

## The Act of Performance as Hospitality

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### Abstract

Our educational system has always prepared the Romanian student to consider popular creation uprooted from its ethnographic context, either esthetically monumentalising it as unique or as a masterpiece marked by profound meanings that is endowed with every power to back up an identity discourse, or inducing the idea of sub-literature, of a superficial text, a reflex product of some Romanian traditional primitivism. Popular culture, however, is neither a collection of masterpieces nor an assemblage of written passages only. Ethnographic or performance contexts provide a paratext pregnant with clues, some suggestive “stage directions” in the absence of which the apprehension of the masterpiece would be nothing but a fake, a mystification of reality. In the middle of these “stage directions”, there is the performer himself, the one who with each performance, re-interprets a cultural heritage which is both codified and formalized. His performance is a response not only to the stimuli forwarded by inheritance but also to the ones dictated by immediate pressures. Any act of performance is, actually, a process of working out a crisis. The performer seeks for solutions to appease the two pressures, namely inheritance and immediate pressures. He inserts the solutions within the text he performs. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate this by analysing two epic variants of the same motif (*The walling up alive of a human being*) situated almost a century apart, when power and human sacrifice are dissimilarly understood by the collectivity. The paper discusses the anonymous society’s apprehension of the mechanisms of power, highlights the textualisation of the motif (its monumentalisation through national education), points out the interpretations it generates and makes evident the changes it entails.

### 1 Introduction

Popular culture has always surprised the ethnologist through its large variety of meanings. The Romanian educational system has always prepared the Romanian the student to look at popular creation from a perspective that presented it detached from its ethnographic context, either esthetically (by monumentalising it as unique or as a masterpiece marked by profound meanings, i.e. endowed with every power to back up an identity discourse), or by inducing the idea of sub-literature, of a superficial text, a reflex product of some Romanian traditional primitivism. Popular culture, however, is neither a collection of masterpieces, nor an assemblage of written passages only. Ethnographic or performance contexts provide a paratext pregnant with clues, some suggestive “stage directions” in the absence of which the apprehension of the masterpiece would be nothing but a fake, a mystification of reality. In the midst of these “stage directions”, is the performer himself, the one who, with each performance, re-interprets a cultural heritage which is both codified and formalised. Its performance is, at the same time, an answer to the stimuli from this heritage, but also an answer to the present stimuli. Ultimately, any act of performance is a solution of a

crisis. The performer searches for solutions in order to solve these two tensions, solutions that transpire through the words of the text.

## **2 The Characteristics of the Romanian Epic Song**

In order to account for our approach we have chosen the epic song due to its prestige, the characteristics of the context in which it is performed, and to the specialisation of the performers. Our methodologically restrictive option is not meant to affect the understanding of the popular phenomenon as a whole. The status of both the epic song and its performer, the fiddler in particular, has been radically changed, losing part of their former prestige. Unaware of the underlying causes, people helplessly face the weakening of some institutional functions, of a power center, as the role of certain performers, recognised by the community as a cultural institution, is to administrate intracommunity solidarity which they promote and to which they confer consistency through their repertoire, embodying a true form of pedagogy which, in its turn, circulates codes and norms.

Like any other type of discourse, the ballad is virtual, it is a form of evanescence, it does not exist unconditionally. These temporal, spatial, social and mental conditions are the materialisation of the notion of mutual cultural mediation as a form of adhesion of the locutor to their own discourse, presupposing a certain mentality and, at the same time, inducing not only a certain mentality, but also as the receiver's adhesion, in other words, the gathering around an illusion. According to this, the performer becomes a narrative instance and the performance becomes an action of interpreting situations. We find it obvious that any interpretation belongs to the locutor's present, to instantaneous existence and, thus, its repeatability is debatable. Similarly, any performance is transitory and immaterial, the solutions themselves repeatable through the repeatability of the performance itself; they can be identified or re-identified, but never identical. They may become the brand of a mentality code or can be simply dropped out. Their existence is transitory like that of the body they belong to. In other words, any solution manifests itself ideologically and compositionally.

Ideologically, they have a function of updating: they perpetuate evanescence through a continual infusion of present, the locutor's present, the balader's present. This can be perceived either in its social complexity, as a cultural instance, as a social archetype and or in its individuality, which a characteristic behaviour that should be, according to Geertz, a reflex, a distortion, an approximation of the archetype (1973: 66). This double perception originates in the impact of a material culture on a real man. Geertz' opinion is that we are "unfinished" animals which become so through culture, not culture in general, but specific cultural forms.

Each performer inherits a repertoire which is nothing else but a complex series of symbols. The performer might simply disappear along with this series of symbols or make them live, passing them over to contemporaries, activating the process of cultural mediation previously mentioned, which can be defined more exactly and eloquently as a free market of symbolical changes; these performers are the ones who impose the market price.

Within this process of cultural mediation as a manifestation of solidarity among the community members, the real functioning of the network interstices as power generators is demonstrated, if Leach's model (1980: 303) of the society is applied, i.e. each performer seen as a social instance makes a constant, but unconscious effort to legitimise himself through the act and quality of the performance. His legitimisation is implicitly a sign of power which models the network configurations.

Compositionally, the performer's solution that has become meaningful through the interaction of the cultural inheritance and through the process of mutual cultural mediation divides the discourse, as the solutions suggested by the performer cannot survive textually but in a subsequential and metastatic form. They cannot induce the replacement of an older structure with a completely new one; they can only alter the former by introducing sequences or subsequences. In one way or another they are metastases of the poetic performance.

Any performance presupposes unbroken dynamics of codes. The coherence of the dynamics and, implicitly, of the appropriate functioning of the codes are ensured by the adequation between the archetextual reality of the narrative sequences; i.e. of a theoretical ideal model (Genette 1994), and the paratextual reality of the subsequences. We think that every solution contains stage directions regarding the understanding of the new assemble meaning, resulting from the application of a new reading code. Any performance sets up an imaginary universe as a form of escape, as a form of emancipation from a variety of determining factors but, at the same time, it viruses the old variant by introducing the above-mentioned subsequences which upgrade the model. To conclude, any performance is a new reading of the archetype and, at the same time, a generalisation of its neoplastic form, by expanding the metastases, in other words, any folk creation contains the germs of its own destruction, which are activated through each performance.

This whole mutual cultural mediation process shelters a series of power relations, a special configuration of the relationship between the Ego and the Other. If we think that the fulfillment of this relationship is carried out both philosophically and anthropologically (Levinas 1999: 267) as a matter of servitude or hospitality, we could define the performance as a gesture of hospitality through which the performer subtly and concretely manifests his

power. The performer receives his guest or guests in his own illusion, in his own imaginary universe, sharing with them his priceless thoughts, his intimacy in the deepest and the most sacred sense. This gives him the privilege of exerting upon them the power of the master. The essence of this power resides in an unequivocal magic of the word, in its capacity to dominate destiny.

### **2.1. *Meşterul Manole*, The Motif of Human Sacrifice**

*Meşterul Manole* (in a rough translation *Master Manole*), which is the motif of human sacrifice required so as to ensure the durability of an edifice, is not just any epic song for Romanians. Similar creations are frequent everywhere in the Balkans (*Podul de pe Arta* for the Greeks, *Fortăreața de la Skodra / Skadar* for the Albanians, *Fortăreața Tarnovo* for the Bulgarians), only that the Romanian variants are more elaborated and more polished. Their perfect form and their exaggerated publicity about the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century have yielded both advantages and disadvantages. Along with *Miorița*, *Meşterul Manole* has become a constant and unreplaceable part of textbooks and school curricula. For over a century, all pupils and students were literally obliged to learn by heart the hundreds of lines of the two ballads. The results of this “educational” approach have been complex and of long-term influence. The ballad has led to:

- An artificial existence that competed with the natural existence of the motifs, and in most instances, they survived;

- A deformed image of the folk perception.

- A monumentalisation of certain motifs or variants (among these *Meşterul Manole* and *Miorița*) to the prejudice of the corpus.

- Their textualisation.

- An artificial regrafting of certain variants in folk media and last, but not least, a state of post-narrativeness as a result of textualisation which acts at two levels: a cultured one and a folk one, through transtextual means.

Famous Romanian writers (Sadoveanu, Blaga) used these motifs to produce cultured writings (*Baltagul*, *Meşterul Manole*), thus creating a hypertext relationship between the monumentalised folk motif, encapsulated in its own splendour, and their own text. Such a phenomenon can be encountered in folk context as well, but it is complicated by the laws that govern the passing over of folk creation.

We will further analyse two variants of this famous motif, situated one century apart, when both power and sacrifice are differently understood by the popular community, so that

we should be able to point out how anonymous society reacts to power mechanisms and the way a motif behaves in textualisation (its monumentalisation through national education), what types of reads it may produce and what transformations it entails.

This narrative motif has been the object of many studies (e.g. Odobescu's, Șăineanu's, Caracostea's, Eliade's, Caraman's and Taloș's), of numberless debates between Romanian scholars and/or from the Balkans, e.g. Arnaudov and Skok. Apparently, little more can be said about *Meșterul Manole*. The obsessive approaches reflected in these studies have appeared and have fed on involved genetic and diffusionist problems, as well as on efforts to illuminate the meanings of creational sacrifice. All these have led to the highlighting of a thanatic area: the ritual death of creation. Eliade's conclusion to the study of *Meșterul Manole* is that "nu este deloc întâmplător că cele două creații de seamă ale spiritualității populare românești, Meșterul Manole și Miorița, își au temeiul într-o valorificare a morții" (1992: 130).

This revaluation of death has always placed in the first position the Creator, creation and less or not at all the User, although, at a closer look, we see that the narrative epic evolves around a conflict of legitimisings on a thanatic background, a conflict between the political power and the Creator's power surpassed by the power of death. It is our intention to approach a relatively neglected aspect (or, at least superficially exploited so far): the relationship between power and death and the way in which it is perceived by performers one century apart.

Such a relationship is imposed by the characters' symbolism by virtue of their depersonalisation. If we take into account Petru Caraman's demonstration in "Critical Considerations on the Origins and Spreading of Meșterul Manole in the Balkans" ("Considerații critice asupra genezei și răspândirii baladei Meșterul Manole în Balcani", 1934), Manole is rather the onomastic symbol of the builder, spread in the Balkans through Romanian speaking populations, themselves having an indisputable fame as builders. Moreover, popular mentality as part of the feudal mentality is not aware of this radical hiatus between the artist and the worker whom the European society, beginning with the Renaissance, has institutionalised and sacralised.

It is very likely that at a certain level of the motif's existence, this issue of the legitimising power came first and, only later, the stress fell on the "artist/master", which enabled not only the creation of a true philosophy of the creation, of the relationship between creator and creation, between genius and the ordinary human being, of the romantic features of the character (the ballad was discovered and published in full swing of Romanian Romanticism), but also of an ambiguous logics of the narration.

The “Voievod” (the Prince) decides to have an unparalleled monastery built. He chooses the most famous builders in the country and, together they take a trip in the search of the best place to erect the monastery. Whatever the builders produce during the daytime is ruined overnight, until Meșterul Manole is revealed the secret of durable wall-raising: human sacrifice. Manole’s wife becomes the sacrificial human being, as the other builders betrayed the secret and warned their wives. Her body placed within the walls, Manole’s wife, Ana, ensures the durability of the construction. On inauguration day, the Prince asks Manole whether he would be able to build an even nicer monastery. Vainglorious, Manole says he could and the Prince orders to have the scaffolding removed. In an attempt to leave the building, the constructors jump from the roof and die. Manole, like Icarus, makes himself a pair of wings, but falls and dies.

Temporary political power is fragile and futile. It is not a self-imposed necessity like death. It evokes the “Voievod” (the Prince), the King, the Man in charge in most instances. The exertion of power represents the chance to deceive death, while to obey signifies dying or death. Every mortal tries to get their bit of immortality, by leaving their print on someone or something. But, according to Louis-Vincent Thomas,

le pouvoir ce n’est pas seulement celui que j’exerce ou tente d’exercer. C’est encore, et surtout, celui que m’est imposé par le Chef ou par les rouages de la société anonyme. Et, au niveau suprême, le pouvoir confère des privilèges tels qu’on peut composer avec la mort en toute sérénité. (1978: 157)

The conflictual essence is that Manole confuses these two planes: the power he exerts is not *the Power* only because the print he leaves behind is substantial. *The Power* belongs to the Chief Absolute who has the right of life and death upon all who depend on him: he is perfectly incarnated in the community he leads. Manole’s gesture equals usurpation, because being able to build once is a felicitous coincidence, while repeating the gesture means usurpation, delegitimising the other.

Building a durable construction is in fact an exercise of power, both for Manole and for the Prince. The former legitimises his position within the guild and further, in the community, acquiring prestige and power:

Nine famost builders,  
 Builder’s apprentices  
 Plus Manole, the tenth,  
 Who is the best of all.

The latter, in turn, ensures his survival in his subjects' memory, thus legitimising the continuation/ heredity of power.

There is in Teodorescu's variant an eloquent part regarding the relationship between power and death:

Leaf of barberry,  
 Up upon the cover  
 Up upon the roof  
 Monastery as such  
 Beautiful as much,  
 Nine andacious builders  
 Builder's apprentices  
 Plus Manole, the tenth  
 Who is the best of all,  
 Sit and thinking keep,  
 Making many plans  
 Fasting more intense  
 Three long summer days  
 Three long sunny days  
 Plus some other nine  
 From day dawn till dusk  
 Cause' the prince had fed them  
 And the prince had them work  
 And the prince was saying  
 "I don't want that ever,  
 Any such nice building  
 .....  
 None would ever try  
 To erect to sky  
 Monastery as such  
 Beautiful as much".

(Collected from Petrea Crețu Șolcanu, August the 9<sup>th</sup>, 1883)

Compositionally, the quotation above is an enlarged variation of the previous fragment; this variation suggesting the fiddler's need to formulate a conclusion on the situation. The Prince's power is compromised by the builder's strong belief that he is able to erect "more magnificent" constructions. Manole's answer generates a break in the logics of power exertion. Till then, the Prince treated the builders indiscriminately, as if they were instruments. The relationships between the one who orders and the Orderee:

Whatever you asked  
 I willingly fulfilled  
 But what you have **build/ worked**  
 Is a perfect thing **for me**.

This the fiddler textually underlines through the presence of the possessive pronoun. According to this logic the authors are left behind the User in a comfortable anonymity, assumed through the initial convention of “vă”.

Manole’s answer compromises this convention, imposing the primordial place of the Artist, of the Creation and not that of the Orderer. Consequently, the Prince’s power itself is questioned. The latter’s reaction aims at intimidating (through blackmailing) the actor, the Prince (= the Orderer/ User) imposing the logic of power and initial conventions: “And the Prince fed them / And the Prince made them work”. Through this blackmail the efficiency of power is verified as a death threat and, particularly a personalised death threat, presupposes a demonstration of power twice: you dominate the person you want to destroy by sending him to non-existence and, particularly, you master or control death, emptied by every transcendence and mystery. This supreme power equals the radical exorcism of the fear of death and the triumph of life: to kill the other means to destroy that part of your self that lives in the other, a double exorcism.

The Prince does not kill Manole, only that part of him that usurps his own power. The Prince and Manole are the two halves of one and the same demiurgic entity. Manole’s gesture is interpreted as Satan’s rebellion against the Supreme Creator. The two cannot co-exist if one gives up this convention. The power goes to death even if at supreme level power confers privileges that enable the serene understanding of death. In this respect, *Meșterul Manole*, to continue Eliade’s idea (1992: 130), contains an erotic, manly political view of death. The ritual of creative death of the in-building human sacrifice is accompanied by the ritual of power. The first aims at attaining immortality while the second at controlling death by exorcising its fears.

We will further analyse a variant of 1972 collected in an area in which the epic song is the most representative folk genre, the south of Dolj county. This variant comes with so shocking innovations that they cannot be explained but through the triple phenomenon of model monumentalisation, the variant’s textualisation (school propaganda in particular) that generate a state of post-narrativeness. This very post-narrativeness is the key that “unlocks” the performance act as an act of hospitality.

This variant was collected by a fiddle from Lișteava, Marin Negrilă, by Popa Florea, who passes over the manuscript of the ballad to his grandson, Ion-Mălin Târșoagă from Târgu-Jiu. The latter writes the lyrics, he hands in the manuscript to Centrul Județean de Conservare și Valorificare a Tradiției și Creației Populare Gorj, where each page is stamped, authenticating the variant through the note “unknown variant”. The copyright norms are set



and there is a note on the last page: “Varianta a fost redescoperită în iarna anului 1995 de către Ion-Mălin Târșoagă și dată lui spre folosință de bunicul său Popa Florea din Lișteava Doljului”.<sup>1</sup>

The artificial circulation of the variant handed it over in written form and, in particular, the “behaviour” of the person who comes into the possession of the variant recorded in the ‘70s, are clear signs of an exaggerated form of monumentalisation and textualisation of certain folk variants. The transmitter’s education radically influences the circulation, killing it through copyright, stamps and conferring it a final form through publishing. The schooling system has induced the idea that this ballad is a national treasure. This action is similar to that of the treasure hunter who turns the jewels into ingot.

These radical signs are preceded by the new type of read which a fiddler like Marin Negrilă applies to the motif in 1972. This new type of read is a form of denying the legitimacy of the motif monumentalisation, which the fiddler finds ambiguous; he perceives the action as incoherent and the meanings hidden. His variant simultaneously establishes a hypo/hypertextual relationship with the monumentalised variant and a metatext, as the shockingly different new variant contains a new logics of the story that can be approached as an example of an interpretation theory in folk variant with the intellectual means of a fiddler preoccupied by handling tradition.

The new type of read is rather of thriller type, the philosophical and ethical meanings of the sacrifice are abolished, the political aspect of the conflict is non-productive and everything is centred on an erotic conflict and a wounded male’s haughtiness. The superior, abstract maleliness of the mediaeval variant is turned into a concrete, soap-opera masculinity that characterises a conflict of passions: the Prince goes hunting and takes a rest at Master Manea’s home, where he meets the latter’s wife. The two fall in love. In the woods, near the master’s house, there is a ruin on which the Prince wants to have a monastery built and employs Manea to do it. Ana tells her husband that she is with child. Manea finds the tracks of the Prince’s horse in his yard and suspects his wife of cheating on him. While building the monastery, he asks his cousin to spy on his wife. Ana tells the Prince that she will have a child by him. Manea’s cousin witnesses all this and, shocked by the news, tries to leave without being heard by Ana and has an accident. Ana realises that she has been discovered and offers the spy a bag of money and the Prince’s horse that she received as a gift in exchange of her

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<sup>1</sup> “This variant was re-discovered in the winter of 1995 by Ion-Mălin Târșoagă who received it from his grandfather Popa Florea of Lișteava Doljului” (Personal collection).

silence. He has qualms of conscience and oscillates between telling his cousin the truth or keeping his word to Ana:

Let the lightning struck him,  
Blind him  
Shut his mouth for ever  
Make him loose his way.

When he finally reencounters Manea, he tells him the truth. Manea decides to punish his wife and build her into one of the monastery walls. After doing it, he tells the other builders what he did. Meanwhile, the Prince is looking for his beloved. He learns that Manea has built his wife into a wall to punish her for her infidelity. He orders the scaffolding to be removed and Manea remains on the monastery roof. He makes himself wood tile wings and, while flying, he shouts to the Prince that he feels able to build an even nicer monastery; flying close to the sun, the gluing wax of the tiles melts and Manea crashes to the ground. A spring of limpid water appears in that very place.

The transformation could be explained through changes of mentality. We insisted on the outer conflict (we can also speak about an inner conflict, like in the Greek tragedies: the comparison with Euripides would not be forced) in order to highlight the building of a functional mechanism of power. It is generated and supported by the effort of legitimising the two actors that represent two institutions: the feudal court and the guild, both surrounded by an undisputable halo of power. The contemporary read translates the idea of power from its abstract sphere of feudal legitimisation to a concrete one, that of the husband's honour as master of the home. The actual narration and its logics are simple and veridical, and the structural elements enable a double classification of the variant, sending it into the sub-category "feudal court" while leaving room for the pre-eminent familial elements. Thus, simplicity and veracity are characteristic elements of this new type of read, focused on the erotic nucleus, a fact that transforms the epic song into a short play.

### **3 Conclusions**

The classifying of equivocation as a consequence of the new structural cause inscribes the new creation into a more truthful popular mentality. The erotic conflict placed on the forefront triggers the use of narrative schemes derived from widespread motifs which are less monumentalised: the unfaithful beloved and the punishment of the cheater, which completely removes the concepts of sacrifice and durability of creation, but which saves the dialogue

between the two parts, the performer and the audience. Once again, we test the logic of the performing act as an act of hospitality. The contemporary performer offers the contemporary audience a story pregnant with contemporary meanings which are still based on complex palimpsest that is, however, useless to reconstruct.

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