

THE TEMPTATIONS OF WISDOM

A reader who is trying to identify the common denominator of the Romanian spirit, reflected in both folk literature and literary works (to be more exact, in fairy and folk tales), will find it without effort: the key to the "national soul" of Romanians is *concordia discors*: the harmony of the contraries, the assumption of polarities, and the liquefaction of tensions. The Taming of the Shrew (i.e., of historical fate) seems to be the supreme utopia in this ethno-mental space, overwhelmed by contrasts, constantly irrigated by foreign alluviums, rhythmically and brutally divided among several empires in the course of history.¹

The unity lover will see the wisdom of Romanian folktales through the already educated eyes that distinguish the elements which support the osmosis of contradictions, instill angelism into the demoniac, transform pain and suffering into healing magic, and depict death as an old woman carrying a bundle of twigs in the wood, ogres as a sort of Goldonian tyrants, and shrews as frolicsome widows. These elements melt the entire paraphernalia of medieval horrors and Gothic dread in the lukewarm fire of Bogomilic temptation.²

It is from this perspective that the face of Evil is to be read in Romanian folklore: always softened through caricature, lyrical exorcism or tolerant malice. The demoniac is even pitied, if not paternally tutored (by word or by stick), either through cunning or playful innocence. Romanians do not depict the devil "as an antithesis to the friendly spirits or to God," Lazăr Șăineanu remarked more than a century ago. "On the contrary, his role is rather minor. He is sometimes identified with the Dragon, especially in his imbecility," while Death "looks burlesque rather than somber and tragic."³ The Devil is embodied either in the hysterical outbursts of a slum beauty and the lewd, burning looks of a waitress, or in the servant of a smart peasant. He is duped, tucked in a bag, given a good sole-thrashing, and so forth.⁴ Death and the Devil are still carnival figures, reminiscent of the Middle Ages, at various Romanian village festivals.

The entire taming of evil through tolerant playfulness may be a specific trait of Orthodoxy, different from both the excessive, heretic fiber of Protestantism and the moralizing rigor and disciplined severity of Catholicism. The permanent moral censorship, the muffler invariably applied to any stridence⁵ makes Romanian literature nurture mainly bashfulness – never overwhelming sexuality; lyricism, the thirst for the fabulous, magic realism and the oneiric prevail over violent psycho-behavioral touches; and the pathological is especially relished from the eccentric angle of the unexplainable, dark picturesque, rather than the veristic angle of the zest for describing excess in itself.

All the characteristics mentioned above may be found in this volume, from the *Eternal Life and Everlasting Youth* tale by Ispirescu to Ion Creangă, Eminescu and Caragiale. They are perhaps reflections of the Romanians' "transactional spirit" cited by Mihai D. Ralea⁶, "transaction" being a concept that must be understood historically, politically and metaphysically alike. To those who prefer the symbolism of poetical-ramified

explanations, we shall specify that the look and silence of The Wisdom of the Earth, Brâncuși's famous sculpture, watches over the spirit of Romanian literature – of the tale, in specie, and its art, on the whole...

Finally, for the researcher interested not in the unity within diversity but, on the contrary, in Romania's multicultural variety, the text of Mircea Vulcănescu's 1937 lecture, *Romanian Man*, is thoroughly clarifying⁷. Mircea Vulcănescu identifies ten "temptations" that lured our indigenous stock, infused it specifically, and at the same time constitute the "genetic heritage" of Romanian literature: the native temptation, the "revolt of our non-Latin background" ("skepticism, moderation, stubbornness, patience"), the Roman temptation ("lawfulness, character, consistency, Jesuitism"), the Byzantine temptation ("luster, pomp, scheming, plundering, breadth, tolerance"), the Slavic temptation ("religiosity, laissez-faire, idleness, elation, pliancy, daintiness"), the French temptation ("getting out of the self as imitation"), the German temptation ("the return to the self"), the Jewish temptation (modernism, "getting out of the self, void tendencies"), the Hungarian-Polish temptation ("a variety of the Roman temptation combined with the Byzantine temptation"), the Balkan, or Greek-Bulgarian temptation, and the Gypsy temptation ("energy, tenderness, noisy response, charm")⁸.

Of course, a typology (and an anthology) of Romanian stories may be based on this classification, but this is not my intention. It would be enough if everyone agreed that, whatever the date of its creation, whatever the author's origin or his style, stories hail from folk tales, or fairy tales – in sum, from an amalgam of universal anthropological patterns.

As for the hunger for storytelling of a modern spirit (increasingly tired of and indifferent to the labyrinthine, as much as dull, traps of postmodernism), its reality is beyond doubt.

NOTES

1. It was precisely the "felicitous balance between the extremes" formula by which C. Noica defined the *Eternal Life and Everlasting Youth* tale (included in this volume) – "a rigorous ontological affirmation" of the Romanian being (see *The Folktale of Being and "Everlasting Youth"*, in *The Romanian Sentiment of Being*, Humanitas, 1996, p. 103 et seqq.).
2. "With us, Bogomilism is a dreamt-of heresy, not an organized heresy. Bogomilic ideas penetrated into our folklore (...) Good and Evil are considered "brothers", beings stemming from the same trunk..." (Lucian Blaga, *Brother and Non-Brother*, in *Chronicles*, Minerva, 1972, p. 208 et seqq.) Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Satan and Good God. The Prehistory of Romanian Folk Cosmogony*, ch. III of *From Zamolxis to Genghis Khan*, Humanitas, 1995, Payot 1970, who begins by quoting N. Cartoian "in connection with the Bogomilic influence in Romanian folklore" (*Folk Sagas in Romanian Literature*, 1929).
3. Lazăr Șăineanu, *Romanian Folk Tales Compared to Ancient Classical Legends and Associated with Neighboring Peoples' and All Romance Peoples' Folk Tales* (1895), Minerva, 1978, pp. 57, 565, 571.
4. "It is indeed remarkable that, in our folk conception (unlike other conceptions, which consider him a radical evil), the devil must be saved too: in one of our legends, Noah takes him on his ark..." (C. Noica, *Joint Word on the Romanian Parlance*, Humanitas, 1996, p. 184.
5. It is worth reading the final chapter (*National Specificity*) of G. Călinescu's *History of Romanian Literature from the Beginnings to the Present Day* (1941), Minerva, 1982, particularly his remarks on "our energetic fatalism", "our Celticism", moral health, modesty and the "aversion to useless complications" (p. 975).

6. "The Romanian adapts himself to any disorders or wrongs (...) Lasting, dogged combats are not our way of life. In all the wars he wages, the Romanian prefers the *transactional spirit* (...) The Romanian is essentially good. His remembrance of evil things is short-lived: he forgets quickly, waits for the slightest sign of repentance from his adversary to shake his hand and put everything behind them. Up to a certain extent, he is also tolerant. This allows him to adjust to any change of fortune." (Mihai D. Ralea, *The Romanian Phenomenon*, in *The Right to Memory, as Read by Iordan Chimet*, vol. III, *Dialogue on Romanian Identity*, Dacia, 1992, p. 616 et seqq.).
7. Mircea Vulcănescu, *Romanian Man*, in *The Romanian Dimension of Existence*, Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House, 1991, p. 19 et seqq.
8. Mircea Vulcănescu concludes (loc. cit.): "The spirit of this nation encompasses a temptation of Rome, one of our non-Latin background, a Greek-Byzantine temptation, one or two Slavic temptations (one is Slavic-Balkan, the other from Dostoyevsky's Russia). Likewise, there are French and German temptations, and they are so strong that they estranged us. A Polish-Hungarian temptation of haughtiness, especially in Transylvania. All these temptations materialized in political and cultural trends that carried some weight in various historical eras. And they continue to polarize." Like Ralea, Vulcănescu remarks that, "sickened by compromises, the Romanian actually *adjusts*, strives to amaze through brilliance, and does not keep his word, giving among foreigners – especially Westerners – a strange impression of a *seductive scamp*, of a correct mind ready to cross over and shine." (idem, p. 21).

