

The Image of the Danube in Romanian Poetry

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Abstract. This article surveys the evolving renditions of the Danube in Romanian poetry from the nineteenth century to the present, situating them within broader cultural, historical, and ecological frameworks. Inspired by a personal rediscovery of the river and informed by Bruno Latour's concept of the "parliament of things," the study approaches the Danube as a voice-bearing agent, whose meanings emerge from the interaction between natural processes and human histories. Drawing on an interdisciplinary perspective from Danube studies, it examines how Romanian poets have envisioned the river as a complex subject, the multiple roles it has played in their works, and the contexts in which it becomes a meaningful theme. At the same time, it traces the evolution of poetic visions across a succession of literary waves spanning nearly 170 years, paying close attention to shifts in thematic focus and stylistic expression. In doing so, it foregrounds the Danube as a dynamic site of memory, refracted through diverse interpretive lenses: from its early construction as a stage for heroic struggles to its more recent reconfiguration as a space marked by ecological awareness and contemporary environmental concerns. Through close readings of major poets and diverse poetic forms, the article demonstrates how the Danube functions as both cultural archive and active participant in social life. By integrating literary analysis with environmental and political theory, it argues that Romanian poetry contributes to reimagining human–nonhuman relations and offers a critical resource for understanding identity, memory, and responsibility in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: Romanian poetry; literary history; Danube studies; cultural identity; European studies

Introduction

I recently read these lines by modernist, avant-garde-oriented poet Ștefan Baciu (1918–1993), first conceived while he was on a plane over the Antilles, in 1959: "The Danube flows into the Orinoco / Brăila is a port on the Caribbean Sea"

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(Baciu 1993: 263). They are part of the poem “Colind peste Marea Caraibelor” (“Carol over the Caribbean Sea”), initially published in the collection *Poemele poetului singur* (*The Poems of the Solitary Poet*) (1980). Baciu left Romania in 1946, lived in Europe, South America, and the United States, and settled in Hawaii in 1964. I was struck by his experimental, cosmopolitan, and surrealist-leaning lines, which express radical geographical and symbolic displacement. Distant spaces are collapsed and real borders are erased to create a single transcontinental poetic map that responds to the emotional rupture of exile.

I was born in Galați, a city on the Danube, but I have not spent more than a month there in total. In 2019, I returned for an international conference after more than three decades. Although I had seen the river before, I had never felt so close to it. Its force captivated me and made me murmur *panta rhei, panta rhei*. That encounter prompted me to pay closer attention to literary patterns of the river and, eventually, to begin writing poems about it. A decade earlier, while I was a doctoral student, I came across the poetic idea of the “parliaments of nature” in a section of *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, which has stayed with me ever since. In *Politique de la nature* (1999), the French philosopher Bruno Latour explicitly argues that entities such as rivers, soils, climates, and ecosystems must be included in collective decision-making. His notion of “rivers with their ‘water parliaments’” (Latour 2004: 174) extends his earlier concept of the “parliament of things,” formulated in *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes* (1991), through which non-human entities are imagined as receiving political representation within democratic processes. This perspective challenges the longstanding division between nature and culture rooted in modern Western thought, Enlightenment philosophy, and positivist traditions.

Visualizing the Danube as a parliamentary figure, *qui peut parler*, I began to examine how scholars and writers invoke it and to what ends. Drawing on Latour’s ideas, sociologists Schillmeier and Pohler (2010) argue that the river cannot be separated into a purely physical entity or a purely human construct; its significance emerges from the constant interaction between environmental processes and human practices, meanings, and histories:

The Danube never becomes socially relevant as an exclusive form of pure and unaffected ‘nature’, nor as a ‘culture’ solely produced by humans. Rather, it is always and at the same time a cultural and a natural object. Neither does the river’s nature exist outside of societal reach, nor can we imagine the cultural meaning of the River Danube without its non-human configurations. (Schillmeier and Pohler 2010: 27)

A decade ago, in the introduction to *Watersheds: Poetics and Politics of the Danube River* (2016), a collection of interdisciplinary articles edited by M. Bozovici and M. D. Miller, the American editors mention the emergence of “the new field of Danube studies” (xxxi), which inquires into the river’s cultural, historical, ecological, and literary significance across borders and disciplines.

Therefore, in an era of environmental awareness and global multicultural complexity, it is essential to revisit literature and envision improved interactions between nature and culture in Europe and beyond. How have Romanian poets represented the river as a poetic subject over these decades? In what contexts does it become significant, and what does it say? What changes can be observed from one literary epoch to another? The following commentary on Romanian poetry, with samples from the nineteenth century to the present, contributes to integrating the Danube’s literary imagination into broader political discussions about life in Central and Eastern Europe. The selection of the primary corpus includes canonical poets of the nineteenth century, representative poets of the twentieth century, and case studies from the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Nineteenth Century

This section examines the Danube’s presence in the poetry of canonical authors such as Dimitrie Bolintineanu (1819–1872), Vasile Alecsandri (1821–1890), and Mihai Eminescu (1850–1889), highlighting its symbolic, historical, and natural significance. It covers genres from patriotic odes and historical epics to romantic ballads, elegies, and philosophical poems. These authors use the river to explore themes of national identity, resistance, heroism, love, memory, and mortality, interweaving folklore, myth, and historical events with lyrical reflection. Their epoch was shaped by the unification of Moldavia and Wallachia in 1859 and Romania’s independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1877. In their poetry, the Danube functions as a witness, agent of fate, and mediator between human and natural forces, structuring both epic narrative and intimate lyricism, while connecting temporal, spatial, and cultural dimensions across centuries.

First published in *Melodii române (Romanian Songs)* (1858), “La Danubiu” (“By the Danube”) by Dimitrie Bolintineanu merges elegy, ode, and historical considerations, rendering the river as a living witness to Romania’s glory, suffering, and resilience. He imbues the Danube with moral and national significance: it absorbs blood and sacrifice, becoming both protector and chronicler of the nation’s trials. Written a year before the union of Moldavia and Wallachia under Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the poem denotes alienation and

loss, as foreign ships dominate the river, yet it also calls for patriotic awakening and civic responsibility. *Bătăliile românilor* (*Romanians' Battles*) (1859) revisits pivotal historical episodes. "Bătălia de la Varna" ("The Battle of Varna") portrays the council before the 1444 battle, where kings, generals, clerics, and nobles debate confronting the Ottomans. Ladislav and Huniad rely on divine intervention and untrustworthy allies, while Vlad of Wallachia warns against weak alliances, poor timing, and numerical disadvantage. Accused of cowardice, Vlad withdraws but leaves aid. The battle ends disastrously: the Turks triumph, Ladislav dies, and the Christian army flees. The poem critiques blind faith untempered by strategic wisdom. In contrast, Michael the Brave exemplifies moral clarity and courageous leadership in "Mihai la Vidin" ("Michael at Vidin") and "Bătălia pe gheață" ("Battle on the Frozen River"), the latter casting the frozen Danube as an ally that becomes both an obstacle for the enemies and an instrument of justice. *Legende istorice* (*Historical Legends*) (1865) presents the Danube as a border of conflict and loss. In "Mihai revenind la Dunăre" ("Michael Returning to the Danube"), Michael and six men defeat an ambush of five hundred Janissaries, showcasing heroic exceptionalism: "The Prince alone struck down fourteen men!" (Bolintineanu 2006: 57) In "Un ostaș român închis peste Dunăre" ("A Romanian Soldier Held Captive beyond the Danube"), a captive soldier addresses a sorrowful dove, his confidante in exile. Unlike the bird, he cannot return home. Refrains and contrasts intensify captivity's pain, linking love for homeland with love for a woman. The dove ultimately flies home, while the soldier resigns himself to decay. The Danube thus becomes a boundary between freedom and imprisonment, home and exile, embodying both physical and emotional separation. These samples show Bolintineanu's interest in representing the river in various ways, while consistently assigning it a positive role aligned with the territorial political outlook of the time.

Included in *Pasteluri* (*Pastels*) (1871), the poem "Valul lui Traian" by Vasile Alecsandri envisages the place as a monumental scar across the Danubian plain. He describes it as "a furrow," "a bowstring," and "a mirage" (Alecsandri 2026: 139), summoning visions of Roman legions, conquest, and memory, before dissolving into pastoral calm, where ancient violence yields to timeless rural life. Its title designates a toponym meaning "Trajan's Wave," situated today between the two arms of the Danube–Black Sea Canal, near Constanța. "Bărăganul" illustrates the Danubian plain as vast, desolate, and almost hostile, stretching endlessly under the scorching sun with no houses, forests, or rivers to enliven it. Its monotony is accentuated by dull grass, whirling dust, and harsh seasons. Human presence is sparse and fragile, while vultures move in fleeting, predatory patterns. "Românii de pe malurile Dunării" ("Romanians on the

Danube Riverbanks”) stages a lyrical dialogue between two young lovers, where feelings challenge natural and symbolic barriers. The river appears first as an obstacle, then as a bridge that can be crossed through devotion, craft, and patience. Rooted in shared Romanian identity, desire unfolds in harmony with nature and cosmic rhythms. In “Balcanul și Carpatul” (“The Balkan and the Carpathian”), from *Ostașii noștri* (*Our Soldiers*) (1888), the river is figured as a witness to conflict and liberty, observing the titanic struggle between “two impetuous giants” (Alecsandri 2026: 17): the Balkan – symbolizing the Ottoman Empire, aggressive and fanatical – and the Carpathian, a resilient defender of freedom. Standing as a majestic, silent force, measuring the clash of powers and moral authority, the river embodies judgment and moral witness, laughing at oppression and heralding emancipation. In the ballad “Ștefan și Dunărea” (“Stephen and the Danube”), Vasile Alecsandri personifies the river as a witness to a dramatic episode involving Stephen the Great. The Danube mourns a beloved woman, a “flower under the sun” (Alecsandri 1981: 66), symbolizing love and the people, while three opposing armies signal imminent conflict. As she pleads for escape, Stephen refuses, declaring his devotion despite danger. Desperate, she throws herself into the river, prompting his heroic rescue. Leaping into the waters, he overcomes the river’s force and saves her, transforming the Danube into both a perilous barrier and a stage for love and heroism.

Despite his brief life, Romania’s national poet Mihai Eminescu left a vast legacy of over 500 poems, prose, and journalistic writings. Influenced by Romanticism, folklore, German philosophy (Schopenhauer, Kant, Hegel, Fichte), and nature, his poetry also drew inspiration from Romanian history and landscapes, using rivers, forests, and rural life as recurring motifs. In “Memento Mori” (1872), a monumental poem commenting on the transience of human existence, the author surveys ancient empires, religions, heroes, and cultures, showing how glory, power, and knowledge inevitably decay. History appears as a repetitive cycle of rise and collapse, driven by illusion and desire. Individual ambition expresses collective hubris, all ending in silence and oblivion. Recently translated into English by K. V. Twain (Diana Cârligeanu’s pseudonym), the poem affirms the supremacy of time, death, and nature over human pride, progress, and metaphysical aspirations. The Danube appears in two sections: first, within the description of Dacia’s heaven; and second, in the section depicting the confrontation between the Romans and the Dacians. Dacia’s heaven is Dochia’s mythical land, where nature and peace reign. Usually portrayed as an old shepherdess in Romanian folklore, Eminescu describes her as a young and beautiful fairy, while the river, which remains unnamed, appears eternal and cosmic – a generative speculum in which creation and disappearance manifest infinite, celestial order:

And the river that crisscrosses to infinity that garden
 Unfurls but its clear waters like mirrors vast and uncertain,
 The isles that it bears with it are a-born and die in depths;
 Upon its majestic mirrors, the icons of the great stars
 Rise a-wet at very bottom, in the midst of sheer waters,
 So that looking at the river is like looking at skies' depths. (Eminescu 2025: 101)

In the section covering the Roman conquest, the Danube appears as a vast, thinking force that absorbs and releases time itself:

There the Danube large, old, free-daring, with a murmur
 Sends but tumbling brooding waves, that move ever closer
 To the sea of bitterness as they roll in slumberous wise;
 Thus the myriads of centuries, with thoughts and lives measureless,
 Heavy with old age and sleep sink deeper into foreverness,
 And then from new springs epochs clear and cool arise. (Eminescu 2025: 123)

Against this organic, reflective movement stands the Roman stone bridge, a rigid human attempt to dominate time and nature. The river resists, its furious waters striking the arches, while empires march across. Placed in Eminescu's pessimistic vision of history, the river symbolizes the eternal flow that outlives civilizations, a cosmic witness to rise and collapse, beyond human conquest:

Clouds rough as basaltic rock come to form on sky's blue vault,
 And it seems one almost hears Black Sea's and Danube's revolt,
 And the world's joints seem to yield, and one hears them a-crackle;
 Has the Universe rebelled against mighty globe in air?
 Are stars' armies on the move? Emperor-suns caught in a dare?
 Is world dying? Is Rome falling? Is the sky become a babel?
 No. From the depths of the Black Sea, from halls that are tall and deep,
 From rocks that in arching form portals that are wide and steep,
 The army of Dacia's gods has in long ranks but emerged—
 And Zamolxis with old windstorm, on a path made of clouds' tops,
 Steers his chariot and lightning-horses. Riding on aurochs,
 His luminous army from the east rose and converged. (Eminescu 2025: 125)

The poem figures a mythical battle between Dacian gods and Roman legions, interweaving history, prophecy, and divine intervention. From the depths of mountains, clouds, and forests, deities emerge, their chariots, horses, and armies illuminated by lightning and celestial forces. The narrative alternates between immense armies, supernatural phenomena, and impressive combat

imagery. Decebalus observes from a high window, mourning his ancestors while rallying his people. The mighty Romans are challenged by divine power: “the Danube shall then drink their many sacred legions.” (Eminescu 2025: 127) The river transforms from a contemplative observer into an active agent of fate, absorbing, punishing, and witnessing human conflict. K. V. Twain’s literal-leaning, archaizing, and poetic translation preserves imagery, syntax, and line structure, favors calques and inversions, and uses elevated diction to echo the original’s romantic cadence.

“Revedere” (“Return”) (1879) contrasts human transience with nature’s continuity through a philosophical pastoral dialogue between the speaker and the forest. While people wander and change, the natural world endures, renewing itself through seasons, stars, rivers, and the Danube’s eternal flow, which symbolizes stability beyond human time. The translation made by Corneliu M. Popescu renders the playful original folkloric rhythm:

What of seasons, when for ages
All the sky my lake engages;
What of years ill or good,
When the sap mounts in the wood;
What of years good or ill,
When the Danube rolls on still.
Only man is always changing,
O’er the world forever ranging;
We each do our place retain,
As we were, so we remain. (Eminescu 1989: 113–114)

In “Scrisoarea III” (“The Third Satire”) (1881), Eminescu positions the river as a symbolic frontier between imperial expansion and Romanian resistance. It embodies temporal continuity and moral authority, serving as a natural and ethical boundary confronting invaders. Within the poem’s medieval setting – depicting the Ottoman advance into Wallachia under Sultan Bayezid – it defines the edge of imperial ambition and the threshold of resistance, marking both a geographical and historical line where confrontation and the defense of national identity converge:

So, as Fate decreed, the passing ages proved his vision true,
Like an eagle soaring upwards every year the empire grew,
Sultan after sultan followed, their green banner rose still higher,
Nation after nation conquered was by them with sword and fire,
Country after country open all the ways for them did set...
Full of glory to the Danube came the stormy Bajazet. (Eminescu 2000: 47–48)

While Bayezid's power grows, the Danube remains a constant witness to history, having seen many conquerors attempt to cross it, as the exchange between the Ottoman king and the Wallachian king Mircea the Old illustrates:

“And my hurricane that's sweeping all away like dust and chaff
 Thinkest thou that thou canst stay it only with an old man's staff?”
 “Yes, 'tis true, an old man, Sultan! but the man thou dost behold
 Is a man not of the common, but Wallachia's ruler bold.
 I wish not that thou shouldst ever come our direful wrath to know,
 That thy mighty hosts should perish in the Danube's angry flow.
 Yet in olden times full many, on their way all conquering,
 First of all and the most famous, great Darius, Persian king,
 Built a bridge on our old Danube, battling o'er with might and main,
 Fright'ning all around and thinking the whole world was their domain:
 Emperors, whom the vastest empires could within their bounds not hold,
 Came here asking earth and water, as in olden tales is told,
 And I do not wish to frighten, nor do I now wish to boast,
 They were turned to earth and water, nought was left of all their host.” (Eminescu 2000a: 50)

The river is described as a defensive force, capable of swallowing armies, and as a symbol of national endurance. It embodies both geographical reality and mythical memory, anchoring Romanian identity in a landscape that resists domination.

Prefiguring Latour's “parliaments of nature”, such romantic poems from the nineteenth century illustrate how nature is already an active participant, not merely a passive background, positioning the river as an actor in cultural and political narratives, and highlighting the interdependence between humans and environments.

Twentieth Century

This century is shaped by three pivotal historical moments: World War I and the 1918 Great Union, World War II and the emergence of Soviet influence, and the fall of communism in 1989. Traces of Romanticism persist into the early twentieth century, soon giving way to Symbolism, Modernism, and Realism. Authors such as Duiliu Zamfirescu (1858–1922) and George Coșbuc (1866–1918) still render the Danube as a historical witness and an allegorical moral figure. In contrast, symbolist and modernist writers, especially Ion Minulescu (1881–1944), consider urban alienation, existential inquiry, and ecological decay, while postwar realist poets like Andrei Ciurunga (1920–2004),

Dumitru Radu-Udar (2018–?), and Nicolae Labiş (1935–1956) focus on human suffering, labor, and ethical consciousness in the Delta and the canal regions. Later poets, including Alexandru Andriţoiu (1929–1996), Marin Sorescu (1936–1996), and Ileana Mălăncioiu (b. 1940), expand the poetic presence of the river, employing lyricism, irony, corporeal sensibility, and mythology to explore memory, ecological awareness, and the ethical interconnection of humans and nature.

In “La Orşova” (“In Orşova”) (1903), Zamfirescu paints the Danube as a formidable, restless force carrying centuries of history. From the riverbank, the poet’s thoughts drift across time, recalling moments when the Romanian world was unified, vigorous, and morally strong. While foreign invasions and moral decline are acknowledged, resilience persists through rulers, free peasants, and Roman descendants. Heroic Dacian figures appear as guardians of the land and dignity. Time renews both nature and human life, as forests, fields, and people absorb the river’s energy. The concluding stanza is a hymn-like praise of the “old Danube” (44) – “young forever” (45) – as a benevolent source of fertility and prosperity. In the allegory “Dunărea şi Oltul” (“The Danube and the Olt”), part of *Cântece de vitejie* (*Songs of Bravery*) (1904), Coşbuc stages a poetic dialogue between the calm, maternal Danube and her restless son Olt. This is an example where rivers are personified and speak. The Danube questions why the Olt flows muddy and violent, eroding fields and riverbanks. The tributary replies that its turbulence is due to sorrow and outrage. Flowing from the mountains, it witnesses Romanians’ suffering under oppression, denied language, freedom, and justice. Contrasting their fate with other peoples’ liberties, the dialogic poem transforms rivers into agents of historical conscience, using nature to address ethical issues.

Ion Minulescu, a central symbolist poet, merges musicality and dreamlike imagery with modernist themes of urban alienation, fleeting time, and existential longing. In “Pe Dunăre” (“Down the Danube”) from *Romanţe pentru mai târziu* (*Songs for Later*) (1908), the river is a dark, modernist corridor of decay and anonymity. No longer heroic or mythical, it carries human suffering and ecological collapse: “Along the Danube, slow they glide, / White coffins on the current ride, / On murky waves their fates abide.” (Minulescu 2001: 37) Fishermen move silently among refuse, while “white coffins” against “murky waves” dramatize moral degradation. The river absorbs “the mud of the whole world,” a metaphor for cultural and spiritual erosion, and even art survives tenuously, like “a broken guitar” (38) drifting downstream. Minulescu transforms it into a living emblem of societal decay, a mirror of human despair and a landscape of existential reflection. In the volume *Nu sunt ce par a fi* (*I Am Not What I Seem to Be*) (1936), his modernist work evolves both thematically

and formally. In “Itinerar” (“Itinerary”), the Danube contrasts with the frenetic motion of a Pullman: while the train speeds forward with mechanical confidence and modern bravado, the river embodies stagnation, melancholy, and arrested motion. Quoting Eminescu (2000b) – “See, autumn swallows fly away / And walnuts shed their leaves astray, / The white frost over vines has run” (125) – Minulescu juxtaposes these lines with “the cemetery of the blue Danube / From Brăila sailing to Sulina’s shore, / Where rust has stiffened evermore” (220), painting the river as obsolescence, suspended continuity, and a failed promise of progress. In “Pe malul Oltului” (“Down the Olt”), the Danube is a desired terminus, as the Olt rejects modern roads – “shy as a caterpillar” and “ascending, shouting, / as if drunk” (227) – flowing freely “as any rebel egoist,” dancing its “eternal / discreet menuet” to “our Danube wide, / with waters deep and blue” (228). The self-contained rhythm of the rivers contrasts with human pettiness, offering an introspection on poetic identity. In the title poem, “I am not what I seem to be,” the speaker, the “last drop of wine” (231), embodies cultural sedimentation. Local waters, words, and rituals converge into the Danube, which symbolizes cultural transmission, linking human, natural, and poetic flows into a larger cosmological vision.

Andrei Ciurunga (Robert Eisenbraun’s pseudonym) was a writer born in Bessarabia who explored personal and collective trauma, including labor on the Danube–Black Sea Canal. He wove stark realism together with existential introspection. His collection *Poemele cumplitului canal* (*The Poems of the Dreadful Canal*) (1992), published only after the fall of the totalitarian regime, features rhyming verse representing life under extreme conditions: love and friendship, vignettes of peers, work’s physical toll, social critique, patriotism, prayers, and nature. In the poem “Canalul” (“The Canal”), the construction is not a technological marvel but a site of human suffering and historical violence. Forced labor in the 1950s is illustrated as brutal and relentless, where sweat, blood, and death mark the reclaimed land. The Danube appears indirectly as both witness and participant in oppression and transformation, flowing beside trenches and excavations, its waters mingled with human sacrifice. Ciurunga emphasizes the moral and physical toll of forced labor, which exposes workers to heat, cold, and exhaustion while denying them dignity. The river embodies geographic presence and historical trauma, linking human endurance with collective memory: “This dreadful Danube flows along, / Three mouths of water, one of blood.” (11) The three mouths correspond to the natural canals – Kilia, Sulina, and Saint George – while the fourth signifies the man-made Danube–Black Sea Canal. According to the “Postscript” (128–131), he had little access to pencil and paper while working there, composing and

memorizing poems instead. Fellow detainees learned them by heart, circulating them clandestinely both within Romania and in several Western countries.

Dumitru Radu-Udar, imprisoned in a penitentiary colony in the Danube Delta, underwent a similar experience. Several of his poems are included in *Antologia liricii de detenție anticomunistă din spațiul românesc* (*The Anthology of Romanian Anti-communist Prison Poetry*) (2016). Three of his works are particularly notable, all composed in rhyming quatrains. “Pădurea Letea” (“Letea Forest”) (Popa 2016, 420–421), written without pen and paper during marches on the island in the winter of 1963–1964, meditates on the secular oak trees, later declared monuments of nature, capturing the encounter between travellers and the forest’s majestic presence. In contrast, “Periprava” (421) depicts the brutal working conditions and modern slavery at the eponymous detention camp near Letea Forest, concluding with an urgent call to testify against the horrors of the communist inferno. The love poem “Fata dunăreană” (“The Danubian Girl”) (423–424) narrates a young woman who fishes a talking goldfish, revealed to be a superior being who loves her; upon this realization, she regrets her earlier hurt. The poem concludes with the narrator awakening from a dream.

Nicolae Labiș wrote with intense lyricism, social conscience, and existential awareness, combining youthful rebellion and philosophical thought within a tragically brief life. He is renowned for the allegorical, rhyming narrative ballad “Moartea căprioarei” (“The Death of the Doe”), which portrays a forced killing during famine, where human survival clashes with natural innocence. Labiș transforms the hunt into moral trauma, linking wartime deprivation, lost childhood, and humanity’s violent intrusion into nature shaped by WWII scarcity. In free verse, “Gânduri pentru pescarii din Deltă” (“Thoughts for the Delta Fishermen”) conjures a haunting, immersive autumnal Danube Delta, juxtaposing natural imagery and human emotion. The poem opens: “Autumn has come again, with soles purple from the cold” (Labiș 2025: 242), establishing melancholic decay mirrored in both city and personal loss. The Delta is a physical and emotional landscape, as Labiș reflects on fishermen whose lives are entwined with its harsh, unpredictable environment. Night dominates: “The night is dark and, look, a storm is coming” (243), emphasizing the struggle of humans and wildlife. The rhythm alternates between contemplation and sudden bursts of chaotic energy, capturing the local life and the turbulence of memory, mortality, and loss.

Alexandru Andrițoiu, a poet influenced by postwar Transylvania, mingles lyrical introspection with civism, moral gravity, and a clear, restrained style rooted in tradition. His 1974 poem “Pe Dunăre-n sus” (“Up the Danube”) meditates on Ada Kaleh, four years after its submersion during the construction

of the Iron Gates I dam. Opening with “Oh! Beautiful island of sweets and donkeys, Ada-Kaleh / has lowered its gardens under the water” (33), the poem frames the loss as a dignified, almost voluntary withdrawal rather than passive destruction. Human and technological agency recede, foregrounding life and nature, as the island becomes “a Turkish Atlantis” (34) and Andrițoiu observes, like “a boatman on the Styx” (34), that: “All things, / returned to nature, to their beginnings, / will melt back into the plasma from which they were created.” (33) The poem evokes both Ottoman cultural decline and ecological surrender: “an island that sleeps like a leaf in a crystal” (34), where the leaf symbolizes silenced life, memory, and biodiversity, while the crystal represents cold, transparent technological control. Nature endures only as image, immobilized by progress, showing how human development can submerge living ecosystems and cultures in the name of utility.

A prolific poet, Marin Sorescu combined philosophical skepticism, tragic humor, and everyday language to probe history, identity, and existence. His 1989 collection *Ecuadorul și polii* (*The Equator and the Poles*) includes several poems inspired by the Danube. In “Distanța în cotituri” (“Distance in Bends”), the river functions as both measure and metaphor, embodying inevitability, grandeur, and human humility before natural forces. The poem contrasts small, murmuring tributaries with the Danube’s vast scale and authority, addressed reverently as “your highness,” signaling symbolic and physical supremacy. By asking, “From what distance does a river feel / That it will inevitably pour into the other river?” (34), the speaker comments on the mystery of natural cycles and human limitations. The Danube emerges as teacher, sovereign, and metaphor for life’s inevitable convergence, situating human existence within the rhythms of water. In 1982, Sorescu visited Sulina, writing poems inspired by the Danube Delta. In “Pădurea Letea” (“Letea Forest”), irony and lyricism merge as he ennobles labor, links self to nature, and reflects on solitude through Caraorman’s white sand and dunes. “Continutul Delta” (“The Delta Continent”) stages inspiration as delayed and ironic, moving between delight and impatience. The river overflows with “the most poetic subjects” (37). Everyday observation, humor, and ethical reflex converge when emotion becomes restorative as he sees carved initials into an old oak’s bark: “May my emotion / Act like resin, / Soothing and healing the wounded bark!” (37) Nature anchors both people and meaning, turning lyricism into care and ecological responsibility.

Ileana Mălăncioiu writes poetry that fuses myth, rural spirituality, and corporeal experience, presenting natural elements as transformative forces. She seldom uses specific toponyms, preferring to conceive place as universal. In “The Water of the Dead,” Mălăncioiu (2005) renders water intimate, animate,

and morally charged, linking human vulnerability with natural forces: “in that water where you moved / Great scars were visible on your body” (16). Unlike earlier poets, she foregrounds a corporeal, personal, even erotic relationship between humans and water. Here, water participates in human experience, carrying both shame and desire, shaping encounters of body, memory, and the natural world. In “Sturionii” (“The Sturgeons”), opening Mălăncioiu’s 2020 selected poems, sturgeons are primordial forces, not mere fish. Their upstream journey reverses natural order, suggesting a mythical return to beginnings, where rivers are born and matter pulses with life. Water becomes a nurturing medium, enlarging fins until they prop riverbanks, making the sturgeon an architect of landscape. Stone, mountain, and rain respond organically, as if the earth breathes through fish gills, collapsing the boundary between animal and geology. Reproduction is a sacrificial act, bodies yielding so life flows to the sea, linking pain with continuity. The poem’s final address invites readers to internalize the sturgeons’ force, letting it surge through human blood:

Drink these waters, spawn and all,
 Feel the sturgeons rising through your frame,
 A place where blood can scarce contain its call,
 When their fins surge through you like flame,
 You’ll face each wave, unbowed, enthral. (Mălăncioiu 2020: 25, *my translation*)

Thus, sturgeons symbolize vital abundance, resistance, and purity – a life force so potent it defies containment. In a historical moment when they still thrived in the Danube, the poem preserves them as both biological reality and sacred metaphor.

The poems in this section reflect a general tendency to challenge anthropocentrism by expanding the scope of democracy beyond the human. Rivers and ecosystems gain political voice, the nature–culture divide central to modern thought is blurred, and poets propose new modes of representation, speaking for, through, and with nature.

Twenty-First Century

The last section includes poems by Cristina Ispas (b. 1979), Angelica Stan (b. 1969), Nicolae Tzone (b. 1958), and Monica Manolachi (b. 1976), which offer a diverse poetic cartography of the Danube, blending narrative, descriptive, elegiac, and mythopoetic modes to illuminate the river’s shifting meanings. These poetic case studies move between urban alienation, ecological fragility, industrial ruin, and intimate memory, revealing the river as both witness and

participant in human experience. Whether through Ispas's grounded realism, Stan's ethically charged observations, Tzone's expansive epic, or Manolachi's transnational approach, the river emerges as a site of connection, vulnerability, and enduring imaginative power. In line with Latour's perspective, the Danube, as a poetic subject, becomes increasingly part of the "water parliaments," shaping not only poetic language but also other forms of speech, associated with legitimized ecological imperatives in decision-making, and interdisciplinary approaches.

The first part of *rezervația (the reservation)* (2021/2011) by Cristina Ispas, entitled "weekend people," paints urban leisure as ritualized escape, exposing emotional vacancy, consumerism, and fragile identities, suspended between work routines and simulated freedom. The narrative and descriptive poems set in Corabia, the poet's place of birth, are occasions to reconnect with the Danubian valley. It is depicted as a small southern city of return and responsibility, where family care, aging parents, absent working women, and everyday rituals coexist with fruit trees, domestic animals, rain, and a lingering sense of social depletion. The poem "weekend people" expresses the general atmosphere of the place:

between corabia and calafat vegetation has lost
control
houses are swallowed by forests ditches are muddy
hanging from fences or hunched on stone benches
people follow us with their eyes (11)

Other poems figure human relations along the Danube as fleeting and emotionally charged, shaped by proximity, shared vulnerability, and a sense of urgency. Leisure by the river is both exhilarating and precarious, a space where fear, fatigue, and relief intermingle. The riverbank is a setting for temporary connection, intimacy, and subtle reconciliation, emphasizing that human encounters in such natural spaces are transient yet deeply affecting, as in "weekend people II":

this summer everything happened in a rush
we swam somehow, touched by panic
we hurriedly spread and folded the blanket under the pines
on the riverbank rich with trout
between the romanian bank and the bulgarian bank, on the sand island
we looked at each other violently – violently
then we grew tired
we felt a little better (32)

Time spent at the Danube means excitement, exhaustion, and comfort, indicating that the river functions as a mirror for human emotions, amplifying the interactions while providing a space for pause and emotional recalibration. The natural environment actively shapes behavior, transforming ordinary moments into almost ritualistic exchanges.

A more recent poem, “Introspection”, frames the Danube beach as a space of disappointed expectation and uneasy inheritance. For the children, it promises play, yet “the dirty water” and enforced sunscreen rituals turn it into refusal and retreat. The river itself is stripped of nostalgia: “full of trash and smells bad, / it cuts short any desire we too might have for swimming.” Yet this degradation coexists with beauty – the landscape remains “beautiful, wild,” and, strikingly, “completely without memory,” suggesting a nature that absorbs damage without consolation or moral response:

Late at night, before falling asleep, I see on the news that the Gerai has burned,
a true corner of paradise for birds, between the Danube and the Olt.
I immediately reach out for my phone on the nightstand.
The south is burning, my friend has already written on WhatsApp.
I saw, I reply, and wait to see if she’ll write anything else,
because I don’t know what else there is left to say.

Good night, I read, after a while. (Ispas 2023: online)

This last stanza draws on news about a local wetland, which sharpens the tension: its burning exposes the vulnerability of such spaces. The brief news report contrasts with the poem’s earlier slowness, collapsing silent personal reflection into ecological loss. Together, the beach, the polluted Danube, and the wetland trace a geography where familial continuity unfolds alongside environmental exhaustion, and where care persists despite irreversible damage.

The middle section of *O femeie urmărește ploaia de la etajul opt* (*A Woman Watches the Rain from the Eighth Floor*) (2020) by Angelica Stan – a poet, university professor, and architect from Bucharest – was inspired by her participation in a project coordinated by the Budapest University of Technology and Economics (BME) in collaboration with several other universities along the Danube. Architects, urban planners, sociologists, and landscape designers explored small localities on both riverbanks. The sequence entitled “The river: several details” comprises fourteen poems, each focusing on a Danubian place in Serbia, Bulgaria, or Romania. As a footnote explains, portions of it – translated into German, Hungarian, Slovak, and English – formed the content of a brochure and paper installation included in the itinerant exhibition in spring 2019. Each title specifies both the city and the

river's water level at the time of the visit. For example, "Silistra. 212.6 cm" offers a stark critique of local industry along the Lower Danube region by describing it as a landscape of abandoned machinery and broken promises. The lines evoke the ghostly afterlife of socialist-era industrial projects, especially the former shipyard now reduced to decay. Oil-soaked carcasses, dismembered pumps, and amnesiac mechanisms point to not only physical ruin but historical forgetting. Through ironic personification, these objects still believe in progress. Their plea sounds both accusatory and tragic, implicating economic neglect and misplaced nostalgia:

sheet-metal demons captive
 inside freight cars
 of the former shipyard
 overrun with carcasses soaked
 in black oil
 amnesiac disjointed pumps
 still live their dream
 of growth
 and progress

they demand our mercy
 fresh paint,
 compassion,
 and money (30)

The Danube's industrial margin becomes a space where modernization has stalled, leaving behind mute witnesses to failed development and environmental degradation, and questioning whose responsibility this ruin ultimately is.

Some poems call forth the region's *longue durée*, as in "millennia of liquid language dripping / between the same riverbanks" (27) or "furrowed brows beneath the water, / locked in a tension spanning centuries" (29). Unlike romantic poetry, where myth and history idealize the river, Stan juxtaposes this inherited symbolic depth with contemporary realities. Her transnational perspective extends a postmodern sensibility in which identity is shaped through difference and alterity: "from the opposite bank / my country lets itself be seen / in light that has reached maturity." (28) The implied distance casts the homeland as an ethical, rather than possessive, object. Stan's elegiac, ecologically attentive voice prioritizes accountability, turning affection into an ethical force.

A recent major poetic project celebrating the river is *dunăre kilometrul 510 / o poveste de viață, de moarte și de naștere cum nu au mai fost și nici nu vor mai fi altele: cartea nenăscutului* (*danube kilometre 510 / a story of life, death, and birth like no other: the book of the unborn*) (2021) by Nicolae Tzone, poet, editor, and owner of Vinea Publishing House. Spanning more than five hundred pages, the volume is an expansive autobiographical tale in which the Danube serves as the very thread of life. Born in Malu, Giurgiu County, near the river, Tzone undertakes a mythopoetic construction that is simultaneously a love poem, a poetic manifesto, and a heroic epic.

Written entirely in lowercase and without punctuation, the poem conveys fluidity and equality, portraying time as intensely subjective and ahistorical. Three main figures structure the narrative. The poet, *tzone*, addresses himself and myriad other voices, integrating cultural icons, diverse chronotopes, and flora and fauna, framing life as omnipresent, and poetic creation as a distinct reality separate from history. The second, *mila*, carries dual significance: a unit of measure, “mile,” and the Romanian “milă,” meaning mercy or compassion. Connotatively, she embodies the feminine spirit – lover, friend, mother, sister, muse – essential to the creative process. The third, *the unborn*, symbolizes the fruit of love, the poem itself, the pursuit of an ideal, and the poet’s identity reborn through art. These figures establish a mythopoetic universe in which creativity, memory, and existence flow seamlessly, intertwining erotic, natural, and imaginative worlds into a continuous, living epic.

Tzone constructs his river-like surrealist epos emphasizing that his life is inextricably bound to the Danube, not only by destiny but also by conscious recognition of that bond. The river stands as a space both touched and untouched by civilization, a heaven of all heavens, where aspiration, birth, and rebirth flow freely and uninterrupted:

tzone builds himself a secret castle beneath the danube; pike, catfish, carp help him
breathe when he descends underwater and passes through its chambers
tzone is always ready to retreat here and never leave it again
perhaps had mila not arrived he would have already begun calmly and serenely
his new and unknown life as a wholly aquatic being (XII)

The unborn first appears in a dream, followed by a ritual designed to transfigure the dream and bring it into reality. This ritual includes a dialogue with the unborn:

after you are born your first river will be the danube by our house
in its waters you will learn to breathe with the fish
you will spend your childhood on its silver sand

you will sleep so many nights that you will lose count of them
 sometimes alone other times with your beloved
 who today like you is still unborn (XVI)

Whereas in *Memento Mori* the river is a boundless, thoughtful, and transformative space, merging natural and cosmic dimensions, Tzone's vision recalls Homeric underwater realms, imagined as inhabitable spaces for artistic retreat. The river becomes a magical, playful environment, where humans transform nature, creating a theatrical spectacle that celebrates wonder and delight. In this sense, Tzone's poem might be called *Memento Vivere*.

Journeys in Europe / Călătorii în Europa (2022), a bilingual collection by Neil Leadbeater and Monica Manolachi, combines personal reflections on the Rhine and the Danube with cultural exchange and transnational literary collaboration. In the first section, "Journey down the Rhine," Leadbeater traces the river through cities and gorges, blending history, technology, music, and playful observation. In the second, "Journey down the Danube," Manolachi evokes local memory, architecture, folklore, and personal encounters, from the river's tributaries to the Delta, capturing both the cultural and natural richness of Central and Eastern Europe.

The second section draws on life in cities and villages from the Black Forest in Germany to Sulina in Romania, intertwining historical commentary with personal observation. "Kepler's Ghost on the Stone Bridge" (90) connects the astronomer's scientific legacy to modern recognition, celebrating the poetry of his laws of motion and transforming the loss of his grave into cosmic belonging. "Snapshots of Ada Kaleh" (120) reconstructs the submerged island, weaving Ottoman, European, and local cultures, mourning its 1970 flooding, and turning disappearance into evocative images of food, prayer, and landscape. "Somewhere near Grindu Village" (132) recounts the 1989 Mogoșoaia ferry disaster from a surviving child's perspective, juxtaposing innocence with death, trauma with rescue, and human loss with the river's presence.

Other poems are more personal. For instance, "Swimming Lesson in Eșelnița" (118) recounts a childhood near-drowning and tackles paternal models, the river's hidden dangers, political silence, and how memory transforms trauma into an image of survival. "Dayka Gábor Street" (102) mingles youthful nostalgia with a lasting emotional bond to the Danube, exploring identity, time, and belonging. Inspired by a conference in Vienna, "Chilling out Beside the River" (94) transforms academic moments into quiet meditation, where intellectual debates dissolve into calm, playful, and tentative contentment by the Alte Donau. "One Night in Győr" invokes an intimate

scene, merging cosmic imagery with human closeness, where movement on water mirrors planetary motion:

We advance on the water
as the planet rows through the universe.
The river is so dark and you,
like a beacon among the tiny stars,
cannot stop laughing. (98)

The poet sometimes experiments with form and structure. “Beginnings” (78) uses two parallel stanzas to represent the Danube’s twin springs, Breg and Brigach. “Christmas Lights on the Pentele Bridge” (104) underscores the importance of translation in Central and Eastern Europe for preserving memory and cultural diversity. In these ways, the poet resists linguistic and cultural fragmentation, demonstrating how language, memory, and creative practice integrate to maintain a shared heritage and illuminate transnational connections. For Manolachi, the Danube is a presence that links transnational history, memory, and personal experience. Carrying both tragic and happy moments while shaping identity and connection across ethnicities and languages, the river holds the poetic power to inspire hope.

Conclusions

Over the past two centuries of Romanian poetry, the Danube has been not merely a geographical landmark but also a complex cultural, historical, and ethical agent. Nineteenth-century poets predominantly envision it as a moral witness and frontier, absorbing sacrifice, guarding borders, and legitimizing collective identity through heroism. Romantic and early realist poets imbue the river with patriotic symbolism, portraying it as both protector and chronicler of national destiny. In the interwar decades, this emblematic stability gives way to fragmentation and ambiguity. Symbolist, modernist and realist writers conceive the Danube as a corridor of decay, melancholy, and existential unease, indicating urban alienation, technological acceleration, and political disillusionment. Under totalitarianism, the river is sometimes a site of trauma and forced labor, its waters mingled with suffering and silenced memory. At the same time, other poets continue to explore its philosophical and ecological dimensions, emphasizing humility before natural cycles and the limits of human control. Contemporary poetry further reconfigures the Danube as a living ecosystem and relational space, foregrounding corporeality, vulnerability, and interdependence. Recent texts blur the boundaries between

human, animal, and geological life, transforming the river into a medium of ethical responsibility and ecological awareness. Myth, biology, and personal experience converge to articulate new forms of belonging and communion.

Taken together, these poetic representations reveal a gradual shift from national monument to ecological interlocutor. The Danube evolves from a symbol of historical continuity into a speaking presence that challenges anthropocentric perspectives. Romanian poetry thus anticipates current environmental debates by envisioning the river as both archive and agent – bearing memory, and demanding attentive, reliable coexistence.

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