

# Iancu Jianu by N. D. Popescu – Distant Reading for European Literary History

by Justin Tonra : 10-13 minutes

The second article of the Distant Reading Recommends series is written by Roxana Patras of “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi in Romania. Her piece describes a notable hajduk novel, from a genre which followed the adventures of these romanticised hero figures of the Balkans.

In Distant Reading Recommends, an Action member introduces a novel, published between 1850 and 1920, from one of the participating countries in our Action. These novels may be important or notable within the individual nation’s literary tradition, but less well-known in the broader European context. By bringing these novels to light, we aim to further advance our objectives of creating a broader, more inclusive, and better-grounded account of European literary history and cultural identity.

Around 1855, when French, English, German and Hungarian translations of Romanian ballads started to be published, *Iancu Jianu* did not look like an epitome of the Romanian *hajduk*. Thus, translators such as Jules Michelet, Henry Stanley, Wilhelm von Koetzebue, Karoly Acs or Vasile Alecsandri went for texts that featured braver outlaws, whose names were spelled in funny westernised versions: “Mihou” ou “Michu”, “Toma Alimoche” or “Thoma Alimosch”, “Boujor”, “Kodran”. Attested from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century and spread throughout the entire Central and South-Eastern Europe (Rodopi Mountains, Srena Gora, Stara Planina, Olympus Mountains, Romania Mountain in Bosnia), the Bulgarian *haiduti/hayduds*, the Serbian *hajduks*, the Greek *klephts*, the Albanian *kaçaks*, the Ukrainian *cossacks*, the Croatian *uskoks*, and the Romanian *haiduci* were known as paramilitary organisations championing democratic decision-making, rebellion against the feudal privileges and chiefly against the Ottoman rulers, a sort of alternative proto-socialist economy and a nomad lifestyle. The hajduk literature, ballads and derived genre fiction, is thus specific to the entire Balkan area, its regional development being favoured by shared geographic, economic, social, and cultural conditions.

Indeed, Jianu’s ballad is considerably shorter and looks lesser adventurous than others of the same type. Living between 1787 and 1842, also being Tudor Vladimirescu’s right-hand man during the 1821 Revolution, it seems that the Romanian hajduk would survive his dying legend and probably witness the decay of his own text (allegedly authored by himself) into bits of drinking songs, as the ones assembled by Anton Pann’s in his colportage collections. Surprisingly, a decade after his death, Iancu Jianu was resurrected as a die-hard literary character and as a national symbol that, for over a century and a half, would enthrall a lot of Romanian writers, composers, film and stage directors.



Images from editions of Popescu’s *Iancu Jianu*

A young and very energetic aspirant named Nicolae D. Popescu (1843-1921) speculated the success of melodramas and vaudevilles authored and directed by Matei Millo around 1855 and turned the *dramatis persona* into a sensational character. The resulting novel was issued in no fewer than 7 editions, comprising 5000 copies each. Taking into consideration the social, cultural and economic context, especially the low levels of literacy during the period of its publication, we might say that these are numbers that indicate market success, professionalisation of writing and enforcement of literary institutions. Gaining fame with this simple trick of rewriting recent national history as

sensational literature, N. D. Popescu came to be acclaimed as “Romania’s Ponson du Terrail,” as the unchallenged master of nineteenth-century Romanian pulp fiction. Indeed, he wrote around 60 novels, the majority of them belonging to the hajduk genre.

Between 1868 and 1916, the novel series *Iancu Jianu* grew in complexity from a structural, thematic and symbolical point of view, at the same time accommodating new historical and ethnographic content coming from scholars who were assiduously researching the hajduk’s biography. As the author himself avers in several prefatory notes, the story about the publication and growth of this series is as spectacular as the hero’s life. While the first edition was actually a newspaper installment and did not exceed the average length of a short-story, the second and the third editions, published in 1872 and 1881, were issued in response to readership demand. Apparently, the hagiographical structure of the fourth edition (1887) was an innovation inspired by Jianu’s recently-revealed autobiography and by a series of unknown documents and testimonies such as those published by Gr. G. Tocilescu, V. A. Urechia, and C. D. Aricescu around 1880; so, the novelist would now deliver the same novel in two mirrored parts that presented the hero’s deeds and temper before and after his conversion to an outlaw’s lifestyle: (a) *Iancu Jianu, Zapciu/Iancu Jianu, the County-Tax Collector* and (b) *Iancu Jianu, Haiducul/Iancu Jianu, the Hajduk*.

But the character sold too well for the publishers not to try more profitable typographic formulae or easy-going copyright transfers. The fifth edition had a third part, where the novelist developed the circumstances of Iancu Jianu’s death. The sixth edition (1912) returned to the hagiographical pattern, while the seventh edition (1912) seemed to be an aggregate of the previous ones.



Illustrations of *Iancu Jianu*

Why does Iancu Jianu decide to become a hajduk in king Caradja’s times? Beside his sister’s/his betrothed one’s elopement, beside his brothers’ plundering of properties, beside the strong ideological commitment to Φιλική Εταιρεία/Filiki Eteria and Tudor Vladimirescu’s riot against the Ottoman Empire, there is something about Iancu Jianu that places him in Karl Moor’s descent and makes him the most romantic Romanian hajduk of them all. Apart from his particular social status—he is an aristocrat offspring, while his kinds are rebellious peasants—it is his deep melancholy, his inexplicable longing for loneliness, isolation and perhaps self-extinction that express a modern consciousness, a troubled sense of identity, an intellectualised manner of acting. Indeed, his decision to commit himself to a hajduk lifestyle, his surrendering to the Phanariote militia and escape from the salt mine, his love affair with his host (Catinca/Ilinca/Stăncuța) and then the forced marriage to Sultana look like not entirely assumed acts, as if the hero is not thoroughly participating in his own life and story.

Taking into consideration the author’s massive interventions on the original text during half a century (1869-1912), *Iancu Jianu, Haiducul* could hardly be defined as a single novel. It should be considered more of a work-in-progress series. Certainly, there is magic about it, as the hajduk leader’s brave deeds and abyssal personality attracted not only N. D. Popescu’s imitators (Panait Macri, Panait Popescu, Anton Marcu, Ilie Ighel, T. M. Stoenescu, Ștefan Stoenescu, Alexandru Munte Stănceanu, Lazăr, Simion Bălănescu), but also accomplished writers such as Bucura Dumbravă or Panaït Istrati. They exported Iancu Jianu and the hajduk type through novels that were published in Germany (*Der Haiduck*, *Der Pandur*) and France (*Présentation des Haïdouks*). The force of this literary myth is also illustrated by a legion of texts, movie scripts, movie series and musicals that were produced under the Communist regime.

I remember that, during the 1980s when the programme of the Romanian national television was severely limited to 2 hours a day, the movie series *Haiducii/The Hajduks*, *Pintea Haiducul/Pintea, the Hajduk*, and *Iancu Jianu* were anticipated with restless excitement and watched in stunned admiration. Directors Dinu Cocea and Mircea



Moldovan would avail of Romania’s isolation and deliver to the communist audiences a kind of Balkan western. This is another proof that *Iancu Jianu, Haiducul* should be recommended not only as a text authored by N. D. Popescu and restyled by many others, but also as a complex cultural phenomenon whose stretching in time and whose variety of artistic extensions makes it a perfect topic for distant-reading research.

**Acknowledgements:**

According to *Dictionarul Cronologic al Romanului Romanesc* (The Chronological Dictionary of the Romanian Novel), N. D. Popescu wrote the following novels featuring Iancu Jianu:

*Iancu Jianul, căpitanul de haiduci*, Bucharest, Editura Librăriei H. Steinberg, 1873, 140 p.

*Iancu Jianu, zapciu de plasă. Nuvelă originală*, Bucharest, Editura Librăriei H. Steinberg, 1887, V + 120 p.

*Moartea lui Iancu Jianu, căpitan de haiduci. Nuvelă originală*, Bucharest, Editura Librăriei H. Steinberg, 1894, 176 p.

*Tinerețea lui Iancu Jianu, vestit căpitan de haiduci*, Bucharest, Tip. Concurența, 1909, 164 p.

*Jancu Jianu, polcovnic de poterași*, Bucharest, Tip. Concurența, 1910, 148 p.

*Scăparea lui Jancu Jianu din ocna părăsită*, Bucharest, Tip. Concurența, 1911, 178 p.

*Dragostea lui Iancu Jianu cu Smaranda Gălășeasca. Nuvelă originală*, Bucharest, Tip. Concurența, 1916, 174 p.

*Prinderea lui Iancu Jianu căpitanul de haiduci. Nuvelă originală*, Buc., Tip. Concurența, 1916, 143 p.

Versions of Iancu Jianu editions as well as other Romanian hajduk novels are available on Zenodo:

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.2648515](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2648515); DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.2648518](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2648518);  
DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.2648520](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2648520); DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.2648524](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2648524);  
DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.2648528](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2648528); DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.2648532](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2648532); DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.2648457](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2648457).

For more info on Iancu Jianu’s biography and literary legacy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iancu\\_Jianu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iancu_Jianu).

For more details on the hajduk movie series: [https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haiducii\\_\(film\\_din\\_1966\)](https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haiducii_(film_din_1966));  
[https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haiducii\\_\(serie\\_de\\_filme\)](https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haiducii_(serie_de_filme)).

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For further reading, see:

Joep Leersen et al, *The Rural Outlaws in East-Central Europe*. In Cornis-Pope, Marcel & Neubauer, John (eds.) (2010), *History of the Literary Cultures of East-central Europe*, vol. 4. *Types and stereotypes*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Bracewell, W. (2003). *The Proud Name of Hajduks: Bandits as Ambiguous Heroes in Balkan Politics and Culture*. In Norman M. Naimark and Holly Case (eds.), *Yugoslavia And Its Historians*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

*Dicționarul cronologic al romanului românesc* (2003). Vol. 1. Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române.

*Dicționarul literaturii române de la origini până la 1900* (1979). Bucharest: Editura Academiei RSR.

Hobsbawm, E. (1959). *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Century*. New York: Norton.