# MYTH AND TRADITION IN ION AGÂRBICEANU'S WORK

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*Abstract: Ion Agârbiceanu was born in an archaic space in which tradition is religiously followed and his work materialized itself into more than eighty volumes. Ion Agârbiceanu's work favours on one hand the portrayal of archaic Romanian aspects, of traditions and popular unwritten laws, and on the other hand, it depicts the rather forced permeation of the city civilization and industry into the village environment, which attempts to destroy the ancestral way of life. Through all his work, Ion Agârbiceanu affiliates himself easily with the traditional line by revealing the respect for tradition and by promoting the national specificity.*

*Keywords: myth, tradition, folklore, mystery, rural*

Ion Agârbiceanu was born in an archaic space where local customs and traditions were religiously followed, an aspect later to be reflected in his work which abounds in saps of tradition and national specificity. His family showed respect towards learning and in such a climate the valorization of folkloric sources was integrated as well. The school system helped to promote popular texts within the alluring atmosphere of traditions, Agârbiceanu himself attending primary school in the countryside.

According to folkloric selection, Ion Agârbiceanu's work includes more than eighty volumes. The greatest extent is represented by the beliefs of the so called "moți" or Romanians from the region of Apuseni Mountains also known as the Stone Land in the frightening apparition of the earth spirit: Vâlva băii or the Spirit of the Mines. There are numerous stories, short stories, sketches which present in detail: the collier's mental, his internal dramas, work accidents as well as the physical and moral poorness he lives in. The writer will not crumble people's beliefs, but instead, similarly to a confessor he will adopt the way of empathy always standing beside his peasant. To all these aspects mentioned above one can add details regarding space representation, man's approach to death and universe, true landmarks that outline the portrait of the Romanian from the region of Apuseni Mountains.

Ion Agârbiceanu's creation favours on one hand the portrayal of archaic Romanian aspects, of traditions and popular unwritten laws, and on the other hand, it depicts the rather forced permeation of the city civilization and industry into the village environment, which attempts to destroy the ancestral way of life; so his writing "performs in the directions of archaism and national ethnicity, of protective tradition intending to dissociate oneself from the combined aspects of existence such as: war, industrial civilization and the departure of the human beings from their own ancestral, biological and hereditary legacy."[1]

Being strongly identified with the life of the Transylvanian Romanians, Ion Agârbiceanu creates a vivid monography of Transylvania which evokes the realities of a known world. The

1 Mircea Popa, Ion Agârbiceanu- the story teller, in the volume Ion Agârbiceanu, Retrieved Stories, Cluj-Napoca, Edited edition and prefaced by Mircea Popa, Eikon Publishing House, 2011, p.8;



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Transylvanian village lives authentically and the people guide themselves by uncompromising laws and rigour. Everything is overwhelmed by the popular tradition and past history. The village from his stories reveals a world of spectacle, ranging from extravaganza to degradation. Death is often met and it represents an implacable reality of this world.

Prose writer Ion Agârbiceanu turned to folklore, thus succeeding to depict archaic mentalities and spaces. In the novel entitled *The Ghoul*, which is a monumental image of rural life appear different customs, erotic rituals and rites of passage. Death, love, birth, baptism, harvest, crop, raising cattle, food preparation for various events, words going about the whole village by word of mouth, news spread with rural simplicity and naivety, the pleasing patois, the folk costume worn so gladly and with such naturalness- all of these together create an ample ethnographic fountain and even more true, they offer pages of rough life, not glossed over being absorbed right from its origins. In the novel we encounter traditions typical of a handicraft evening sitting, the bee of the youth and that of the married women. The death rite in Transylvania is generously depicted and described by the prosaist. The confession, the communion, the readying of the dead person for the burial (the closing of the eyes and the covering with a veil), the feast from the wake, the grieving, the asking for forgiveness, the tolling of the church bells, the way to the graveyard and the alms giving are described in detail by Ion Agârbiceanu. We encounter in his work the round dance seen as a bee rite as well as the round dance performed on Sundays or at the main holidays throughout the year.

The bee held in the house of the widow Nastasia "in Câmpșorului Street- the most respectable one in the village, because there lived the most important families"[2]proves that traditions and popular rites are strictly followed. The bee was organized in a big chamber with benches adorned with floral patterns, abed with pillows covered with weaved carpets, with walls full of glass painted icons and a gas lamp hanging from a beam. About twenty lads and lasses participated in a quilting bee and it was mandatory for them to maintain their seats. The participants' laughter and yelling was accompanied by the sizzling sound of the spindle. The young men who had serious intentions regarding certain girls sat next to them and they talked and recounted in pairs. The moment the lad took the girl on his knees was a sign that they got along well and that they made a step towards marriage. The third step taken towards marriage within a quilting bee was the lad's coming together with the girl in the passage hall where they stayed for a while only the two of them in the dark. The marriage depended on this meeting, and entering this room was not regarded as being dishonorable as long as it was done for the first and last time. Going into the passage of a peasant's cottage together with a young man is an ancient ritual regarded as something natural although nobody knew what was happening there between the two young people. If the girl were to remain pregnant as a result of going into this room with the boy, the ritual was not acknowledged in case the intention to get married was missing and this was imposed by the girl's parents and relatives.

In the novel *The Ghoul*, the life of the Transylvanian village , a superb fresco of a lost world flows similarly to a mountain brook , either smoothly and wispy or swirling. Ion Agarbiceanu presents in detail the main events in the lives of his peasants: the birth, the baptism and funeral. The news regarding the death of Moise a Mărgineanului is first announced to the village by the bells tolled by Ilarie, the bell ringer. There is a complete rite in terms of tolling the bells. If the first sound was that of the big bell, then everybody would know that an old person

2 Ion Agârbiceanu, *Works 12, Novels*, Minerva Publishing House, 1980, p.19;



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had died. If the next sound was made by the middle-sized bell, then it was known that the dead person was a woman and in case it was followed by the big bell then it was announced that the dead person was a man. The sound produced by the small bell let all villagers know that a child had died. The deceased were dressed in their celebration clothes, laid down on a bench and later the wake was organized. At the wake people played cards, feasted and told tales of ghouls. In funeral rites the lament is also included and it was performed by old women. In his work the beliefs related to ghouls are to be met. Thus the following are mentioned: ghouls that could not find their peace until they were exhumed and had a sharpened pole stuck into their hearts, then there were the undead women who walked stark naked at night across the fields and spoiled the sowings or stole the milk from the cows in the stable, or the old women who were able to bind or unbind marriages. In each told story there were names of men and women included and these events truly happened once in the village. These told happenings had the role of enhancing the surrounding mystery. The lament performed at the wake is depicted in the short story called *The Pharaohs*, where the gypsy women express their grief caused by Rusalinda's death by means of their gypsy idiom.

Confession as depicted in Agârbiceanu's creation seems to be mandatory in rural Transylvania and it comes first in comparison to other major events in people's lives. When Moise was agonizing, Vasile, his son, ran to bring the priest to hear his father's confession. If somebody died without having their last confession, they were regarded as pagans. In the short story *The Gendarme* the confession made before the wedding ceremony is presented. Catarina Albu, although not accompanied by Dumitru Bogdan, went to church to confess before the wedding as requested by the ancient custom. The Sacrament of the Holy Unction is presented in Agarbiceanu's work and it is performed with the aim of bringing about healing and relief. This service is officiated in the house of Moise Mărgineanu for the alleviation of this soul but also in Veronica Roșu's house, a woman for whom nobody could find a cure. Her mother oscillates between the sacred and the profane, turning for help both to the priest and to spells in order to heal her daughter.

The short story *The Pharaohs* describes the wreath song. This song was sung by the gypsy people when returning from reaping. The reapers, men, women, lads, lasses after finishing reaping entwined an eared wreath in the shape of a cross and went to the host saying: "Master, master! Have the dinner ready well/ Because the wreath is coming,/ And do not sadden ,/ Because its ears are big." [3]Those standing at the gate to watch the suite sprinkled water towards the boy carrying the wreath as a sign of abundance. This lad was regarded as one of the foremost people in agriculture. In the same short story also appears the blacksmith's song in which the magic number seven is invoked , " Come on seven brothers", in order to bring about progress and to chase away the ghosts and the evil spirits with the help of the sounds made by the hammer.

The tradition of going from house to house to sing Christmas Carols is portrayed in the story *Grandma Iova*, where grandma teaches the children to sing carols. The youngest children are taught the shortest Christmas Carol: Two old people, / Come and feed the dogs,/ Because if they bite us,/ You will face the devil." [4]The older children would laugh at hearing these lyrics but grandma encouraged her grandchildren to sing. The five children would go caroling on Christmas Eve under their grandmother's careful surveillance.

[3] Ion Agârbiceanu, *Works 6 Stories and Short Stories*, Minerva Publishing House, 1971, p.286;
[4] Ion Agârbiceanu, *Works 2, Sketches and Stories*, For Literature Publishing House, 1962, p.2;



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Along the four years during which Agârbiceanu was a priest in Bucium Saşa (1906-1910) the young parson would get acquainted with the extremely hard life of the dwellers of the Stone land. Most of his short stories and stories emerged due to his pastoral experience, the writer being impressed by the suffering that marked the villagers' lives, which enkindled inside him feelings of compassion.

The characters taken from the peasantry have got an expressive and original drive representing larger than life figures. The people from the short story *Father Man* are hardworking, thrifty, enterprising and yet shaded by certain sadness. The reason is soon revealed by the narrator; for many years the village has had no priest despite the repeated attempts to bring a "shepherd" to solve their issues related to traditions and religious practices inherited from their elders. The people from the village become the laughing stock of the people from the surrounding villages and the belief that the place is cursed overwhelms the village even more. Mystery mantles the being of the character from the very beginning and provides the character with that seduction resulting from his disquietudes and unrests thus offering him an air of legend. The accounts emphasize the legendary dimension of the priest and nourish mystery, curiosity and interest. Firuța, Ioniță's daughter is entrapped by the seducing toils of father Man and becomes ill. She longs for the priest who receives the characteristics of the so called *Sburătorul ,* an evil spirit tormenting girls and women. Popular beliefs interfere here, the presence of the folkloric character who steals young girls' hearts that end up earning for him. For the parson, the love for Firuța becomes a predestined thing, a love he cannot avoid.

In the short story *The Gendarme* the confession which is mandatory and necessary before the wedding ceremony appears. Catarina Albu according to ancient custom went to church to confess before the wedding although she was not accompanied by Dumitru Bogdan. The Sacrament of the Holy Unction is presented in Ion Agârbiceanu's creation and it is performed with the aim of bringing about healing and relief. In this short story appears an archaic character 'the village gossip' with a significant role on commenting the events. This collective character issues thoroughly argued suppositions provided by the unusual behavior of the stranger. This stranger can be regarded as being Sburătorul, the evil spirit from mythology tormenting girls and women. He inflames the hearts of young women and then disappears. The presence of the gendarme in the village disturbs the heart-ease of the villagers causing hustle and bustle and incertitude. He is endowed with evil powers, being able to mesmerize with his look women for whom there was no escape. Dumitru receives the characteristics of a wraith being considered by villagers as unclean and satanic. The demonic nature of Dumitru is amplified by the village gossip, always informed and imaginative which makes the character oscillate between wraith and Zburător.

The encounter between veronica and the gendarme is graphically described by Agarbiceanu: "One evening Veronica was carrying water from the street well, when suddenly she sensed that the wooden pails were too heavy and had the impression that two red hot nails are riveted into her nape. She put the wooden pails down, she breathed with difficulty, and turning her head she looked behind her. Three houses further away, in front of the gate stood Dumitru Bogdan, tall like a rod staring at her. Thrilled, the woman turned her head, went pale like a dead person and barely had the strength to pick up the wooden pails. A cold fright overwhelmed her limbs and after she had entered the house she wiped the sweat off her forehead." [5]Veronica asks for divine help to banish her bad feelings:

[5] Agârbiceanu, Ion, *Works*, in the collection *Fundamental Works*, edition coordinator: academician, Eugen Simion, edited edition, chronologic table, note on the edition, bibliography, notes and commentaries, critical references by



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"She crossed oneself saying unconsciously: "God forbid and protect!" Then she began to worship icons. She was home alone. Her man had not returned from ploughing yet.

But while worshipping she slowly sensed a fiery rummage through all her body instead of the fright she had felt previously. She imagined Dumitru's face in front of her eyes all the time. What beautiful and sad eyes he had! And how much passion there was in them!

-No! She shouted loudly in front of the icons. He looked at me as if I were a pray! He looked at me as if he were a wraith willing to take my blood!

And once more she began to worship and genuflect: "God forbid and protect from the evil!"

She had a headache. She extinguished some hot coals and washed herself with the resulting healing water. All she did was in vain. All night she struggled as if she were on fire.

Three days later she sensed the same red hot nails into her nape again. One week later the same feeling was present too. And each time she turned her head she could see Dumitru's burning eyes staring at her. The second time this happened she was in the field and the third time she was in her own garden." [6]

Although the gendarme had gone to war and there was no news from him, Catarina Albu, his wife, thought she could hear his footsteps around the house one Saturday night. This thing scared her: "She did not light the candles, she did not move from the chair. Suddenly she heard footsteps in the entrance hall of the cottage, heavy footsteps, the way only the gendarme would walk, footsteps known by the whole village.

Her heart went back into its place and her breathing stopped. She heard the familiar steps a few more times, and then there was quiet.

Maddened, she opened a bit the parlor's door, and with her heart in her mouth she asked in a low voice:

-Is that you, Dumitre?

But the questioned remained unanswered and got lost in the night. She gathered all her strengths, opened wide the door and asked again:

-Is that you, Dumitre?

No answer, only a death silence which made her freeze from fear. She clenched her hands on the posts in order not to fall: she stopped dead and could not move away from the door." [7]

In this short story, Ion Agârbiceanu deliberately allows an aura of mystery to float in the air and he mixes the latter with the fantastic so that the two of them cannot be disrupted one from another.

The motifs of religious inspiration (the red hot nails which Veronica sensed the moment the gendarme stared at her) makes one understand that the fantastic has its origin according to the writer's view in an archaic and religious feeling.

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Ilie Rad, volume IV. *Stories and Short Stories* (1902-1910), Bucharest, Romanian Academy, the National Foundation for Science and Art, 2014: *The Gendarme*, p.740;

[6] Idem, Ibidem, p 740;
[7] Idem, Ibidem, pp 768-769;



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"Agârbiceanu reflects Transylvanian realities, especially the rustic ones, with so much trueness, adequacy that he seems to have forgotten about himself, and it appears that he superseded himself as a knowing subject and story teller, in order to present only the object of his narration: rough people and places, consumed with invading pains which sometimes end in death." [8]

The contact with the folkloric fabulous, with the picturesque of the traditions, with nature, with the occupations of the villagers, with the image of parents and grandparents, creates a fundament of life experience. Ion Agârbiceanu wrote a prose filled with human substance, with moral and social conclusions in the spirit of a popular common sense philosophy. Regarding the epic projects Agârbiceanu was more daring than Ioan Slavici, and less profound in psychological analyses than Rebreanu but more lyric than both of them.

In Agârbiceanu's work the village radiography implies most often social observation and the revealing of some conflicting states in the rural environment. *Fefeleaga* is a representative creation in which the Transylvanian village appears to be consumed with selfish interests. Dinu's Maria has carried stone to the rich for years in a row, toiling too much although many times she goes unrewarded. In relation to the rich people who mockingly name her Fefeleaga, the character displays dignity, tenacity and moral superiority.

Ion Agârbiceanu was a creator of literature and a priest and his mission does not interfere with his vocation as a writer. A good knower of Romanian soul, Agârbiceanu would illustrate in his prose in an unusual way aspects which had not been encountered in Romanian prose before. If his contemporaries regarded him as a traditionalist ( and many timed considered he was Sămănătorist), the most important analysts of his work ,Mircea Zaciu and Mircea Popa state that Ion Agârbiceanu is a realist writer, emphasizing though the fact that his debut prose is aligned with the Sămănătorist school. Many critics lay emphasis on his ethicism. As noticed by George Călinescu, in his work entitled "The History of Romanian Literature", Ion Agârbiceanu avoids the sermon and highlights virtue.

Through his entire written work, the writer is connected to Transylvanian life, remaining attached to its birthplaces, being "in many ways the exponent of a province whose torments, whose history and moral dimension he has always felt. Equally he was oppressed by a certain Transylvanian mentality and its reality. Hence, some critics' tendency to regard him as a provincial writer whose works are of reduced circulation, with a minor voice of his work, almost an epigone of Ioan Slavici." [9]

Ion Agârbiceanu enters his work into a distinct tradition, bringing forth a specifically Transylvanian characteristic. The rural universe proves originality, The Transylvanian village being authentically evoked. "The quantitative massiveness of his creation, its vast geography, its typological variety and the long presence within the literary movement of the century establish Agârbiceanu as one of the most significant Romanian writers of prose through his vision, ethos and national specificity."[10]The work of the writer Ion Agârbiceanu can be easily enclosed within the traditionalist line because of its respect for tradition and its promoting of the national specificity. Writer Nicolae Steinhard underlined the following: "A text has value in itself only

[8] Alexandru Dima, Agârbiceanu's Art, in *The Tribune*, Cluj, year 1, no.32, 14th September 1957;
[9] Mircea Zaciu, *As a huge stage Transylvania…,* Bucharest, the Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House, 1996, p. 211;
[10] Idem, p.227;



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when it relates in one way or another to reality, either it starts from it or it gets to it by means of final meanings."[11]

"A patriarch of Romanian literature, Ion Agârbiceanu through his entire work contributes to the promoting of realism, a realism that identifies itself with his own creation in which he planted his endless desire for good, truth and beauty. He has always loved the man and declared his love and trust in the man's beauty, in his power to revive spiritually. He had always faith in the educative virtues of literature and in its strength to shape characters.

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[11] Nicolae Steinhardt, *The Polyphonic Monologue*, second edition, edited edition prefaced by Virgil Bulat , Cluj-Napoca, Dacia Publishing House, 2002, p.73.



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