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**BETWEEN WASTELAND
AND THE GRAIL:
Twentieth-Century Staging of
Divinity in Romanian Drama**

Preface by **Maria-Ana Tupan**

E I K O N

București, 2021

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CHAPTER I.

**THE DESCENT OF DIVINITY
INTO THE HISTORICAL WORLD****I.1. Preliminary Remarks**

History is continuously studied and re-written, although past events are unchangeable, which might bring one's attention to the literature inspired by the ever-shifting historical facts. Historical facts are grounded mainly in geological discoveries and recorded historical writings entwined with the logic of human beings. Precisely because pieces of the historical puzzle, for example, archaeologist findings, are usually never complete, historians often include hypotheses and probability to reach a final historical verdict. The inclusion of probability and hypotheses includes the imagination which combined with archaeological findings opens the gateway to literature, to fiction. This combination of concrete historical findings associated with hypotheses and subjective human perception narrating what could have been, provides a more complex image of humanity's journey towards the present time, which brings us to the roots of what nowadays we call a refurbished myth.

A myth pulsates with energies of ancestral beliefs and wisdom. A mythical ballad is a historical representation of the identity and culture of a certain nation, a spiritual mirror encompassing beliefs and uniqueness of identity through allegorical agency. Underneath an apparently simplistic narrative plot, the antiquated and rhymed ballad encodes a most profound representation. Ballads were popular poetry

transmitted by word of mouth to subsequent generations, whose epic and historical content is enriched by spiritual overtones. The folkloric data gathered from the ballads is just as valuable as any other studied human experience, offering researchers an eye-glass when researching the manifestations of the primitive mentalities and soul (Eliade, 1991: 170).

The folk poems, being passed on orally, had known numerous versions before being penned. Within rural communities traditional texts elaborated in verse, not only simplified the memorization, accompanying the workers in their mundane duties, but also acted as philosophical contemplative companions, due to their dense symbolic content. Possibly the most influential factor initiating the creation of ballads in old times was the orally passed on history of that specific area. Mircea Eliade sheds light on the subject of folkloric texts in his essay *Folclorul ca instrument de cunoaştere* (Folklore as Instrument of Knowledge), arguing that primitive men live a spiritual life, apparently, filled with fantasy, however, based on concrete experience¹ (Eliade, 1991: 174). Two of the most widely known Romanian ballads represent the protagonists as being shepherds: *Miorita* (The Ewe Lamb), as well as *Traian şi Dochia* (Traian and Dochia). These two folk narratives are in this way expressive of the archaic past. The geographical characteristics of the Dacian territory (now Romania) facilitated an intense shepherding and agricultural preoccupation.

By creation of ballads, as well as by creation of epics, in the primitive societies, history was communicated to succeeding generations by oral agency. Before going down into written literature, the communicated narrative, recording past events, was preserved in the memory of an illiterate community. It encoded the spiritual identity of a nation, the traditions, culture and beliefs through a seemingly simplistic but symbolic folk narrative. Mircea Eliade discusses the ballad and

¹ "au o viaţă sufletească plină de fantastic, în aparenţă, dar bazată pe experienţe concrete".

legend in the context of archaic beliefs in the solidarity between the human body and the entire cosmos (Eliade, 1980: 246-247), which also implies the identification of a building with *imago mundi*, with the creation of the universe, the building benefiting from the transfer of a human life into its own body (Eliade, 1980: 182-4).

We notice, however, that, far from being lost *illo tempore* (the archaic, prehistoric past), the two texts allude to Romania's late feudalism and early modernity: the reign of Negru Vodă (the Black Prince, late 13th century), and to the descent of "Hungarian" and "Vrancean" herds of sheep into Moldova, which seems to allude to the exodus of Romanian shepherds from Transylvania into south-eastern Wallachia around 1700 because of the pressure put on them to convert to Catholicism. The lack of differences between primitive man and nature is a ground upon which critics of the realist school could evolve an interpretation which capitalized on the mimetic or realist poetics of the ballads reflecting on the shepherd's real world. Contrariwise, in *Master Mason Manole*, there is a second layer of meaning where the builder's death is caused, not by divine command, but feudal envy and thirst for glory. The Prince leaves them on the roof in order to prevent them from building another or a more impressive monastery whose purpose, as indicated by his bloody deed, was not Christian munificence but feudal pride and self-aggrandizement. The shepherd instructs the ewe lamb to tell the other sheep about his wedding surrounded by the symbolism of death (falling star, communion with trees etc.) but to forebear from telling his old mother anything besides his marriage to a princess. It is obvious that he knows his mother will understand the symbolic meaning. The elements in nature whose attendance of his wedding obviously suggest integration through death resemble the bed of the Cross to which Christ comes as to his wedding (the Christian Church he founded is symbolized as his bride) (Eliade, 1980: 247). The shepherd's love of his sheep and sheepfold, dog and trees makes him desire to render that vicinity permanent. His integration into nature serving as a figure for Christ's crucifixion, the

prophecy of the falling star, etc. are the effect of a secondary process of meaning, constituted as a metalanguage. At a first level, the ewe lamb is an animal, and the star is a heavenly body. At a higher, secondary, level of meaning, the signified animal becomes signifier for oracle and the signified falling star becomes signifier for death. As Roland Barthes theorizes in his *Mythologies* (Barthes, 1957: 187-8), a myth is a language act which takes effect at a metalevel.

And here is now another example: I am at the barber's, and a copy of Paris-Match is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolor. All this is the meaning of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed with a previous system (a black soldier is giving the French salute); there is a signified (it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); finally, there is a presence of the signified through the signifier (Barthes, *Mythologies*, 1991: 115)²

² "Et voici maintenant un autre exemple: je suis chez le coiffeur, on me tend un numéro de Paris-Match. Sur la couverture, un jeune nègre vêtu d'un uniforme français fait le salut militaire, les yeux levés, fixés sans doute sur un pli du drapeau tricolore. Cela, c'est le sens de l'image. Mais, naïf ou pas, je vois bien ce qu'elle me signifie: que la France est un grand Empire, que tous ses fils, sans distinction de couleur, servent fidèlement sous son drapeau, et qu'il n'est de meilleure réponse aux détracteurs d'un colonialisme prétendu, que le zèle de ce noir à servir ses prétendus oppresseurs. Je me trouve donc, ici encore, devant un système sémiologique majoré: il y a un signifiant, formé lui-même, déjà, d'un système préalable (un soldat noir fait le salut militaire français); il y a un signifié (c'est ici un mélange intentionnel de francité et de militarité); il y a enfin une présence du signifié à travers le signifiant" (Barthes, *Mythologies*, 1957: 189).

Miorița by Valeriu Anania as well as *Meșterul Manole* portray the results of a creation process, of a poet's own de-codifications of the ballads' metalanguage and signifiers, interlaced with religious elements. He staged Divinity using historical motifs, thus representing Divinity descending into the historical world, through verse. The contemporary author encoded Christian motifs and themes, weaving them between the lines of pre-historic pagan traditions, by converting the two surviving ballads of the Romanian culture into historical plays. Reproducing the author's exact statement, we can observe the perspective which set up the motor for re-writing the ballads in an original manner:

Verse drama is the most fit to approach history in its vertical dimension, to explore its depths, aiming to retrace all the contours, to restore its central soul and to re-frame hidden connections between epochs and geographies³ (Anania, 1995: 131).

We could apprehend the fact that he believed in the semantic 'depths' of *Miorița* and *Mesterul Manole*, thus resulting their reproduction. He also stated that, at a first glance, re-writing a play based solely on historical information or myth, would seem to be a simplistic process, one which lacks originality and creativity. Giving further detail, he stated that since it would be an accessible plot, the return to origins, to historical facts, the effort would be minimal, the characters would have already been invented, the conflicts as well, the success of it would be assured due to the historical vibration appealing to the consciousness of the spectators; moreover if the contemporary events correspond to the historical ones it is sure to triumph (Anania, 1995: 129). The difficulty, nevertheless, he argues, begins with the original story plot: mythical historical facts are sometimes allusive and not corresponding to a certain literary genre and the author would have to convert the historical data, to fit his own

³ "Poezia dramatica are cele mai multe sanse de a aborda istoria în dimensiunea ei verticală, de a-i sonda adâncimile, de a-i recontura toate reliefulurile, de a-i restitui viața lăuntrică, de a descoperi și reface legăturile ascunse dintre epoci și geografiu".

vision, in a free but risky process; the time or space would be either condensed or widened, the characters would either be directly related or in contradiction. The playwright continues: a final result would be faced with preconceptions, with comparisons and confrontations in contrast to the original historical events (Anania, 1995: 130). The same playwright monk also believed that a historical drama written in verse is more than historical data rearranged to fit the stage in a poetic manner. He articulates the fact that a poet's starting point when writing a play is the poetic idea in which the historical data is naturally integrated, thus the poet, he continues, does not alter history, in fact, he ennobles it. Anania also sustained the fact that historical drama written in verse transfigures a historical reality, transferring it to the sphere of possibility, thus introducing a new reality (Anania, 1995: 130).

I.2. *Miorita* ('The Ewe Lamb') by Valeriu Anania

Miorita, the original Romanian folkloric ballad was represented through poetic verse and introduced into Romanian printed literature by Vasile Alecsandri, although it had previously been retrieved from the rural community by Alecu Russo. Lucian Blaga defined it as being the poem of the Romanian people for ever and since ever⁴ (Blaga, 2011: 32). Initially, rural communities, without having access to writing and reading, naturally, worked out versions of the same storyline, depending on the territorial region, dialect and linguistic influences. For example: the version from the region of Transylvania is named *Miorița* 'The ewe lamb', while the version from the Moldavian region is entitled *Mioara năzdrăvană*, translated as 'The enchanted ewe'. For all that, the frame and the plot of the ballad remain basically the same. Several versions of the same ballad have survived until today, as a result of passionate researchers' continuous inquest through time, exploring the rural communities, in order to salvage the colourful variants. Regardless of *Miorița's* stylistic diversity, Vasile Alecsandri's version has remained the most popular to this day, being translated into over twenty languages. The symbolism of *Miorița* is considered to be inexhaustible; the values it encodes, irrespective of the amount of hermeneutic work, being apparently impossible to completely decode (Coman, 1980: 203). Coman associated the signification of the ballad with a huge tree: the closer you get to its roots, the more you can observe how its glorious trunk separates into successive branches, which then, divide into innumerable ramifications (idem.). Mircea Eliade presents the ballad as being a valuable inheritance from Romanian ancestors, unique in the spiritual experience it triggers,

⁴ "de totdeauna și pentru totdeauna".

an authentic folk creation, alive, to this day – the true archetype of Romanian spirituality (Crișan, 1986: 447). The main plot of the ballad could be interpreted as taking place in a pre-Christian cosmos

in which the world is emphasized as being sacred. [...] The shepherd is not a nihilist. According to Mircea Eliade, he «converts» the unfortunate event condemning him to death within the wedding sacrament mystery, majestically and mystical, empowering him, finally, thus offering him the chance to triumph over his own destiny⁵ (Crișan, 1986: 447)

Anania, however, came up with a different interpretation. This chapter aims to reveal a Christian framework applied to the symbolically rich narration of the folk ballad.

The shepherd of the ballad does not abdicate in the face of death. The ballad does not clearly specify that he will not oppose his attackers. The good shepherd specifies that his death is not a certainty: and if I am to die/ in the bristle fields to lie⁶ (Alecsandri, 1998: 11-14). The conjunction “if” is clear evidence that he does not confirm his death. However, he continues, if he should die, then his death will be a triumph. Accepting a possible outcome could sometimes make an individual more fearless than adopting a position of opposition from the start. The acceptance of a possible tragedy could lift the consciousness of the individual towards a higher level of understanding of the situation, and maybe even a higher level of psychological freedom. Inflexible opposition could trigger fear, while existential flexibility could breed courage. The belief that one has nothing to lose could result in fearlessness. Similarly, Viktor E. Frankl exemplifies in his book, *Man in search of Meaning*, how victims of World War

II embraced their fate, giving sufferance a noble, positive and higher sense, without surrendering to conflict or revenge. The Moldavian shepherd, the protagonist of the ancient Romanian ballad, we could theorize, in contemporary understanding, had an existentialist attitude.

The term *Miorița* is the Romanian diminutive for a ‘young ewe’, originating in the archaic term *Mioara*, which, according to the Romanian dictionary, is a ‘female sheep’ from the ages of one to maximum two. The sheep is considered to be a pure animal, possibly an animal which did not need domestication, being genetically constructed the way it is, from the beginning of time. According to general knowledge, “sheep (mammal of the genus *Ovis*) were first domesticated from wild species of sheep (not known exactly which) at least 5000 B.C., and their remains have been found at numerous sites of early human habitation in the Middle East, Europe and Central Asia.” (“sheep”, 1993: 715). Nevertheless, the evidence of sheep domestication is not unquestionable taking into consideration the evidence, or lack of it. Therefore, without sufficient, concrete evidence of the sheep domestication process, or its ancestral wild origin, we could consider this animal as having been entirely domestic, ever since its origin. Naturally, it is related to its “cousin,” the goat, which, we learn, can be traced to wild ancestral provenance, however, the sheep is a completely different animal. “The sheep is usually stockier than its relative the goat; its horns, when present, are more divergent; it has scent glands in its face and hind feet; and the males lack the beards of goats” (“sheep”, 1993: 714). Some believe mouflon (*Ovis musimon*) to be the sheep’s ancestor. The mouflon, not extinct today, is a “small wild sheep, family of Bovidae (order Artiodactyla), of Corsica, Sardinia and Cyprus. The 70 cm (27-28 inches) at the shoulder and is reddish brown with white underparts. The male has a light, saddle-shaped mark on its back and bears large, curving horns with the tips turned outward. The female is hornless. The mouflon has been introduced into parts of Europe but has become endangered in its original range”

⁵ “in care lumea se revează sacră, iar moartea devine de structură cosmică.[...] Ciobanul nu este nihilist. El «preface» spune Mircea Eliade – nenorocul care îl condamnă la moarte într-un mister al tainei nuntii, maiestuos și fecerit, care în cele din urmă, îi permite să triumfe asupra propriului destin”.

⁶ “și de-a fi să mor/ în câmp de mohor”.

(“mouflon”, 1993: 369). At this time, there is no knowledge of a sheep-mouflon exemplar, in transition. However, we can safely state that the sheep is considered by humanity to be a harmless and sacrificial animal. During ancient times it was a valuable tribute, a sacrificial object brought before deities, among various rituals practiced by many cults and religions. The sacrifice of lambs as a tribute to God is found within the Biblical Old Testament. The first mention of lambs brought before Divinity as sacrifice can be found in Genesis 4,4. The narrative of Cain and Abel, the two brothers, shows that sacrificing lambs was a gift received by God: And Abel brought forth, from his own sheep first-born and of their fat. And The Lord looked upon Abel and upon his gifts⁷ (The Holy Bible, 2009: 26). The title of the ballad can suggest a premonition of the tale’s ultimate theme: the sacrificial destiny of the shepherd.

Transcending the fear of death is an attitude believed to have characterized the religion and beliefs of the Romanians’ ancestors, the Getae- Dacians. The Getae are “an ancient people of Thracian origin, inhabiting the banks of the lower Danube region and nearby plains. Having emerged in the 6th century BC, the Getae were subjected to Scythian influence and were known as expert mounted archers and devotees of the deity Zamolxis” (“Getae”, 1993: 228). Equally important, “The early history of Romania can be traced back to Dacia, the ancient Roman name given primarily to the area in modern Romania of the Carpathian Mountains and Transylvania, though the Roman province eventually included wider territories to both the north and east. The Dacians were closely related to the nearby Getae (with whom they shared a common culture)” (“Romania”, 1993: 645). As a result of written evidence alone, a significant number of personalities from antiquity (Latin, Byzantine and Greek classical authors) strongly sustain, in their writings, the inhabitation of

⁷ “Și a adus și Abel din cele întâi-născute ale oilor sale și din grăsimea lor. Și Domnul a căutat spre Abel și spre darurile lui”.

Getae-Dacian people on the contemporary Romanian territory (as well as around its neighbouring territory). Amongst many others, we mention several of them: Julius Caesar, Homer, Herodot, Plato, Dionysius, Publius Virgilius Maro (also known as Virgil), Pomponius Mela (the earliest Roman geographer), Publius Ovidius Naso, also known as Ovid (Popa-Lisseanu, 2015). Important evidence regarding the Getae-Dacian, according to ancient personalities, can be found in the work of Gheorghe Popa Lisseanu (1866-1945). He was a Romanian historian and philologist, member of the Romanian Academy, who dedicated a significant part of his life to studying the origin, roots and journeys of the Romanian people. One of his many published works includes a comprehensive list of Latin, Greek and Byzantine texts which mention and describe the Getae-Dacian people. They serve as a significant source of arguments sustaining the continuity of the Romanian people, casting light on the roots which sustain the contemporary traditions and culture.

We could link the shepherd’s courageous attitude to the mentality of the pre-Christian inhabitants of the Carpathian Mountains. Although the Dacians, throughout history, are believed to have had a polytheist religion, some historical documents mention they believed only in one supreme god, Zamolxis (Pop I. A., 2011: 18). Herefrom we can extrapolate the idea that this branch of Thracians, the Getae, were monotheist, as stated by Herodotus: they believe there exists no other divinity but their own⁸ (Popa-Lisseanu, 2015: 217). This circumstance facilitated the assimilation of Christian values by the Carpathian inhabitants. The first records regarding the Getae-Dacians contact with Christianity is known to be the IInd century C.E. (Pop I. A., 2010: 38). According to Herodotus’s notes on the expedition of Darius against the Scythians in 514 B.C., the Gets (otherwise known as the Dacians) believed they were immortals, viewing death as a journey to their god

⁸ “ei nu cred că există o altă divinitate decât a lor”.