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HISTORY - FOLKLORE - LITERATURE: THE EXAMPLE OF ROMANIA

The beginnings of modern Romanian culture coincide with the discovery of folk literature. The first to benefit from this true "revelation," around the middle of the last century, were two of the most authentic representatives of Romanian romanticism: Vasile Alecsandri and Alecu Russo. However, the earliest manifesto of Romanian romanticism was not very explicit in its treatment of the subject, because others who participated in the current—especially Mihail Kogălniceanu and Nicolae Bălcescu—were primarily historians. In 1840 the contensts of *Dacia literară,* a magazine edited by them, gave literary status to heroic events that had entered into Romanian history; second place was reserved for the beauty of the Romanian countryside; the picturesque and the poetic content of the traditions held by the people who had lived this history and animated this countryside were only third in importance. Now, the term "traditions" could be applied in the same way to different artistic expressions: dance, music or literature.

Thus a literature inspired by historical events was born at that time, represented in prose by Costache Negruzzi and in poetry

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by Vasile Alecsandri, Dimitrie Bolintineanu and Grigore Alexandrescu. The period in history that they chose was the Middle Ages in Romania, a period also preferred by French poetry and English prose of the time. The influence of French and English romanticism is felt predominantly in *belles lettres,* while German romanticism awakened interest in folklore. Historical facts, becoming literary facts—rich not only in actual historical figures but also in characteristics bestowed by the imagination of the artist—thus passed from the documentary to the fictional and entered the national consciousness. However, in Romania historical legend was not the work of a classically educated poet. In fact, while around the 1830s and 1840s Vasile Alecsandri and Alecu Russo "discovered" folk poetry, their resulting works contained legends and ballads whose characters were actual historical figures such as Dragos Vadŏ, Radu Calomfirescu, Stefănită-Voda, Constantin Brâncoveanu, Mihai Viteazul, as well as the *haïdouks* * whose existence has always wavered between myth and reality. Vasile Alecsandri tells us that one of the people who revealed this "treasure" (as Alecsandri called folk literature) to him confided that his father knew many ballads, some of them celebrating the Roman emperors Trajan and Aurelian, names connected with the origins of the Romanian people. This bears out what Jung and Kerenyi said: "Myth is not a way of interpretation intended to satisfy scientific interest; it represents in narrative form the recreation of a reality from the earliest times."[1] It follows that a people, at a time when it did not yet have access to any form of cultural expression or instruction, nevertheless constructed its own view of history, with a particular interest in its origins—in this case, the origin of the Romanian people.

It is not our purpose here to compare the two views of history nor to try to bring to light the kernel of historical truth hidden in each manifestation of folklore. On the other hand, it is important to point out the truth of Mircea Eliade's remark with regard to the two forms of knowledge: "Myth and legend are 'true' in another sense from a historical reality called 'true'.

* Haïdouks: "good-hearted" brigands having the people's sympathy and considered as national heroes - the Robin Hoods of Romania (Editor's Note).

[1] C. G. Jung and C. Kerenyi, *Introduction à l'essence de la mythologie,* Payot, 1951, pp. 17-18.

There are two different approaches of the mind to an interpretation of the world, ways of being and mental activities that do not exclude each other. A people as well as an individual may be conscious of its responsibility within history and assume it courageously, while continuing to enjoy the ancient myths and legends and to create them, since they are the bearers of other dimensions of human existence..."[2]

Undoubtedly the first Romanian to grasp intuitively the historical value of popular traditions was Ion Neculce (1662-1743). The author of a Moldavian chronicle, *Letopisetul Tării Moldovei* —printed in 1840 by one of the ideologues of Romanian romanticism, Mihail Kogălniceanu—he introduced the work with forty-two historical anecdotes and advised the reader that they were a series of short tales handed down from father to son through many generations; he does not insist that the reader have a blind faith in the tales, each reader, therefore, being free to believe them or not, as he chooses.

This truth-fiction relationship of legends inherited from the late Middle Ages, as well as certain concordances between some Romanian traditions and those found in other European peoples, was discussed by one of the great Romanian historians, Gh. I. Brătianu (1898-1953) in a work of fundamental importance that was published in Bucharest in 1945 with the title *Historical Tradition of the Founding of the Romanian States*. For Brătianu, "The uniting of the classes for a common action against an outside enemy is a characteristic of the beginning of our life as a state and resembles the origins of the Swiss confederacy, just as the semi-legendary tradition of its origin is similar to that of the foundation of Romania. In any case, we should keep in mind the fact that a legend, even when it has characteristics in common with similar ones in the popular literature of the Medieval world, should not be discarded as a source of historical information. The form it takes on in antiquity—as in Switzerland and Romania—may be influenced by a cycle of tales or a strong symbolic figure, very frequent in the Middle Ages, but it is nonetheless true that the fact on which it is based can be as real as the battle in the Pyrenees that gave birth to the French epic poem of the valiant

[2] *De Zalmoxis à Gengis Khan*, Payot, 1970, p. 132.

Roland or the 'conspiracy' of the cantons to which is connected the story of the exploits of William Tell." However, the legends of Neculce are both political and social. They are not inspired by the late Middle Ages, having as their central figure Stephen the Great (1457-1504), who combined the ideal of national independence and generosity toward the peasant class.

To return to the object of the present study, an interesting phenomenon proper to the spiritual life of the Romanians in the 19th century is its way of mythicizing historical events and individuals that are nearly contemporary. The typical example in this sense is that of the Romanian war for independence (1877). Profoundly struck by the event, popular imagination made use of written material on the subject to make it its own and assigned a folk character to it, in the true sense of the term. It seems worthwhile to us to look at the phenomenon of the metamorphosis effected by the people, starting with the works of cultivated literature that it then transformed into folklore. It is a process set in motion in the 19th century by a series of key moments in modern Romanian history.

I do not think I exaggerate when I say that the Romanians made a mythical image of their war for independence. The simple exegesis of the literature of the time, or later, inspired by the war gives the proof—although superficially, because the roots go far deeper. In order to get to the roots, we must go back to certain characteristics of the psychology of the Romanian people. In fact, it is necessary to take into account its particular way of experiencing the impact of history as well as its way of celebrating great events.

Even before it was over, the war for independence inspired numerous pages of verse, prose and theater. Almost immediately these fruits of cultivated art were transmuted into folklore, the historical dimensions almost overshadowed by the rich content of human significance and ethical and emotional values. Neither history written by scholars, speeches, nor other diplomatic documents, nor the inevitable stereotypes of all kinds were able to change the mythical image: its legendary dimensions retained the power to cause the souls of generations to thrill. Even those who have never experienced it, who have not directly felt the spiritual tension of the moment, have felt its effects, the strength of the

event being enough to relegate value judgments to second place. Would that not prove that even in modern times there is no incompatibility between mythical and scientific knowledge of an event? Even more, it would seem that these two kinds of knowledge are complementary, as Mircea Eliade says in the quotation above. Mythical knowledge touches the heart and the imagination, because it is human nature to create prototypes for itself, to elevate to their quintessence moral values in order to find its own image in that projection, while scientific knowledge seeks to define and interpret an event "the way it happened."

What the reading of narrative history glimpses is transfigured on the spiritual level. The process uses as a starting point a "truth" grasped before it becomes common knowledge, widespread and measured; in other words, before it has become historical. Often (and 19th-century Romania is a good example) historical science is anticipated by popular imagination which on its own authority confers a mythical nature to such or such a national personality. However, what particularly catches the attention in the period with which we are concerned are the *identical* conclusions arrived at on the one hand by mythical imagination and on the other by scientific data—an identity born of the convergence of essential characteristics of an intellectual, moral and psychological order. We notice that science validates the facts of mythical knowledge that, in many cases in which documents are lacking, offers it testimony and references.

It is not the structure of the historical event as such that is important here but the way in which *tradition* tends to magnify certain characteristics of the mind, certain ethical values. History later confirms them with abundant documentary proof.

From this point of view, the 19th century is a psychological turning-point, and consequently it bears the mark of important events, likely to stimulate the creative genius of the people. Historical periods marked by important events form a series: Tudor Vladimirescu and the revolution of 1821; a quarter of a century later, the revolution of 1848; eleven years later, Alexandru Ioan Cuza achieved the union of Romanian principalities (1859). The seven-year reign of this prince was a prelude to the independence of the Romanian people, an independence for which Cuza paid with his life in 1877. It was the peasants, thus the

popular majority, who conferred the title of *domn* (lord) on Tudor Vladimirescu when they chose him as their leader. It was in the heart of this same popular majority that the mythical image of Tudor Vladimirescu at the head of a peasant army took form. Revealing, for our discussion, is the fact that Vasile Alecsandri included in his collection of folk legends (1852) a selection inspired by the figure of Tudor Vladimirescu, an almost contemporary figure who, scarcely twenty years after his tragic death entered legend, the tragic being transposed here to the oniric level. The piece was called *Visul lui Tudor Vladimirescu* (*The Dream of Tudor Vladimirescu*)—a premonitory dream of his death by betrayal. What struck the popular imagination was the tragic nature of a heroic existence—a dominant trait of folklore woven around historical personages. This was also the case with the martyr prince Constantin Brancovan, who ruled in Walachia from 1688 to 1714, giving his name to a brilliant cultural period that was a true spiritual renaissance of the country. The prince disappeared in tragic circumstances in Istanbul for having refused to renounce his Christian faith. More rare are the exultant expressions of triumph, which are especially connected with the foundation of the Romanian states. The legend of the *voïvode* Dragos is a typical example exalting the accomplishment of a historical action that is assured of immortality. Another spark to kindle the imagination of the people was that produced by the historical personage who incarnates a collective desire and makes real an ideal previously confined to simple aspiration. In these cases, the image has nothing of the tragic. This is what occured with Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the prince who achieved the union of the Romanian principalities in 1859 and who was elevated to the "peasants' prince" because of the reforms he introduced during the years 1859-1866 for the purpose of raising the peasants from their condition of social debasement. By giving them full ownership of the land they worked, Prince Cuza vindicated them for all the affronts they had suffered for centuries.

Here we note the appearance of a process of interference peculiar to the 19th century, after which the people adopted and made theirs literary works inspired by the times. That is, such works were transformed into folklore. Sometimes under the names of their respective authors but more often under the label

of collectivity, the works were vehicles of the expressions of a general sentiment and became *independent* of their authors. The verses of *Desteaptă-te Romăne* (*Awake, Romanian*), the revolutionary marching song of 1848, as well as those entitled *Hora Unirii*, celebrating the union of Walachia with Moldavia, were on the lips of everyone from 1855 to 1859, so much so that they same to be called the "Marseillaise of the Romanians." In fact, the names of their respective authors—Andrei Mureşan in the first case, Vasile Alecsandri in the second—faded into the background as soon as the public made them its own, reciting and struggle was at its height, rarely did anyone specify the names of the true authors of these verses. From then on, they no longer had a literary status in the actual meaning of the term, since being expressions of a collective sentiment, they were taken up by each generation as its own, whenever history brought analogous events.

What is the function of tradition in a case of this kind? Let us take as an example the "peasants' prince" Alexandru Ioan Cuza. Popular imagination did not transform him into a Prince Charming, it did not endow him with physical attributes or supernatural powers. His image is simply that of a man, but of a man with superiority on the spiritual level. This image does not ignore, however, the trappings of the fantastic: at times the prince, disguised, appears unexpectedly to reestablish justice, right wrongs, punish and reward. Thus we find incarnated in this historical figure some specific characteristics of Prince Charming, but always within the limits of the believable, so that history and legend end by agreeing with each other. If the people rightly sought to multiply these tales about the kindly interventions of the prince, it nevertheless kept—and the fact should be noted—some connections with reality, whatever the hypostasis in which he was evoked. In 1880, when the writer Ion Creangă drew the image of Cuza with an outspoken old peasant, Ion Roată, the scene only transposed the folkloric vision to the level of human and social meaning. The myth of Alexandru Ioan Cuza is a *social myth*: the prince of the first agrarian reform in Romania is opposed to arrogant rapacity and severely punishes extortion.

The gallery of legendary ancestors—Dragoş, Ştefan, Horia,

Brâncoveanu, the Haïdouks—is enriched in the 19th century by the addition of several new figures. Aside from Tudor Vladimirescu and Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the people sanctioned yet another image of a hero, that of the Transylvanian hero of 1848 Avram Iancu, who almost three-quarters of a century before heralded the achievement of the act that reunited, in 1918, the three Romanian principalities into a single country. As a consequence, Avram Iancu incarnates the *national* myth of the Romanians.

All kinds of artists, prose writers, poets, composers, painters and engravers, seem to have agreed to exalt by their works the 1848 revolution, along with the union of Moldavia and Walachia that occurred eleven years later. The contribution of the ordinary man to the accomplishment of these historic acts was emphasized, with pathos, but in an accessible manner. This explains the rapidity with which the people adopted these artistic expressions. The phenomenon was further facilitated by the absence of any dividing line between the processes in use in cultivated art on the one hand and folklore on the other, the first often drawing on the resources of motifs and attributes of the second. Let us not forget, in fact, that we are at the time of the "revelation" of folklore, which is alto the *only* tradition of autochthonous art.

We will also add that at that time neither the idea nor the status of the artist as such was clear in this part of the European world. Magazines and gazettes were scarce and reached only a small public. Widely-diffused literary works were those that, incarnating a general sentiment, were given oral expression. This explains the impression of many people that they are creations of the collectivity.

When the war for independence broke out in 1877, Romanian society had entered the last quarter of the 19th century and disposed of modern means for the diffusion of cultural values, means that were, even relatively, remarkably developed. The press was already an active presence in the social and political life of the country. The number of schools was increasing daily; even the theater reached a wider public than it had twenty years earlier, when the struggle was on for the union of the principalities.

These facts help us to understand better how a poetry molded from enthusiasm, emotion and freshness could immediately seize

all hearts, resound in all social classes and categories to become —even before the last echoes of the events that inspired it had faded away—a true folk possession. From then on, each generation, before having recourse to the scientific knowledge and interpretation of the war for independence as a historic fact, would feel the impact of its artistic image. Each generation in turn would see in the *heroes* exalted in the poetry of the time (*Penes, Curcanul, Sergentul*, by Vasile Alecsandri) the effigies of a true prototype which kept its vividness intact through the years, along with its romantic and patriotic content.

If the people were not themselves the creators of all the literature the war of 1877 inspired, since it is writers who create literature, in this case Vasile Alecsandri first and George Cosbuc later, it is nonetheless true that the people adopted it as the most faithful account of that war. Two generations of writers and artists contributed to the construction of this image: the generation of those who fought the war and their successors, whose childhood and youth were spent in an ambience that was still throbbing with glorious memories. It would be just to consider the above-mentioned poets as the *chefs de file* of those generations. As to the wide diffusion of their respective works, it was facilitated by several factors of a social and psychological nature. First, the protagonists of the exploits that inspired the poetry were mostly peasants, men of the people, simple soldiers. An officer, when he appears, fraternizes with them on the battlefield, all of them united by the same trials. Thus the people recognized itself in the poetry exalting such valor. A sort of osmosis took place leading to the identification on the social level of the mass of the people with the larger-than-life heroes. The public recognized itself in them: "Leaving the field, our home, the shaft of the cart/ This summer we left/ To deliver from the Turk, the yoke/ The poor, dear country." "Country" took on the double meaning of place of origin and the place in which all the hero's hopes converged and which he had left precisely in order to protect it, hoping to return one day: "Oh, may Heaven let me see/ How the grass bends in front of me/ And feel in my hair the caress of the wind."

The press, popular festivals and especially elementary school had greatly contributed to the popularity of these verses before

the war had even lost its actuality for those who had experienced it in fighting and suffering.

Even twenty years later, when it had become a simple paragraph in Romanian history, this war continued to be present in the generation that had fought it, a generation that was still active in the political and spiritual life of the country. The pride in the sublime moments, the heroism, the sacrifice, had not yet been exhausted, as had not yet been exhausted the sorrow for the loss of so many loved ones. And it was just at that time that George Coşbuc wrote his "heroic songs," *Cîntece de vitejie*, whose success would equal that of the verses of his predecessor, Vasile Alecsandri, because the poetry of Coşbuc re-creates a *truthful image* of the war, an image in which each found himself or with which he could identify. As was the case with folklore, the verses were learned in the country in earliest childhood. This process of identification proved decisive for the diffusion of a certain literary genre among the general public. Less rich esthetically, such a literature had, instead, qualities that assured its immediate communicability. Easily and quickly memorized, it spread, surviving the passing of time, no doubt helped by the fact that books were beginning to reach an increasing number of readers, and the village school had become a reality.

As fine a scholar as Alexandru Odobescu understood from the start that therein lay the value of that poetry. In his address to the public on April 6, 1881, in which he proposed the cycle *Ostasii nostri* (*Our Soldiers*) for the Romanian Academy Prize (the cycle was inspired by the years 1877-1878) Odobescu took pleasure in repeating the words of "one of our soldiers, with little education, who took part bravely in our struggle three years ago." Then he pointed out the value of the poetry, remarking that it rested only on the theme of identifying, of the way in which the poet transposed the life and sentiments of the combatants into his work. "I think," said Odobescu, "of all the needs, the frustrations, the dangers, and I often have the impression that I see them passing before my eyes, but to tell the truth, I never see them as clearly and with such pleasure as when I read them in this little book, *Our Soldiers*, by Alecsandri. Is it because he himself was there? Because I never met him there, or heard him spoken of. However, he describes so well the way things hap-

pened that we could swear he really shared our existence and suffering, all the wants we experienced, that he laughed with us at the jokes told around the campfire..."[3]

The Romanian people bequeathed to posterity this synthesized image of a war that its writers grasped through sensitivity and peasant thought. To this was added another essential fact: the war for independence was the first great event in Romanian history, and it had its own painter—a painter of great ability—Nicolae Grigorescu, the national painter *par excellence.* The exploit of this artist crossing the Danube with the troops was perfect for striking the imagination: "With them he experienced the fatigue, suffering and danger of war. He stood watch with them in the trenches, in the uproar of the gunfire, he was in their midst in the assault of Grivita; at Smardan, Opanez, Plevna, he saw what a little thing the life of a man is during a war."[4] As a consequence, Nicolae Grigorescu was the very one to present to his contemporaries impressions whose truthfulness was incontestable, whose emotional impact was all the stronger since it came from an eye witness who had followed step by step the vicissitudes of the war. Before, Romanian painting had not had the occasion to deal with such a serious subject, one that involved the modern history of the country. The artists of the revolutionary year of 1848 had produced, with Theodore Aman, academic paintings, allegories employing an elementary, indeed naive, symbolism of pictures of rural life treated in a conventional manner. It was only with the works of Nicolae Grigorescu that Romanian painting found the solemn and poignant tone of human verity.

Now, this painting returns us to the principal personage of Alecsandri's verses—the peasant. Once made popular by their reproduction in school texts and publications of all kinds, these picures engendered the same sort of identification, awakening at the same time a feeling of entirely legitimate satisfaction. Affective memory would necessarily draw a connecting line between the poetry of Alecsandri and the paintings of Grigorescu, as treating the *same subject,* and endowed with the same narrative character.

[3] A. I. Odobescu, *Complete Works,* II, Bucharest, 1908, pp. 165-169.
[4] A. Vlahută, *Pictural N. Grigorescu,* in *Din trecutul nostru,* p. 111.

In a monograph devoted to the painter in 1910, the writer Alexandru Vlahută made skillful use of the narrative character of the canvases of Grigorescu, describing it in the following terms: "I have before my eyes the Battle of the Valley of Rahova, viewed from the side and very close up. It is just at the beginning of the clash. The Turkish bugler has fallen, pierced by the bayonet of the first Romanian soldier, who takes only one step forward before falling in his turn, face down, his chest on his weapon, killed by a gunshot; fallen backwards, the Turk who has killed him holds his gun with both hands, our soldier having stabbed him in the breast with his bayonet, up to the hilt; now we see other foot-soldiers running *en masse* from the rear, as if carried along by a storm (...), in the background the tumult of the confused crowd becomes greater and greater, the most intense fighting is there, the blind turmoil of death." Here is a literary image associated with the plastic image, both endowed with the same powers of penetration, due to very simple and direct artistic procedures, acquiring an impact that profoundly marked generations of viewers and readers.

However, it is important to remember that the mutual influence between the works of cultivated art and those of folklore in Romania during the 19th century had as a basis the reality of historical events. The actual protagonists of these events (Tudor Vladimirescu, Avram Iancu, Alexandru Ioan Cuza) entered folklore because their exploits responded to a moral dimension of collective psychology, since " myth is a collective dream," as Karl Abraham correctly notes, and in the dream are sublimated the repressed hopes of the particular collectivity. When one of these latent hopes becomes reality, as occurred with the ideal of social justice incarnated in Cuza, the personage incarnating it is idealized to compensate for former suffering (according to Freudian theory). However, the process begins even before the aspirations take on form, in the case of the heroes that identify with them forcefully and at the price of their lives, as with Tudor Vladimirescu and Avram Iancu, for example.

The essential modifications of the structure seem to us just as interesting to discover. They are found in the brief interval separating the abdication of Cuza in 1866 from the war for independence that broke out in 1877. Because of these modifica-

tions, folklore was no longer able to impose a *certain image* of such or such a personage borrowed from history. Thereafter, it was the turn of cultivated literature, channeled through the great authors. It suceeded to the point of permitting the people to identify with the personages and to integrate its works into the folk patrimony. We thus see that the sensitivity of the people, even when it loses its creative faculty, cannot keep from referring to the imagination to express itself. From this come the mythical dimensions that this sensitivity gives to literary representations, when these latter are closely copied from its own mentality. This very special aspect of the history-folklore-literature chain in 19th-century Romania seems essential to us as an original characteristic of romanticism in that country.

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