THE EMPIRICAL THERAPUTICS OF NOSTRUMS AND QUACK REMEDIES IN THE CYCLE „BY THE LILAC TREES" BY MARIN SORESCU[1]

***Abstract**: The village of Oltenia, seen in its existential structures, lives beyond the Easter and Christmas holiday and beyond the ritualic complex of the main important moments of man's life, like birth, marriage and death, also numerous magical belifs, practised along the years and adapted since then to many situations of the profane space. The magical practices and myths evoked by Marin Sorescu are integrated in the local people's life like existential reasons based on an empirical therapeutics of nostrums and quack remedies, in which the peasant from Bulzeşti manifests an implicit faith. People's sufferings can be treated with „medicines" like weeds, plants, victuals, with rubbings, called pulling in the countryside, snuffs in the ears, lit candles, but also with magical formulas in verse, accompanied by gestures, called spells which mostly have a thaumaturgic role.*

***Key words**: the village of Oltenia, incantation, empirical therapy*

Whether influenced or not by the young American poetry which he came in touch with on the occasion of a visit to America and whose tendencies were towards an epical character of lyricism, the use of monologue in poetry, a quantity of apoetical and prosaic concrete as well as towards a scurrilous language, Marin Sorescu proposes a unique experience in Romanian literature, introducing himself as a *lyrical poet emerging into prose*.

Considered by the literary critics as a *lyrical monography* of the Romanian village, especially of the Oltenia one, the cycle *By the Lilac Trees* is seen as an affective re-enactment of memory, as a complex vision of the rural universe; it is achieved not in the prose domain but within poetry, an opening of the lyrical into the epical becoming possible as such.

Actually, the idea of recomposing *the image of the patriarchal village from a few hundreds years ago* occured to Marin Sorescu when he was in the 6th grade, when he wrote an essay, named predictively, *My village*. The schoolboy's then idea , confessed in *Autobiographical Pages,* has not been forgotten, as it can be seen, being turned later into something real, *due to the wish to leave an authentic icon of a twilight world to the posterity, threatened by modernization which leads to the destruction of the Romanian village* (Albu, Istocescu, 2006: 28).

In the six books of the cycle *By the Lilac Trees,* the evocation of his birthplace, the village of Bulzeşti, with its events and its characters, gives the impression of *a mirror of the Romanian village, unmatched in authenticity until now*, as Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu has remarked, comparing *By the Lilac Trees* with *Morometii* in the sense that *Sorescu imposed a personal vision, as a true to life image* (Crohmălniceanu, 1989: 3)

Coming back *to the spirituality of his native Oltenia*, Marin Sorescu creates *a lyrical mythology based on the data of the Oltenia existence* (Simion, 1981: 3), in an evocation of the native village, as he is a participant in the great existential events : birth, christening, wedding, death, as well as love, jealousy or animosities and friendships.

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The life of the village is lived from the interior, with an emphasis on the real, on the unsignificant details which give the image of the Oltenia village, while Marin Sorescu seems to have discovered *the secret that the road to universality passes through Bulzeşti* (Simion, 1986: 32).

The name of the six books of the cycle *By the Lilac Trees* represents the generic name given by Maria Bălii (a character in the cycle and the neighbour of the poet's father since childhood) to the village cemetery, where many lilac trees grew and where, according to tradition*, the table used to be laid on the grass, in the shadow of the riven church on All Souls' Day*, when alms were given.

Nowhere else can you eat a more tasteful sauerkraut / Than in the cemetery, the poet says, and the atmosphere is that of a feast day : *The neighbours wine you with plum brandy above the potage fumes, ... You drink from each other, crosswise, and you say, glowing: <May Good received it>.*

The poet describes the cemetery of the old church from Sălişte as the inhabitants' place of passing away, a natural place of the eternal rest, inherent to everyone and consequently to each inhabitant of the village.

On the Sălişte church, the cuckoo is singing, the cemetery has an important, self-reconciliation atmosphere. / It is so good to be buried here, between the woods, the place is hidden, besides it doesn't draw, / The bell does not disturb you as it chimes only on holidays.

But, until they come here, in the cemetery, where *birds sing and there is a smell of blooming lilacs*, the inhabitants of Oltenia repeat periodically what their ancestors used to do: give birth, grow, work, face difficulties and enjoy life, each in his own invariable way.

Evoking the village of Oltenia, in general, and the village of Bulzeşti, in particular, Marin Sorescu has in mind to portray particular features, which include mentalities, customs, beliefs, language or way of life.

In the life of the village, numerous magical beliefs are recaptured, practised by the villagers through ages and integrated in their life as existential beliefs. Wishing to complete the image of the rural spirituality and to capitalize the folkloric resources from the village world, Marin Sorescu presents, in connection to man's natural desire for health, an empirical therapeutics of nostrums and quack remedies, valid for several sufferings, with a implicit faith in weeds, plants, victuals but also in *pulling* or in spells.

Preoccupied either by their own or by their family's health, the villagers feel closer to the quacks, the healers or even the witches than to the health officers who began to arrive in their village, and who were treated with disbelief and dissatisfaction on every occasion.

During a long conversation, Nae Banța and Moş Gheorghe, godson and godfather, come to ask eachother about health : *And how are you godfather? / - What can I say dear godson? / To the devil with the health officers / Eh, the one who was better, /He knew how to give injection / But the new one who came, / Listen, he throws the syringe in my arse from the door.*

If old Gheorghe accepts a modern treatment willy nilly, Mitru Ceapă resorts to a famous village quack, Țoțuleasa, to cure his ear pains and headaches, *his choking, his gall bladder fits* or his *pangs.* Mitru Ceapă is realy sick and all empirical therapies applied by Țoțuleasa are useless. Suspected for a *swelling*, the invalid is given a spell, with *a coal in a pipkin*, after he had been rubbed *with fresh butter. A huge black man woke up / And yoked two huge black oxen / To a huge black plough /and sewed huge black wheat*.

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Seeing that *the patient was getting worse*, Țoțuleasca also rubbed his *red stones*, after which, helpless, she agrees to call the priest. The belief in the viaticum and in fate holds true finally, … *after that Mitru Ceapă felt better*, and after he *went out and saw his handmill, the sheep*, the fowl, he came *peacefully in the house*, he laid down, and *he passed away*.

To the last, *that was his fate,* and all treatment proved ineffective, *in vain, as he was not long for this world*.

Țoțuleasa *was well-known* because she *was a healer for many diseases*, that is *she knew all the unwritten book of ancestral remedies, from the incantation to the mourning*.

Introducing other incantations in many of the poems of the cycle, among which we cite those for healing the toothache , Marin Sorescu notes in the *Diary: If I could not grasp the garb, the customs, the old things in my childhood, I would think they never existed* (Sorescu, 1999 : 232).

Among all the village witches, Cismăroaica was *damned good at incantations*, as her questions about other diseases of the patient or about his parents'diseases, followed what we call today hereditary diseases. She got those who knew to write */ To sign on a tray filled with sand, / That she may read the character / As this also determine the disease*. She uttered *some magic /one could not understand […] until disease got bored*.

A magic water having a thaumaturgic role is also prepared by means of incantations by Roncioaica, water which brings all man's diseases to disappear, when drunk. The magic water was stuck with a spit rod, *appeased* with a coal and brought calm to the patient. Actually, many female patients found remedy in self-suggestion.

Roncioaica, *a beautiful red woman* healed through incantations only her acquaintances: *It's for her, I will do it for her, As I feel sorry for her*, because diseases, she said, came over and would not let her sleep at night.

Since specialized medical officers were absent from the village, the sick had implicit faith in old women who knew spells and other enpirical cures with dubious results.

Mitra lui Tudoran, a talkative woman, a woman *who talks much and does not know what she says*, or *the chatterbox ,* or *the one penny woman*, offers to heal Florea of Ghiță and to cup him. Not having the right thing for that, the woman uses *some metal half a kilo jugs*, which get warm and make him scream with pain, the patient remaining with a burnt back and sizzled ribs after the treatment. The therapeutic quack procedure is certainly rallied, because, seeing that she could not heal him, the woman excuses herself: *Who is struck by the disease on Saturday, will not cure*.

Hearing that lungwert is a miraculous weed in treating rheumatism, Anica lui Dârmon *very sick, worn out* searches the healing plant, in the forest, far away from the house, in vain.

Goody Ioana of Miai, another healing quack, diagnoses a woman who had headaches every day *at noon* with *dry sun*, since everybody must feel pain somehow. The sick woman must go to the fountain where, seeing her face in the water, she says: *The sun is here in the lake /Not in my head*, while she splashes *her head and over her shoulders*. If for some people the pain is relieved, for Marin Sorescu, then, a child, the treatment does not give results, even repeated.

It is more difficult with children, the poet tells us, *it's a pickle with small children when they get ill, they fade like candlelight,*, because they *do not know to tell where is the pain and what is wrong*. In order to save the suffering child, a more or less

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cunning quack, gives the diagnosis: *Hold on, we must find/ The pang*. This time, the treatment is based on victuals as medicines. After having been washed properly, an egg is broken on the child's chest. The yoke is chosen and then pushed with *the finger, / Here and there* and the pang lies in the place where it breaks. In this happy case, the place is rubbed and covered with a *poultice* made up from a tobacco leaf, a mustard one, onion and oil.

The child begins to laugh as he feels the ilness passing.

However, the situation is dramatic for other children. The yoke does not break, the pang is not found, which means it is beyond cure, *it means that death inhabited him and there is nothing to be done.*

The miracle happened for a child from Seculeşti who escaped from being buried alive, was of ill omen. Forgotten on a porch by *his mother when she went sowing*, pigs ate him *literally*.

Eugen Simion mentions a code of the poems, which he summarizes as such: a *negation on the first level of the poem (the visible level, the manifest level) and a meaning on the second (the implicit level) which contradicts the first one [...]. Anyhow, a reverse meaning, as a rule a bitter philosophical meaning, hidden under the silks of irony* (Simion, 1978 : 128). This *code, reverse meaning* gives the originality and the uniqueness of Marin Sorescu's poems.

Goody Anica cures quinsy by incantation, as she was *a witch*, who *knew a lot of remedies* and healed a chicken which pricked in a thorn; the incantation prevented the wound from swelling. She also cured the poet by incantation when he was a child, when he preferred her spell, than *mother's pointer, dabbled in salt*. Goody Anica twisted a coal in a glass of water and said: *quinsies/ bunches, / Left with the turkeys, / Turkeys came back / Quinsies did not*. Another valid treatment for quinsies was *a wet cloth round the neck* with maize flour, which made him resemble a lord *as I saw later the English wore / Stiff, with upward chin, because the laced collar*.

Marin Sorescu's poems reduce the existential mystery (as compared to Lucian Blaga) in an ironical significant language. For headaches, Floarea had an original treatment. *She said: <Stand still I will fasten it, /and measure it>*. Then, a complicated procedure followed: *She tied a thread round the head / She took a coal and made / Four marks on the thread, / One on the front, above the nose, / Two at the ears and one on the nape of the neck*. After that, *she put a spinner on the front [...] And you also had a pail of water on the head*. After other complicated procedures with the thread and the pail, Floarea was attentive *if signs match , / Sign in sign*. It was beneficial they do not match, as it was the only way she could see *how much your head had been cleft. / And she measured with her finger on the thread. And you recovered*.

Deliberately evoked by Marin Sorescu, all this folkloric and magical thesaurus represents an authentic image of a world which tried to save from destruction the peculiarity of the Romanian village and especially the Oltenia village.

In the village *closed as a fortress*, as a sign of respect or of preserving certain traditions understood only there, *Pregnant women carrying the hayfork on the shoulder / Say good afternoon, / Even if they do not know you*, because in Bulzeşti *everything happens / Normally, / Without surprises*.

Perhaps, that is why Mărin al lui Moş Pătru, who *hasn' t decided to marry* yet and consequently bearing the nickname Later, *wept dryly for the deterioration of the order [...] Their old house with peaceful gentle peasants, / Entered slowly into the ground*.

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In the poems belonging to the cycle *By the Lilac Trees,* Marin Sorescu is animated by a pertinent feeling emerging from the creation freedom, which conveys the most convincing things about world's instability and transience by means of common, almost banal language of human existence. It seems as if Marin Sorescu said `Life is a show; please, look at it and pay attention! `.

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