History and Identity in the Novels of Ion Druță

Keith HITCHINS

My main purpose in this paper is to investigate the definition of Moldavian offered by the contemporary Moldovan novelist Ion Druță, that is, to see what answers he gives to a series of questions that inevitably come to mind in any discussion of ethnic or national identity: What qualities distinguished the Moldavian? Were these qualities eternal, or did they change over time? What values, spiritual or material, held the Moldavian community together? Were these values constantly in flux, merely moral adaptations to the passing times, or were certain values permanent, inbred, one might say? To suggest answers to these questions I am going to use four of Druță's novels:[1] *Frunze de dor* (1957), a tragic love story with the Second World War as a constant, if distant, presence; *Povara bunătății noastre* (1970), a narrative of the effects of war and peace and of continuous ferment in the Moldavian village in the first half of the twentieth century; *Clopotnița* (1972), an inquiry into the uses of history and a defense of spiritual values from the perspective of a village schoolteacher; and *Biserica Albă* (1982), a meditation on identity and faith in Moldavia set in the time of the Russo-Turkish War of 1787-1792.

I approach the theme of my paper as a historian, and thus I ask the questions historians usually ask and use the methods they usually use. I read Druță's novels as, in a sense, documents or original sources, to be analyzed and compared, and, then, on the basis of these researches I made generalizations and drew conclusions. I was following my own interests, too. The origins of modern nations and the formation of national identities have long intrigued me. In these and other questions I am fascinated by the continuity of the historical development of peoples over long periods of time, and I am continually asking myself and others how much of the past is preserved in the present and thus how much we owe the past for the way we live and for the values that guide us. It is, then, in this spirit and with such aims in mind that I turned to the novels of Ion Druță.

---

[1] I have used the texts of the novels as published in Ion Druță, *Scrieri*, 4 vols. (Chișinău: Literatura Artistică and Hyperion, 1989-1990). My acquaintance with Druță's works goes back to the 1970s, when I was reading on the history and literature of Bessarabia and the Moldavian SSR. Then, in Paris, in 1985, I met him at a book-signing for the French edition of his *Biserica Albă*, and later that year he sent me from Moscow his *Izbrannoe,* 2 vols. (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1984). On his work the following have been especially helpful: Andrei Khropotinskii, *Problema vetsii shi a kreatsiei. Studiu kritik despre opera lui Ion Drutse* (Chișinău, 1988); essays by Mihai Cimpoi and Alexandrina Cernova, among others, in *Aspekte ale kreatsiei lui Ion Drutse*, Mihail Dolgan and Haralambie Corbu, editors (Chișinău, 1990); and Mihai Cimpoi, *O istorie deschisă a literaturii române din Basarabia* (Bucureşti, 2002). Of numerous works on the novel, the following have been valuable for the present project: James C. Simmons, *The Novelist as Historian: Essays on the Victorian Historical Novel* (The Hague, 1973); Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel; History as Ritual*, 3rd edition (Bloomington, Indiana, 2000); *Theory of the Novel. A Historical Approach*, Michael McKeon, editor (Baltimore and London, 2000); and many stimulating essays in the marvelous *Il romanzo*, 5 vols., edited by Franco Moretti (Torino, 2001-2003).

BDD-V2407 © 2006 Editura Alfa
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:53:38 UTC)

I know that he is not a historian, at least not in the strict sense of the term. He is an artist who is pursuing his own creative aims and uses his own means to achieve them. As a fiction writer he is concerned with such matters as theme, plot, structure, character, and language. I also know that in composing his novels he did not intend to produce documents for professional historians to pore over and from which to extract the raw materials for scholarly monographs and conference papers. But I am certain that he wanted all his readers to ponder the questions that were important to him and that he was at great pains to set before them in an engaging form and a lively prose.

Although Ion Druță may not approach history in the same way a professional historian does, he nonetheless displays a keen understanding of how history influences society in general and affects individuals in particular. His enthusiasm for history is contagious; he is Horia Holban, the village teacher in *Clopotnița* who reveres history as the preserver of memory and as a moral guide. But Druță's method is different from that of the professional historian. Rather than describing battles or other events directly and in detail, he allows wars and high politics to be reflected in the daily lives and inner feelings of his characters. This is his way of measuring general social progress and individual moral stability.

Ion Druță's knowledge of Moldavian history is broad and his meditations on its meaning for the Moldavian people are profound, and thus he is able to place the heroes of his novels, the peasants and their village communities, in a proper setting. He relishes the sweep of history in *Povara bunătății noastre*, while in *Biserica Albă* his factual command of events and his portrayal of leading figures are exemplary. In both novels, and in *Frunze de dor* and *Clopotnița* as well, history is an active force; it is a shaper of character over long centuries and a reinforcer, if not a creator, of values. In the long run, Druță tells us, a people must know their own history; otherwise, they will not know themselves and will not be able to chart their course through a fickle present to an elusive future.

In his novels Ion Druță, perhaps without realizing it, is participating in the great scholarly debate about the origin and nature of the modern ethnic nation, a debate that has intensified since the middle of the last century. The debaters, the theorists of nationhood, fall into three main categories: the primordialists, who argue that nations are natural social phenomena, living organisms, that have existed since the earliest times; the modernists, who insist that nations are the products of modern capitalist, industrial society and are, in essence, constructed by elites; and, finally, the historical ethno-symbolists, who emphasize the continuity of nation-formation between past and present, but also recognize the powerful influence of social and economic change in bringing nations into being. I am inclined to place Ion Druță among the historical ethno-symbolists because of his respect for history and tradition and his belief in the rootedness of national character, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, his recognition of social and economic forces as powerful molders of community solidarities and individual psyches.

Ion Druță is clearly at home with the inhabitants and villages of rural Moldavia. He was born in the village of Horodişte in 1928, and thus he not only observed the village from the inside, but participated in it, absorbing its atmosphere, its traditions and speech, and its sense of destiny and its sense of humor. Many of the figures in his novels are drawn from the members of his family or other persons he knew in the village. Their

BDD-V2407 © 2006 Editura Alfa
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:53:38 UTC)

daily routines and their inner struggles attracted him especially, and he described them in concise, discriminating prose. He practiced his craft first in numerous short stories, his first volume of collected stories, *La noi în sat*, being published in 1953, before he moved to long fiction with *Frunze de dor*. It is not surprising that among the writers he most admired – Bunin, Chekhov, Tolstoy – Ion Creangă, the keen observer of the Moldavian village from the inside, occupied a key place in his creativity.

When it came to questions of identity, for Druță the quintessential Moldavian was the peasant. He shows us this over and over, and he makes no effort to hide his admiration for the peasants. They are, for him, the true creators of history because they bear the burdens of society and hold society together over the long term by preserving its faith and values and by transmitting them to future generations. There is no more striking statement of his belief in the mission of the peasant than the contrast he draws in *Biserica Albă* between Catherine the Great of Russia and her court and courtiers and the peasant Catherine "the Small" and her village and neighbors. The preoccupation of the Russian court in St. Petersburg, the gossip and the petty rivalries are far removed from the daily struggle for existence, the real life of the peasants in the village of Ocolina. The court and its residents are, as Druță presents them, the products of civilization, a cosmopolitan world that has lost its roots, whereas the peasants are the molders of culture and are close to nature and thus have remained true to themselves. The leading figures of all four novels, then, are peasants. They and the collectivities in which they live – the villages Ocolina (*Biserica Albă*), Ciutura (*Povara bunătății noastre*), and Valea Răzeşilor (*Frunze de dor*)—embody the spirit of Moldavia at any given time.

Druță avoids idealizing his peasants or treating the village as an unchanging model of community, as many populist writers in Romania and other countries in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth century were want to do. He does not insist that peasant society must remain fixed in time. Nor does he view change coming from the outside as a threat to the community and thus something to be resisted at all costs. He shows in *Frunze de dor* and *Biserica Albă*, for example, how peasants by no means lived isolated lives in patriarchal villages, and with superb artistry he portrays the effects of far-off events on individual minds and collective consciences.

Despite the persistence of change, Druță shows us how the new had a mixed reception in the village. Mircea Morariu, one of the heroes of *Povara bunătății noastre*, integrated himself with relative ease into the socialist order at the end of the Second World War. His experiences of war had taught him to think differently about land, which he had always yearned for, and now, having returned to Ciutura, he became a collective farm manager. But, Druță suggests, Morariu's transformation came too quickly, as he had not yet fully assimilated the moral values of the new era.

Others in the village resisted modernity. Onache Cărăbuş, Morariu's father-in-law, was a representative figure of the Moldavian village between the World Wars, and, for Druță, he is the quintessential peasant. He was deeply attached to the land and to the traditions and rituals of the countryside, but his experiences of life, from war to the travail of the interwar years, brought him to the point of crisis, which he finally resolved by seeking a balance between the old and the new. It was the same with Gheorghe Doinaru, one of the heroes of *Frunze de dor*, who wants to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, but the nature of life itself, of history, continually frustrates him.

BDD-V2407 © 2006 Editura Alfa
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:53:38 UTC)

In the end, he trusts his moral sense to rescue him from his dilemma and guide him toward a new life.

Change, then, Druță tells us, is by no means an extraordinary occurrence in peasant society. Peasants could, and did, free themselves from age-old custom, even from their attachment to the land. They could take up new occupations and become intellectuals, as did Horia Holban, the teacher of history in *Clopotnița*. *Povara bunătății noastre* can be read in its entirety as a narrative of village transformation, political, economic, and moral, in the first half of the twentieth century, as Ciutura and Onache Cărăbuş's family and neighbors experience wars, collectivization, and the uncertainties of the future.

Druță is careful to place events and individuals in historical perspective. He does not perceive change in the village as representing a sharp break between the present and the past. He readily acknowledges that economic and social life changed with the collectivization of agriculture, but he suggests in *Povara bunătății noastre* that the roots of collectivization may be discovered in the traditional way of life of the village, in other words, that the collectivization of agriculture harmonized with the age-old collective spirit of the village. As a consequence, it seems natural to him that such a blending of the new and the old should take place. But he inquires further into the process and asks what precisely is the mechanism that ensures the continuity of life in the village, despite man-made and natural calamities and even the weight of history. The answer, he discovers, lies in the spiritual values of the community, values that define character, that enable the peasants to maintain their identity and at the same time adapt to new circumstances and, in the end, achieve new social harmonies. The spiritual foundations of community, he argues, have come together gradually through the experience of many lifetimes, even centuries. It may be tempting for us to see change as occurring only in the outward forms of life, in economic structures and social organization, but Druță shows us again and again how the inner life of peasants, too, the way they think about existence past and present, is slowly modified in response to changes in their surroundings, a course reflected in the personal crises of Onache Cărăbuş and Gheorghe Doinaru.

In his first three novels Druță explores the various traits that define the peasant and, hence, for him, the Moldavian – love of the land, creative labor, attachment to tradition, refractoriness in the face of change, and a search for balance between competing forces, and he wrestles with the nature and effects of change that are the constant companions of his peasants. He perseveres in all these endeavors with consummate artistry and a subtle understanding of peasant psychology. Yet, I cannot escape the feeling that he is not entirely satisfied with the results of his inquiry, that he has still to clarify in his own mind what it was that held the Moldavian peasant community together.

I think that Druță's long search for the defining trait of the Moldavian peasant comes to fruition in his fourth novel, *Biserica Albă,* published in 1982. He discovers it in the peasants' religious faith, their Christianity. The novel as a whole may be read as an essay on peasant spirituality and the place of religion in the life of rural Moldavians. Druță's theologian, so to speak, the person who presents the ideas and sentiments of their faith is Paisie Velicicovschi, a monk renowned throughout the Orthodox world for his piety who as the spiritual leader of the Monastery of Neamț from 1779 until his

BDD-V2407 © 2006 Editura Alfa
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:53:38 UTC)

death in 1794 exercised great moral influence in Moldavia. He expounds the teachings of an Eastern Orthodoxy that is profoundly opposed to the materialism of this world and is turned, instead, toward the eternal spiritual values of the world beyond. Catherine of Ocolina shows how Paisie's teachings could be applied in daily life. Her steadfast faith is a combination of simple Christian teachings fused with a peasant's attempts to explain the mysteries of existence using the means available to her, including myth. Her determination to rebuild the village church after its destruction in war and her insistence that it be white, as it had always been, represent the unshakeable faith of the Moldavian peasant.

The white church itself symbolizes the sacred values that have guided the village, and the Moldavians, on their perilous temporal journey. In the end, Druță tells us, the foundation of community lies in a people who has preserved their spirituality intact through the ages. It is this deeper sense of identity, this knowledge of self, he insists, that forms the essence of nationhood and has enabled the peasant and, hence, the Moldavian to endure.

History and Identity in the Novels of Ion Druță

This paper explores the question of Moldavian ethnic identity as presented in the four novels of the Moldovan writer Ion Druță. Against a vivid and often turbulent historical background covering a period from the late eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth he examines the qualities that distinguished the peasant, who represented for him the true Moldavian. After a long search he concludes in his fourth novel, *Biserica Albă,* that spirituality, manifesting itself in particular in the form of a popular Christianity, ultimately defined the peasant and, hence, the Moldavian, and enabled them to adapt to continuous social and economic change and to endure.

BDD-V2407 © 2006 Editura Alfa
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:53:38 UTC)