. Stamati Marulis went bankrupt and Angelo Deliu left for an unknown destination. This tragic element in the destinies of Jean Bart’s characters is the source of the drama that the city was experiencing during those times: stifled by the competition of the large commercial and naval companies, the port at the mouths of the Danube makes the last attempt to save itself, but it fails and the book ends with the desolate landscape of the port. Silence settles over the places where for centuries there was an intense and vibrating life, where people had a constant battle with the sea and the river:

*“Sulina was in agony ...*

*The mouth of the Danube was stuck ...*

*Where it was water, now it was soil ...*

*The loaded ships did no longer have enough depth.*

*It was such a grief. Navigation blocked. Commerce ruined. World alarmed.*

*The city was emptying.*

*The port was dying.”* (Bart, 2010, p. 266)

Bart is a realistic writer, a critic animated by a warm patriotism, a protester when it comes about the dignity of his homeland. From many points of view, *Europolis* is undoubtedly a remarkable literary achievement of Jean Bart, a culmination of his writing career.

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