MAPPING ORALITY AND LITERACY IN ROMANIAN FICTION: MIHAIL SADOVEANU'S *THE HATCHET* AND *TALES FROM ANCUTA'S INN*

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Abstract

This essay maps heavily inflected narratives like Sadoveanu's novels *The Hetchet* and *Tales from Ancuta's Inn* to trace their ability to depart from the human voice and oral rhetoric to achieve a highly literate formulation and a literaly inflected text. The emphasis is on Sadoveanu's imaginative and expressive rendering of thought that trigger the reader's surrender to spectacle and the anecdotal, in short the means of manipulating reality and of modifying it from within the movement of folk tales and ballads.

Key words: *orality, literacy, visual rhetoric*

> "While other literatures profited from the styles of Classicism and the Renaissance, Romanian literature, without remaining free of the impulses from Athens, Byzantium and Rome, rose upon the generous foundation of folklore and grew primarily out of its substance. […] Folklore basically generated a marked classical character […] thus proving Lessing's opinion (in *Laokoon*) that, in their stages as a young culture, all people spontaneously follow the principles of classical beauty."[2]

In *Orality and Literacy* Walter Ong projects "orality and literacy as two rigidly differentiated entities"[3] thus foreclosing the possibility of a conceptual middle ground. Although such a binary model establishing a great cognitive divide has been challenged in post-Ongian scholarship, which recognizes that "in most societies

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[2] Ciopraga, Constantin, *The Personality of Romanian Literature: A Synthesis*, trans. Ştefan Avădanei. Iaşi: Junimea, 1991, pp.23

[3] Ong, Walter J., *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World*. Routledge, 1982.

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there is an overlap and a 'mix' of [oral and literate] modes of communication,"[4] the quality, content and form of storytelling vis-à-vis a fusion of orality and literacy have not wholly been addressed in the case of specific national narratives.

By postulating two epistemic systems, one oral and the other literate, this essay proposes to examine the literate episteme not as the polar opposite of the oral episteme but as a union and evidence of a single, harmonious discourse that has emerged in Romanian literature from the human capacity to depart from a particular way of knowing. As I intend to demonstrate, oral (generated through voice) and literate (articulated through the written word) cultures have collectively generated in Romanian fiction "an increasingly articulated introspectivity," one that allows the fictional psyche to open "as never before not only to the external objective world quite distinct from itself but also to the interior self against whom the objective world is set"[5] Finally, my purpose is to show that since the 1800s, when the magazine *Dacia literară* [Literary Dacia] called for original literary works inspired by a largely oral folk culture, Romanian literature began turning consistently toward ballads, tales, and legends rooted in rural communities and circulated through oral tradition, and focused on transforming them into literary themes and mythic archetypes that captured the cultural landscape in the new configurations of high literature.

Relying on the example of the nineteenth century when all great Romanian writers and poets, from the revered poet Mihail Eminescu onward, integrated in their work folk values and oral creations, twentieth-century literary critics, beginning with Nicolae Iorga were united in asserting that folk (oral) culture played an essential role in the genesis of a national Romanian literature[6] Even literary luminaries like Emil Cioran, who had taken the path of exile to France, professed attachment to the folk-inspired culture of their native country. In what may be considered a eulogy to his adoptive Paris, Cioran stated:

> "I did not insult you by thinking of another homeland, I did not abase myself for seeking ecstasy in my roots or in the nostalgias of blood. I silenced in my blood the rumblings of generations of plowmen bent over the stilt and no lament of a Danube peasant comes to trouble the minuet of doubt that your clouds are dancing. I folded the pride of my wanderings into your absence of homeland, and my despair – hymn against time – adorns itself with a bloodied halo."[7]

Continuing this cultural model in the more recent, Communist era of the second half of the twentieth century, critics like Ion Dodu Bălan emphasized

[4] Brian V. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984, pp.110.
[5] Ong, op.cit, pp.105.
[6] Iorga, Nicolae, *Istoria Literaturii Romane in secolul al XVIII-lea*, 1901, 2 vols. Bucharest: Minerva, 1901
[7] Cioran, Emil. *Breviaire de vaincus*,1940-44, [Breviary of the Defeated], trans. Alain Paruit, Paris: Gallimard, 1993, pp.93

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once again the notion of an organic Romanian literature nourished by folk traditions. In his *Concise History of Romanian Literature*, Bălan points out that "For several centuries, the Romanians' specific artistic and literary expression that have survived all hardship were embodied in folk art and folklore, crystallizing the essential elements of Romanian spirituality, and subsequently handed down to the cultured arts and literature"[8]. Bălan's claim, shared by other critics like Ciopraga, (see the epigraph), argued that Romanian folklore "held the place of humanism and classicism" during the earlier times[9].

Valorizing to the highest degree the epic potential of folk ballads, folk motifs and typology, Mihail Sadoveanu's novels *The Hatchet* (1930) and *Tales from Ancuţa's Inn* (1928) move from the tangible orality of Romanian folklore to the conceptualizing lenses of literacy contoured by their engagement with the written word, and thus prohibit any possibility of categorizing these systems as exclusive. Quite to the contrary, the oral epistemes of the ballad *Miorita* The Ewe Lamb] and of the folk types and core beliefs of a primitive Romanian culture, emerge in *The Hatchet* and *Tales from Ancuţa's Inn* as fundamental and inextricable elements in the shaping of and engagement with the literate epistemes of Sadoveanu's novels.

The numerous characteristics of orally sustainable thought present in these two narratives include, among others, a strong disposition toward conservation of Romanian cultural values and traditionalism focused on the preservation of the status quo, a fulfillment of readers' expectations that forecloses ambivalent or open endings, and a collective social orientation that encourages imitative and redundant structures with no concept of plagiarism. In this context, the interface Romania's most enduring cultural text. In *Destinul culturii româneşti [The Fate of Romanian Culture]*, Mircea Eliade states that Romania has only two legends of its own, *Mioriţa* and *Master Builder Manole*, each preserved in "lyrical and ballad masterpieces"[10]. Of the two, Eliade singles out *Mioriţa* as a piece that belongs most specifically to Romania, since the *Master Builder Manole* legend also has variants throughout the Balkan region, in Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Greece and possible origins in the Thracian myth of Orpheus. In "*The Mioriţa*: An Introduction in the Form of a Memoir," Ernest H. Latham describes the *Mioriţa* "as the great defining ballad of the Romanian personality and culture, ranking in Romanian self-consciousness with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* for the Greeks, *Beowulf* for the Anglo-Saxons, the *Lay of the*

[8] Bălan, Ion Dodu, *Concise History of Romanian Literature*, trans. Andrei Bantaş, Bucharest: Editura enciclopedică şi ştiinţifică, 1981.

[9] Ciopraga, Constantin, *The Personality of Romanian Literature: A Synthesis*, trans. Ştefan Avădanei. Iaşi: Junimea, 1991, pp.8

[10] Eliade, Mircea, *The Fate of Romanian Culture*, trans. Bogdan Ştefănescu Bucureşti: Editura Athena, 1995, pp.25

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Host of Igor for the Russians, the *Ballad of Kosovo* for the Serbs, *El Cid* for the Spanish, or the *Nibelungenlied* for the Germans."[11]

Viewed against the background of folk tradition, Sadoveanu's *The Hatchet*[12] captures the genius of folk culture, whose elemental forces determine the novel's system of images and artistic outlook on the world. Told and retold in countless versions, usually of about 123 short lines, *Mioriţa* is a nostalgic, lyrical tragic story of a shepherd murdered by his traveling companions, two other shepherds who envy his wealth and kill him so that they can take ownership of his sheep. Even though he is forewarned by his beloved ewe lamb that he will be killed, the young shepherd accepts his destiny unquestioningly and begs the faithful ewe lamb to tell the other two shepherds to have him buried in the meadows near his sheep, so that he may be close to his beloved woods, the birds and the stars. He then asks the ewe lamb to urge everyone not to speak of his death but rather to tell everyone – especially his teary-eyed mother who will be looking for him – that he married a prince's daughter at heaven's gate.

In a country long troubled by external conquerors and internal conflicts like Romania, the ballad *Mioriţa* may well be understood as a primeval myth infused with the pastoral origin of the Romanian people, as well as the drama of its cosmic destiny. Having to take refuge from the threats presented to the country's borders by escaping to its mountains and forests, Romanians are close to a nature they consider a sanctuary. According to Mircea Eliade, the Romanian spirit is rooted in a mystical existence of reunion with nature and its contemplation, a condition which entails disregarding or ignoring history's temporal dimensions, but remaining conscious of one's own spiritual eternity. In his study *Zamolxis, the Vanishing God*[13] Eliade sees the shepherd's acceptance of death in the Miorita ballad not as a capitulation but rather as an acknowledgement of higher cosmic laws: the shepherd converts his imminent death into a mystical reunion with a cosmic world, a magic wedding that gives meaning to an incomprehensible historical destiny. Expanding on the philosophical dimensions of the *Mioriţa* ballad, Lucian Blaga, one of Romania's greatest poets and philosophers, defines in *Spaţiul Mioritic* ([Undulated Space], 1923)[14] the concept of the Mioritic space as delineating the specific geography of the Romanian poetic imagination and as a national archetypal style expressing the Romanian ethos of resignation in the face of an

[11] Ernest H. Latham. *Mioriţa: An Icon of Romanian Culture*, Iaşi: The Center for Romanian Studies, 1999. Quotations from the *Mioriţa* ballad are from this bilingual edition.

[12] Sadoveanu, Mihail, *The Hatchet*, trans. Eugenia Farca, *Classics of Romanian Literature*, Volume III. New York: East European Monographs, 1991. All quotations are from this edition.

[13] Eliade, Mircea, *Zamolxis, the Vanishing God*, trans. Willard Trask, Chicago: U of Chicago UP, 1972.

[14] Blaga, Lucian, *Spaţiul Mioritic*. *Trilogia culturii* [The Trilogy of Culture]. Bucureşti: Editura pentru Literatură Universală, 1969, pp.119-31.

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oppressive historical destiny. As one recent historian of the Romanians, Vlad Georgescu summarizes it, *Mioriţa* is "a philosophical attempt to explain the Romanian spirit through the Romanian landscape, which Lucian Blaga saw as the stylistic matrix of Romanian culture."[15]

Turning the ballad's rhythmical pattern into a crisp prose style, *The Hatchet* reconstructs the centuries' old *Miorita* in the novel's plot as it tells the story of Nechifor Lipan, a well-to-do shepherd from the village of Măgura, who is murdered by two other shepherds, Ilie Cuţui and Calistrat Bogza, while the three men are journeying together toward the land where Nechifor wishes to leave his sheep for the winter. In Sadoveanu's story, however, Nechifor Lipan is the victim of a wicked plot and unexpectedly struck by the murderer, Calistrat Bogza, with a hatchet, from the back, while the other shepherd, Ilie Cuţui, is keeping watch. Nechifor's body is then left to rot underneath a mountain ravine, prey to wild beasts and sinister ravens[16].

Worried that her husband is not returning home as he usually does after selling his sheep or taking them to warmer lands for the winter, Nechifor's wife, Vitoria, decides to leave their home village of Măgura high up in the mountains to look for him. Accompanied by her son, Gheorghiţă, she plans to trace Nechifor's steps, as she is reasonably sure, in spite of the assurances of the village priest, that her husband is long dead, murdered by thieves whom she wishes brought to justice. *The Hatchet* is thus her story, from the moment when she embarks on the long journey at the beginning of spring to the moment when she cleverly identifies both her husband's murderer and his accomplice, far away from her village home but near the very site of the heinous crime that she manages to piece together ingeniously more than a year later.

Although it does not borrow its storyline from the *Mioriţa*, *Tales From Ancuţa's Inn*[17] also articulates in its narrative space the *Mioriţa* ballad. Played during a stop at the inn by a traveling blind beggar on his bagpipes, the sorrowful tune of the *Mioriţa* ballad provides yet another aspect of the cultural dimension of orality. Serving this time as a document of the Romanian people's national identity, the ballad is used here as a multicultural property of all Romanians from the historically divided provinces, who are represented in the

[15] Georgescu, Vlad, *The Romanians: A History*, ed. Matei Călinescu, trans. Alexandra Bley-Vroman. Columbus: Ohio State Press, 1991, pp. 205.

[16] Sadoveanu himself once described how he was inspired to write the story: while traveling around the country on a very hot day, he stopped at an inn to rest and to eat. At a nearby table he heard two policemen talking about a shepherd who had been killed and speculating as to who the murderer might be. The incident, which made Sadoveanu recall the *Mioriţa* plot, cast a retrospective light on the old folk ballad, which found in *The Hatchet* its greatest literary expression.

[17] All quotations are from *Tales from Ancuţa's Inn*, trans. Ileana Orlich, Bucharest: Editura Institutului Cultural Roman, 2004. The *Tales* will be the shortened form of the novel's full title by which I will identify *Tales from Ancuţa's Inn*.

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ballad's verses by the three shepherd-protagonists: one is a Moldavian, the other a Wallachian (Vrancean), and the third a Transylvanian (Ungurean)[18]. While accommodating regionally specific accounts, this adaptation of the *Mioriţa* retains common narrative elements with other versions, such as the minimal action plot, superficial psychological representation of the murdered shepherd's passive attitude towards his own death, and the certain symbolic attributes and characteristics of Romanian morality, philosophy and artistic sensibility that allow a crosscultural recognition of the tale in all Romanian communities[19]. As a testimony to the ballad's strong cultural appeal, when the blind beggar sings the *Mioriţa*, all the travelers at the inn listen in rapture to its melancholy tune, which is to them a moving emotional experience and one that is being renewed with every chance they get to hear it.

Since, as Benedict Anderson has pointed out, European nations were created around well-known myths and legends, like those of Roland, Boadicea, Vercingetorix, etc.[20], the narratives told in the *Tales*, like the *Mioriţa* ballad, stem from a narrative consciousness which in turn confers a sociological solidity upon the iconographic characters of the *Tales*. Each of the storytellers seeking shelter and merriment at Ancuţa's Inn portrays in turn a protagonist firmly entrenched in a specific social milieu – a village, a small town, the Prince's court, etc. – that provides an analogous construct for both the narrative world of the inn and the symbolic space of the inn signifying the nation.

For although the narrative matrix of the stories presents a veritable *tour d'horizon*, it does not offer *un tour du monde*. Drawing on folk stories that stem from a collective past and portray iconographic characters, the stories told at the inn form a homogenized amalgam, an imagined community that corresponds to Herder's notion of *Volk* and is analogous to the process of the building of the nation through myth-making and fabulation.

From the very beginning, the opening lines that describe the inn and its surroundings echo the specific tendency of the Romanian oral folk tales to treat the fantastic "realistically, with great deal of rural local color"[21]:

[18] The unification of Wallachia (home province of the shepherd from Vrancea) and Moldovia in 1859 ended with national unification in 1918 when Transylvania (home to the Ungurean shepherd) was reunited with the other Romanian provinces in the aftermath of World War I.

[19] For an excellent critical commentary of the ballad, its history and cultural background, as well as an exquisite English translation complete with beautiful pictures illustrating the ballad's lines, see Ernest H. Latham, *Mioriţa: An Icon of Romanian Culture*, Iaşi: The Center for Romanian Studies, 1999.

[20] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso and New Left Books, 1983.

[21] Călinescu, George, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*, Bucharest: Fundaţia Regală pentru Literatură şi Artă, 1941.

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> ”One golden autumn I heard many a tale at Ancuţa's Inn. But that was long ago, during the year in which such awful rains fell on St. Elijah's Day that people said that they had seen a black dragon up in the clouds over the overflowing water of the Moldova River. They also saw some birds, the like of which had never before been seen, whirl in the storm and sail towards the East. And *Moş* Leonte, consulting his almanac and explaining the signs of Emperor Heraclitus, showed that these birds, whose feathers were the color of frost, had been borne hither by the winds that rose from the islands at the edge of the Earth and foretold war between Empires, as well as an abundant grape harvest.
>
> And the White Emperor did indeed throw his Muscovites against the pagan world, and, that the stars should fulfill their prophecies, God gave such abundant crops to the vineyards of Lower Moldavia that the vintners didn't have enough barrels for their wine, and the carters from our parts set out to bring the wine to the mountains. Then came the time for revelry and story-telling at Ancuţa's Inn.”[22]

As travelers' and locals' “convoys of carts rumble along outside incessantly ... true masters roast[ed] choice cuts of ram and veal, or grill[ed] fish fresh from the Moldova River ... and folk musicians played and sang inside ceaselessly ... and the men drinking smashed so many mugs and jugs,” men gather to tell stories associated with ethnographic epics or factual events, current or past. The oldest of the travelers stopped at the inn, the astrologer *Moş* Leonte[23] gives the following account:

> ”Ever since I could remember, from the time of the Ancuţa of the past, we, in these parts, have been used to sitting and talking things over, paying homage to the wine of the South at the same time. And while enjoying this most excellent drink, we listen to stories of the past. In my opinion, ... there isn't another inn like this to be found anywhere, no matter how much you'd travel the Earth.”[24]

The stories are precisely deliniated and, in spite of the differences in tone and narrative register, they affirm an ethnically and culturally identifiable space and a collective portrait of the Romanian community. In this sense, the *Tales* reaffirms the notion that, beyond political and economic considerations, a nation recommends itself through processes of cultural identification that hold a people together and enable it to survive through storytelling. Identifying themselves with the Romanian people, the travelers at the inn foreground in their stories a performative discourse whose oral inflections mix folkloric realism with gothic fantasy and archaic myth with the actuality of the raconteurs' own time. As the storytelling experience unfolds itself, in keeping with orally inflected participation, the travelers comment publicly on the narrative as it proceeds and then show signs of engagement through a respectful silence. And so, oral

[22] *Tales from Ancuţa's Inn*.

[23] The word *Moş*, followed by a man's name, is a polite form of address in the rural areas of Romania, the equivalent of Old Man in English-speaking communities.

[24] *Tales from Ancuţa's Inn*, pp. 36-37

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articulations give way to spectatorial quietude, to a reverential silence that allows for the meditative distance required to obtain the emerging engagement with a literately inflected text and the overarching discourse vision benefiting the readers of the *Tales*.

Orality helps explain why characters in both *The Hatchet* and *Tales* are flat and amplified mainly from a visual, frontal perspective. In a photograph-like portrait, Vitoria Lipan appears with "her hazel eyes, in which the chestnut glint of her hair seemed to be reflected, held a faraway look. The spindle [in her hands] spun diligently as of its own accord ... Engulfed as in the darkness of night, her keen, still youthful eyes continued to scan the unexplored horizon."[25] With his "black mustache, those eyes with slanting eyebrows, [and] his squarely-built, broad-shouldered figure"[26] her husband, Nechifor, seems another embodiment frozen in time of the doomed shepherd in the *Miorita* ballad smiling melancholy upon us from a faraway realm.

Similarly, in the *Tales* the structuring of the narrative around the travelers' portraits satisfies a primitive set of aesthetic expectations suited to the time and location of the stories and storytelling. Like wall paintings found on the walls of Moldova's painted monasteries, the storytellers direct the readers' gaze outward to the created world (of which they come to form a part) and not inward to their individual psyche. The unity of the *Tales* is built upon the assembled company of travelers, with the narrator actually a part of the social order that he describes and a means for the reader of entry into it. Once inside, the reader can easily recognize each of the travelers at the inn from the description which relates to their countenance and their identifiable attire: the Merchant who "wore a fur cap and coat and [whose] beard was tidy, neatly cut and rounded with scissors … beaming all over his full and jovial face – the face of a man who had always eaten plentifully"[27]; the blind beggar, "with his expressionless face, framed in its wild beard, [and] dressed like a mountain-dweller, with a little black hat, the white costume of his people, and a sheepskin cloak clasped only at the shoulder"[28]; or the unforgettable Captain Isac "with a swarthy face, a short mustache and a rounded beard, an aquiline nose and dark eyebrows that still held the traces of virile beauty, although his right cheek was crumpled under the dry eye-socket permanently set in a mask of agony, while his live eye, large and dark, merely stared down into the black well of the past; he wore high boots of Russian leather and a tunic of blue woolen cloth with

[25] Sadoveanu, Mihail, *The Hatchet*, pp. 5
[26] Sadoveanu, Mihail, *The Hatchet*, pp. 6
[27] Sadoveanu, Mihail, *Tales from Ancuţa's Inn,* pp. 91
[28] Sadoveanu, Mihail, *Tales from Ancuţa's Inn,* pp. 103

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round silver buttons, held at this side a yellow leather bag, and there were pistols in his holster."[29]

In both works actions are outwardly oriented and housed in a Manichaean universe in which ritual, inflated violence and melodrama occupy center stage.

In *The Hatchet*, where such manifestations abound, when Nechifor is found, the degradation suffered by his body hurled into the void of the ravine by the murderers and his roaming spirit "risen every night to his feet, clad in the rug"[30] must be transformed into regenerating value and overcome through ritual into a new birth. At the murder site and during the burial, folk tradition dictates the need to set right the dead man's impious end and to glorify the deceased. After being removal from the ravine, Nechifor's bones are sanctified through the funeral rites. That process, which includes strong elements of dramatic display, such as the washing of the bones, the crying of the hired mourners, and the priests' sprinkling of the bones with holy water, resembles an elaborate spectacle, with specific roles to be performed by all participants, from the widow to the mourners.

Marking the final moment in the ritual of the dead, the commemorative feast Vitoria gives immediately after the funeral service celebrates Nechifor's luminous memory and his cosmic transformation into an incandescent, positive force in afterlife – something not that much different from the celestial glory the young slain shepherd in the *Mioriţa* ballad envisions for himself when he asks the little ewe lamb to present his death to his mother as a wedding to a heavenly princess. By contrast with the glorified deceased, the two murderers, Calistrat Bogza and Ilie Cuţui, degrade the ceremonial and ensuing feast through their mere physical presence. Added to their excessive drinking, their appearance – one "of a small build and swarthy, the other burlier and with a harelip"[31] – conveys their grotesque[32], debased, and alienating characters defined by a vulgar sense of their recently accumulated wealth stolen from the deceased. Seated toward the lower end of the huge table, the two appear severed from the other guests, as blunt and reprehensible as their flippant conversation. In their humiliating isolation, Calistrat Bogza and Ilie Cuţui are coarse and deadly obstacles to the collective celebration and their presence is seen as the element of negation, breaking the continually renewed link with a cosmic regenerating force. In the end, Calistrat Bogza, the murderer of Vitoria's husband, is killed by Nechifor Lipan's own dog that attacks and bites him mortally. While

[29] Sadoveanu, Mihail, *Tales from Ancuţa's Inn,* pp. 48-9

[30] Sadoveanu, Mihail, *The Hatchet*, pp. 95

[31] Sadoveanu, Mihail, *The Hatchet*, pp. 69

[32] My reference is to that trait of grotesque which W. Kayser in *Das Grotesk in Malerei and Dichtung* identifies with its hostile and inhuman possibilities.

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bleeding to death, Cutui makes a dramatic, public confession of his crime and expresses his admiration for Victoria's ingenious investigation.

In Sadoveanu's vision, the travelers stopping at Ancuţa's Inn are the ones best able to judge occurrences from the past and to become alarmed at the prospect of a threat to social well being and justice. It is there, in their midst, that the terms of social inclusion or exclusion are formulated, with the tales acting as an argument and criteria for the selection process. Stories of inclusiveness take account of persecuted lovers like the young *mazâl* and Aglăiţa, the *boyar*'s daughter in "The Tale of Zaharia the Water Witch," or the bold Todiriţă Cătană and the Lady Varvara in "The Other Ancuţa"; and of outlaws who defend the lowly and the helpless, like the thief Vasile the Great and the suffering peasant in "Justice of the Poor." Other tales argue for the exclusion of evil rulers like Duca-Vodă ("The Blind Beggar's Tale"), cruel and greedy high ranking officials like Costea Căruntu ("The Other Ancuţa"), wicked and depraved *boieri* like Răducan Chioru ("Justice of the Poor") or Năstase Bolomir ("The Dragon"), and heartless gypsies like the old man Hasanache who murder their own for immediate gain ("The Well Among the Poplars").

Amalgamated in the text of the *Tales*, are characters like Todiriţă Cătană or Vasile the Great who illustrate folk typology specific of the Danubian region, like the *haiduk* featured into the folk and high literature[33]. Reenacting ancestral myths of Romanian folk poems that feature the primitive motif of what George Calinescu calls "the invasion of erotic instinct"[34] some of the stories told in the *Tales* foreground violent sexuality turned into high romance material, as in the beautifully crafted love stories of Lady Varvara ("The Other Ancuţa"), the tragic gypsy girl Magda whose body is thrown into a well as punishment for forbidden love ("The Well Among the Poplars"), or the privileged young girl Aglăiţa whose love for an unsuitable poor peasant ends on a happy note thanks to the intervention of a shrewd water witch.

Linked to orality as they are to elementariness, Sadoveanu's narratives highlight dialogic excess and draw attention to the highly visual, flat spectacle. In *Tales*, the travelers at Ancuta's Inn are engaged in a complex relationship and exchange that underscore epistemic oral structures and culturally determined practices of storytelling. Making clear the distinctions of class, literacy and comprehension between the travelers and the sophisticated narrator, the travelers' way of addressing one another effectively highlights the attributes that constitute an oral epistemic system and weaves them into the intricacy of the sophisticated narrator's literate engagement. Making possible a delicate equilibrium between the two systems, is one traveler whom the others

[33] Muthu, Mircea. "'Haiducul' in literaturile sud-europene," ["The Haiduk in East-European Literature"], *Revista de istorie şi teorie literară*, 32.3, July-September, 1984, pp. 68-73.

[34] Călinescu, G., op.cit., pp. 65

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respectfully call "worthy *Comis Ioniţă*,"[35] a marginally educated freeman, whom the unnamed narrator of the *Tales* cleverly uses to facilitate interactions at the inn and to familiarize not only the highly literate narrator but also the readers with the cultural idiosyncrasies of the community of travelers. When news of a modern, Western Europe, are brought to Ancuţa's Inn by agents of change like the Merchant Cristişor Dămian, the Comis acts as mediator and interpreter of the Merchant's travels as far away as Leipzig. In the ensuing dialogue that challenges their embedded cultural notions, the travelers hear about trains described as "a row of little houses on wheels fit on to iron rails ... drawn by a machine that whistles and puffs amazingly [and that] goes all by itself by means of fire, without horses"; deplore the lack in the West of specific Romanian culinary delights like "devilled lamb in garlic paste, sarmale, sour soup, or grilled carp"; marvel at the thought of "houses with four or five stories heaped on top of each other" and "streets made of one single piece of stone"; and grumble that sending girls to school is "another custom that they [the West] should keep to themselves."

Illustrating what appears to be in *The Hatchet* yet another aspect of collective social memory, the spectacular wedding and funeral that Vitoria and her son encounter in their journey underscore the specific burdens orality places on cultural memory. Acting as a tenacious and reliable force in maintaining the apparatus of any civilization, these orally transmitted rituals lift Sadoveanu's storytelling to stimulating reflections on the vagaries of life that undercut the orally inflected expectation of mere social restoration and bring in the literate expectancy of a conventional novel. While conveying fidelity to human experience, the *Tales* develops an autonomously imaginative dimension, a narrative point of view that moves beyond the memory storage formulas of orality to communicate the novel's highly literate independence of vision and Sadoveanu's own personalization of village community.

And yet it seems that precisely these communities who can afford to narratively abandon the story of their communal self may also nurture individual characters whose existential dimension becomes the means by which an orally inflicted narrative reaches autonomously imaginative exigencies. In the worlds of *The Hatchet* and the *Tales*, both Vitoria and Ancuta bring into the narrative a transformative psyche, a vital reinforcement by which their characters' self-perpetuity is assured. And while this opening of their psyche to the outside world is in no way meant to disparage oral storytelling (whose collective self is similarly outwardly oriented), it

[35] The *Comis* was a ranking official in Moldavia, similar to an equerry, and whose position corresponded to that of a squire. Such a person was usually chosen from among the freemen, or free landholders, called *răzăşi*.

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underscores the specific innovation required of a literate bias disengaged from the voice of orality and oriented toward the reared-on-literacy reader.

On a superficial narrative level, the self of both Vitoria and Ancuta is fundamentally experienced in and through direct connection with others, the village world and the crowd of travelers at the inn. Once extricated from this community with which they identify for group definition, the two characters can begin to act for reasons that are no longer motivated by other persons or external circumstance. They become free, in a sense, to dwell on their existence as independent entities. While this process forces some kind of character isolation that may be anathema to the orally inflected individual (i.e., the illiterate travelers at the inn, the village peasants Vitoria encounters), it also allows for the continued transformation of both Vitoria and Ancuta and for the outgrowth, through their characters' development and resourcefulness, of a literaly inflected narrative.

In *The Hatchet*, Vitoria's separation from the group fosters an increased and even articulable introspectivity, encouraging the character's private thought and enabling her to objectify her experiences. Given the narrative capacity for Vitoria's existential independence, she begins to exhibit character development and further detachment from the group as *The Hatchet* gradually subordinates the *Mioriţa* ballad to Vitoria's personal narrative re-inscribing it in the space of modern Romania. In this context, Vitoria Lipan increasingly becomes the instrument for fashioning a "modern" Romanian woman. Unlike the absent feminine character in *Mioriţa*, the shepherd's mother who presumably accepts her son's death unconditionally, Vitoria Lipan disregards ancestral constraints and defies all odds as she goes boldly in her search for the murderers of her husband. Her journey takes her far away from her village and her encounters with various people along the way sharpen her physical endurance and creative intelligence while highlighting her womanhood as part of the natural order of things.

In addition to the obvious differences in the development of the plot, far from being a mere re-telling of the *Mioriţa* ballad, *The Hatchet*'s fast-paced drama is a significant revision of traditional representations and resonates with the feminist model of relating femininity to authority. Having lost her husband, Vitoria can now partake of the kindness and friendship of the new people she encounters, and she seems to be as well-liked by strangers as he once was, exchanging her traditional femininity for a rewarding homosociality[36] once

[36] I am using Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of homosociality to designate "the social bond between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with 'homosexual,' and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual.' In fact, it is applied to such activities as 'male bonding,' which may be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality." *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desir*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985. XIII.

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enjoyed only by males. This new capacity gives Vitoria's public actions the legitimacy that will then enable her to denounce her husband's murderers – not as a wronged woman, but as an individual voice assimilated within the community. Thus *The Hatchet*'s fictional world signals the story's departure from self-possessive feminism and simply celebrates Vitoria Lipan as someone who transcends patriarchal history and obtains complete self-emancipation to hold to justice two murderers responsible for the social disruption that the slaying of a friendly and generous man brings to the community.

In the traditional culture of Romania, a country divided for many centuries during its long and turbulent history, the community is never an abstract concept, but a concrete, social framework sustained by specific human relations between husband and wife, parent and child, older brother and younger brother, and, above all, one friend and another. Such a formulation defines an individual as a relational being and positions him or her in reciprocal obligations to others in the family, the clan, the society. If the *Mioriţa* gives its readers a clear sense of the folk ballad's evolution into an instrument for ideological struggles, a process in which the ballad was constantly rewritten in versions that serve specific political premises, *The Hatchet* regulates the behavior of individual persons by requiring virtues that helped maintain the stability, as well as the harmony, of social relations. Although asserting as central the cardinal virtue of marital fidelity and moral integrity, *The Hatchet* also brings into relief Vitoria's quest for and public denunciation of her husband's murderers in order to restore both social order and the rule of justice. Her actions, loyalty to the memory of her husband, and determination to find justice help maintain the continuity of a set of social relations that begins in the family and ends in the absolute authority of the community (which regards the family as its foundational unit).

In final analysis Sadoveanu's recreation of the *Mioriţa* ballad in *The Hatchet* involves two narratives: Vitoria's personal narrative that openly celebrates her strength and wisdom by degendering the *Mioriţa* ballad to assert that women are often stronger than men, and a national narrative designed to place Vitoria's story in a specific social context delineated in fulsome harmony with the enactment of folk traditions generally confined to an orally inflected narrative. As the story line develops, Vitoria's personal narrative is gradually subordinated to the national narrative, and the individual heroine increasingly becomes the instrument for fashioning a new woman, one capable of protecting and controlling her own life and family.

This formula of steering a narrative away from its generally collective, orally inflected orientation toward a mythical and literately inflected character is repeated in the *Tales*, where the beautiful innkeeper Ancuţa is drawn into the narrative as a rich, resourceful female character of the type that function in Romanian folklore as mythic archetypes. If the inn is a picture of the

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relationship between men and women in the Moldavian community of the time where men dominate and rule over the public space as they drink wine and tell their stories, women like Ancuţa have their revenge. Nobody really cares about the inn's architecture, and most people who stop at the inn don't even notice its shape which men have erected. It is inside the inn where Ancuţa, like her mother before her, pours the wine, "stirs the fire smouldering under the ashes"[37] and presides over a place where reality and fantasy mix and where fine food, good wine, and good cheer welcome the travelers. The inn is thus Ancuţa's temple where she cooks and cleans, and where she has her role to play: connected to the cycle of the week, watching over its basic anthropological rhythms that include feeding, she makes livable and enjoyable the interior realm, the inside space which is warm, sheltering and comfortable. Like the archetypal figure of Sf. Vineri (Saint Friday) in Romanian folk tales, she is a mother figure, at home in a female universe of birth, germination and crops.

But she really can be much more than that. The story *The Other Ancuţa*, which is the fifth and central narrative among the total number of nine stories, introduces the other Ancuţa, the younger innkeeper's mother, as a woman-subject within the story itself. As a paragon of femaleness, prodigal in her gifts and relentless in applying corrections, she dramatizes the inexhaustibility of female folk types that mediate between reality and imagination, human nature and supernatural creations. In an unjust feudal society, she devises a clever escape for the bold haiduk Todiriţă Cătană and his love, Lady Varvara, and her symbolic status becomes consonant with a modern woman-centered reinterpretation of Romanian culture. In helping the two lovers, who come from antagonistic social classes, the other Ancuţa uses her intellectual prowess to manipulate a patriarchal structure and to attain societal change through social dis-integration: with the two lovers' escape and subsequent marriage, love turns into a powerful weapon, a place of passage or a threshold where nature confronts a rigidly categorizing culture. A site for the transformation of the social power relations, the space of the inn where Todiriţă Cătană seeks shelter becomes a ferociously feminine place. Here the other Ancuţa humbles the power structure and reinscribes the traditional roles of men and women in a space that eschews stillness and silence.

If expression in the oral culture is fundamentally tied to the voice, the inn is the visual site or the space of oral rhetoric. Experienced primarily as utterance, the stories told at the inn provide a narrative example that is heavily orally inflected and thus devoid of immediate cultural aplomb. The absence of locale, the whatness of a place like Ancuta's inn, leads to the unassimilated moments of visions disconnected from our cultural appropriation and memory.

[37] Sadoveanu, Mihail, *Tales from Ancuţa's Inn,* pp. 48

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To be assimmilated, such visions require the enabling dimension of literacy that is essential to take orality and out of the ordinary and transform mere site into place. As if to explain the need for a detailed set and decor for the *Tales*, Sadoveanu, in a short note that precedes 1964 edition of the novel, raises the issue of the inn's authenticity. Bringing his own childhood memories into the discussion, Sadoveanu declares that his own mother had spent her childhood in the region around the inn "in a poor little village called Verşeni," and that he himself had seen it as a child whenever he went to visit his grandparents, Sadoveanu proclaims categorically that "Ancuţa's Inn is no fiction. It actually existed and was famous in the past century. Its ruined walls still stood some ten years ago when the last heirs divided the bricks to build two modest farm houses for themselves, not very distant from each other."

By turning orality into literacy Sadoveanu's own reportage becomes the very basis of the narrative and visual texture, the very impulse by which memory is articulated to legitimize narration. From the start, the narrator states that the inn is rigid and symmetrical, muscular and protected with barred gates which look like an armor:

> "Ancuţa's Inn was not merely an inn, but a genuine fortress. It had walls as thick as from here to way over there, and barred gates such as I've never seen in my life. People, cattle, and carts could take shelter within and be without fear of the thieves and robbers.
>
> At the time I'm speaking of there was still peace in the land and good will amongst men. The gates of the inn stood wide open like those at the Prince's court. And on mild autumn days you could see the Moldova Valley through them, stretching as far as the eye could see, and the mountain mists on the evergreen forests as far away as Ceahlău and Hălăuca.[9] And, when the sun buried itself in the other world and the distant landscape dimmed and slid into dark mystery, the fires in the courtyard lighted up the stone walls, the dark recesses of the doors and the latticed windows."

The combination of the geometry, the phallic imagery, and the way in which the building looks like a man in armor, an intimidating gate and outside geometry of stone walls with the high gates that send out travelers across the Moldavian land, are inextricably tied to the ability to depart from the mere visual and the human voice. Demanding a literate inventiveness, the description of the inn reflects a different sort of reality, one that accords reality the opportunity to be constructed beyond and above the voice, in a quieter way, deviating from the oral episteme, through the inflections of a literacy intellectually comprehensible and performatively engaging.

As monographs of village culture in which oral articulations give way to the spectatorial quietude of what Roland Barthes calls writerly (scriptable) literature[38], *The Hatchet* and *Tales* offer a canonization of folklore, a rewriting

[38] Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasures of the Text*. New York: Farrar, 1975.

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of ancestral and archetypal myths, and a refinement of oral poetry and storytelling that are collected, recycled, concentrated and artistically rendered to subvert any possibility of dichotomizing orality and literacy and to preclude any supposition that orality is merely a holdover voice from more primitive days.

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