POLTERGEIST PHENOMENA IN CONTEMPORARY FOLKLORE

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Abstract:

The article deals with instances of the supernatural in Romanian urban legends, namely what we call the *strigoi*, or poltergeist. Usually, folklorists tend to exclude the supernatural from the category of urban legends, however we have decided to take these accounts into consideration based on the fact that the transmitter, the narrators do not distinguish between these elements and the rest of contemporary legends and today's popular culture abounds in such accounts.

Key-words:

Urban legend, supernatural, *strigoi*, annihilation ritual, demonic power.

The belief in a reality which transcends the boundaries of our daily existence is as old as humankind itself; furthermore, during the past years, there has been a growing interest in the paranormal and supernatural. People outspokenly express their opinions on guardian angels, the belief in life after death, extrasensory perceptions and the existence of ghosts (Steiger, 2003: xiii). According to a 2001 Gallup survey, cited by the *Gale Encyclopedia of the Unusual and Unexplained*, 54% of Americans believe in faith healing, 41% admit that people can be possessed by the devil and 38% believe in spirits and ghosts. Another research conducted in the United Kingdom in 2012 revealed that the British are more likely to believe in aliens than in God[1], while a 2013

[1]http://www.ziare.com/magazin/ozn/britanicii-cred-mai-mult-in-extraterestri-decat-in-dumnezeu-1196628 (published October 19, 2012, accessed September 2, 2014).

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Romanian poll showed that more than half of respondents believe in life after death, in heaven and hell[2].

The ancient conviction that there is life after death, that the soul of a deceased person has the ability to stay or return to the world of the living, as well as the fear of evil powers of the dead underlie the belief in demonic creatures such as *strigoi* 'poltergeist', devils or ghosts. It is the *strigoi* legends that will be dealt with further on.

We know that the *strigoi* is a human being (man or woman) who is born with a cap on his/her head (a residue of the embryonic membrane) (Candrea, 1999: 174) or with some specific marks (such as pale blue eyes or a white spot of hair, as we shall see). We also know that there are living *strigoi*, people who are alive but possess devilish traits, who behave as humans during the day, but, at night, their soul leaves the body and goes to meet other *strigoi*. The more dangerous are the dead *strigoi*, whose soul comes out of the grave, becomes incarnate and runs riot amidst the people. One account describes an incident that occurred shortly after the 1977 earthquake: a man (a distant cousin of the narrator) loses his wife and one month after the unfortunate event, his two children tell him that, every night, while he is at work, a woman comes to the house and calls them at the window. Disbelieving the *story* of the little ones, our hero decides to prove all is just a figment of imagination of children longing for their mother and for the presence of the only parent alive, who also *leaves* them every night to go to work. The confirmation, or in this case, invalidation of strangeness requires some kind of material evidence.

"*To prove the little ones that there was no one in the courtyard calling them, he took a sieve and scattered ashes on the footpath from the window as far as the gate. After dark, the man heard a woman's voice that resembled his wife's. He did not dare go out or answer. In the*

[2]http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-15376964-sondaj-ires-despre-religie-55-dintre-respondenti-sunt-acord-slujba-sfintire-masinilor-50-vor-biserica-ocupe-problema-homosexualitatii-16-tin-cont-horoscop-viata.htm (published August 14, 2013, accessed September 2, 2014).

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morning, he noticed footprints in the ashes scattered on the alley. It is known that people with leg defects stomp. So was his wife, lame in her left leg, and the prints in the ashes were heavy. He went to the priest and asked his permission to exhume his wife. When they opened the coffin, the woman lay face down, bearing no sign that she was dead". (*Costin C.*, journalist)

Do we know *for sure* that it is an unearthly creature? We can only guess. Nowhere in this narrative is this clearly specified, even the hero seems to doubt the presence of the supernatural, for he needs concrete evidence: the voice, which is not his wife's but only *resembles* it, frightens but does not completely convince him (it may just be an illusion of a too tense a mind in expectation of *something*), while the footprints that point to a person with some physical deformity, just like his spouse's, prompt him to go further, in search of new proofs: the exhumation of the corpse. Only then is the *uncanniness* of the situation revealed: "*When they opened the coffin, the woman lay face down, bearing no sign that she was dead*". This and nothing more. Naturally, the question "so what then?". Our expectations, as audience, are deceived, as the account ends abruptly, with no such conclusion as "the woman was a *strigoi*".

The narrator feels no need to add an explanation. He does not validate or denies the *truth*, he only presents facts, provides clues and leaves us, the audience, to draw our own conclusions. It is his way of taking a distance from his account. He places the narrative quite accurately, "shortly after the 1977 earthquake" and it seems to be a sure thing, especially as the transmitter has a profession that requires the verification of sources. However, the account is neutral, journalistic and, though there is an emotional connection between the narrator and the hero (they are cousins), it is still a distant family relationship (a distant cousin). Thus, the teller, right from the very beginning, seems to detach himself from what he is about to recount, declining any responsibility for the story he tells.

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Therefore, the ambiguous ending does not prevent us from making a few assumptions based on old folk beliefs according to which the *strigoi* comes at night to people's houses, knocks at doors and windows and asks to be let inside (Candrea, 1999: 176) ("*After dark, the man heard a woman's voice that resembled his wife's*"). And further on, the same beliefs tell us that the *strigoi* "*can be recognised by the way they lie in the grave, either face down or, more often, on one side. […] When they unbury a strigoi, they always find it complete and undecayed, as it was buried*" (Candrea, 1999: 177) ("*when they opened the coffin, the woman lay face down, bearing no sign that she was dead*"). Hence, in the absence of some rational, scientific explanation of the situation, the woman may as well *be* a *strigoi*.

In the next story, however, the "diagnosis" is already established:

"*I heard the story from a former schoolmate. Apparently, several houses away, a woman died. She was one of those people born with a white strand of hair who are said to turn into strigoi after they die. The simple ritual that had to be fulfilled was to stick a spike in her heart. But the husband did not believe in superstitions and would not mutilate his late wife, so he gave up the idea. Well, as is tradition, people came to attend the wake and, on the second night, one of those mourning the dead woman saw her smile. And how she was grinning from ear to ear! The man got scared and called the widower. The latter insisted it was only a rictus and still would not stick a nail in her heart. It was all well and good, but the next morning they found one of the mourners dead. Call the doctor, call the police, turn him, smell him, tickle him… the conclusion: dead of natural causes. Old women started to talk, that she was dead, she was a strigoi, she had to be stabbed. The husband would not hear of that. Another day passed, the last day of wake. In the morning, the priest came, people came to attend the funeral and… surprise! Another mourner dead nearby the smiling stiff. Again came the police, the doctor… the same conclusion. And what with the priest and his crosses and what with the crones and the spike and the husband still refused.*

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Eventually, several villagers pinned him down and the priest took out a stake and pierced her heart. This friend of mine said that the blood gushed from her chest as if from a tank, they heard a short shriek and the smile vanished from the stiff's face. They all made the sign of the cross and proceeded with the funeral. And, after that, peace and quiet."[3]

This story was collected from the Internet, from a specialised blog, which is an indication that urban legends have stepped into the 21st century. Just as the previous story, the narrator (the blogger) also reveals his source – "a former schoolmate" – precisely to make his story credible, although the use of "apparently" seems to cast a shadow of doubt over the authenticity of the incident.

Here there are all conditions for the deceased person to turn into a *strigoi*: she was born with a white strand of hair, so it is clear what has to be done: the *strigoi* has to be *fixed*. In other words, a typical ritual must be performed so as to prevent the dead person's soul from coming out of the grave and harassing people, to annul the demonic power: to stick a spike in its heart. What the villagers deem to be beyond any doubt, the widower believes it is just superstition, so he opposes his wife's being mutilated, which is an attitude that contravenes the laws of the community. Coincidence or a consequence of violating tradition, a number of bizarre incidents occur. First, the dead woman smiles "from ear to ear", a grin that fills people with terror, except the husband who merely thinks it is only a normal post-mortem rictus. Then, the two nights of wake bring the sudden death, "by natural causes" – the authorities conclude – of two of the grievers. The traditionalist community judges differently: "*Old women started to talk, that she was dead, she was a strigoi, she had to be stabbed*", therefore what is meant to happen happens, for the *strigoi* does not undergo the ritual of annihilation: it returns to the world of the living and kills those it comes in contact with.

[3] http://legendeurbane.blogspot.com/ (accessed February 23, 2012).

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The widower himself becomes a danger to the safety of the others by refusing to conform to the unwritten laws, so his fellowmen are forced to put the community's interest ahead of the individual's will and perform the ritualistic ceremonial. "*After that, peace and quiet*", a sign that the *execution* according to tradition of the *strigoi* restores the natural order of things.

As previously mentioned, since this is a legend, the narrator does not completely assume the veracity of the incident, for he is not involved in the events. But he speaks as if he were in front of us, an acquaintance of ours, therefore someone who inspires confidence. Apparently, he doesn't seek to create an aura of mystery, a tension which is after all natural in the case of a story about demons; on the contrary, the atmosphere is relaxed and the narrator's purpose is rather to entertain his audience. His tone is humorous, his account becomes amusing through the use of some words which seem quite inappropriate, for they are in contrast with the sinister situation, the comic has grotesque shades: "And how she was grinning from ear to ear!", "call the doctor, call the police, *turn him, smell him, tickle him*", "another mourner dead nearby *the smiling stiff*". Thus, the transmitter becomes a credible *entertainer*. However, the facts converging towards a dramatic climax seem less plausible: the *strigoi* is finally nailed and "*the blood gushed from her chest as if from a tank, they heard a short shriek and the smile vanished from the stiff's face*". It is as if we were watching the scene of the slaying of a vampire in a typical Hollywood horror movie parody.

Further on, the *strigoi* is somewhat more special:

"*In a village from Valcea County, a family was preparing the funeral of their great-grandmother, Paraschiva, who had been born with a white membrane on her head and pale blue eyes, just like all the strigoi. Moreover, all her life, the great-grandmother, also nicknamed Aunt Schiva, had had a white hair strand, which is a clear sign of holiness. Her family was not too willing to bury a strigoi woman, for they feared that, after the burial, she would come and haunt them. To prevent*

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a possible haunting, all family members agreed to stick a spike in their great-grandmother's heart. They put the coffin on a table in the courtyard, called some hard-hearted neighbour and asked him to stick the pale into Aunt Schiva, which just a couple of minutes later happened. After grieving some time by the coffin, the family, the priest and the cantor tried to take it from the table. Stupor! The coffin was impossible to move, the dead woman would not let herself taken to the grave. The family crossed, the priest crossed, the cantor took another sip of brandy and started to burn incense. Apparently, Aunt Schiva had become extremely heavy, just like Saint Parascheva who is said to be impossible to be budged. People say that, to this day, Paraschiva's coffin has not been moved from the courtyard in that Valcea village and thousands of pilgrims come every day from all over the country to touch it."[4]

So we have a geographically, though vaguely, specified area, "a village from Valcea County", and a name, Aunt Paraschiva, elements which anchor the story in reality and make it veridical. The account is dry, concise, devoid of emotion, while facts are well connected just like a well-planned scenario. The burial ceremonial follows the usual stages; the only deviation is the stabbing in the heart of the potential *strigoi*. The woman displays the diagnostic signs of the 'disease': Paraschiva "*had been born with a white membrane on her head and pale blue eyes, just like all the strigoi*", so she will go through an annihilation ritual. It is only a precautionary measure, carried out quickly and without incidents by some ordinary person with a little more strength of character. Still, there is one detail that strikes: beside the potentially evil traits, the old woman has an additional "clear sign of holiness", the white strand of hair.

So far, even the narrator does not seem to question the authenticity of events because everything is circumscribed within an utterly banal normality. It is towards the end that the sensational element

[4]http://www.tpu.ro/adolescenti/sallz-tpu-va-rog-spuneti-mi-niste-legende-urbane-ex-bloody-mary-sa-fie-foarte-de-groaza-as-vrea-sa-speriu-pe-cineva/ (accessed February 23, 2012).

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occurs: the late great-grandmother becomes so heavy that the coffin cannot be budged. Only now does communication somehow undermine the truth of the facts (*apparently*, Aunt Paraschiva had become heavy, *people say* that the coffin is still in the courtyard). So, it is not the existence of the undead that is challenged, but what is truly exceptional, out of the ordinary and, hence, put in some doubt, is that a *strigoi* whose evil power has been suppressed has transformed into a saint.

The comparison with Saint Parascheva is also interesting. Similarities between the two go beyond the name they bear and the fact that their relics draw thousands of pilgrims. It is also the ambivalence of the two figures. Folk belief assimilates Saint Parascheva to Sfânta Vineri, a dual deity in Romanian mythology, in whom two diametrically opposed aspects coexist: a malefic, punitive one and another which is beneficial, protective. In her evil instance, Sfânta Vineri haunts people's houses starting on Thursday night and punishes housewives who do not honour the day by not working. Or, as Otilia Hedeșan puts it, "*It is obvious that the saint is connected to the 'other world' rather than to a canonical-Christian sacredness, while her troubling apparitions, at certain hours of night and in areas that facilitate the passage between the realms of the living and of the dead, place her closer to post-funerary strigoi. On the other hand, her actual involvement into the world of witches puts her nearby the living strigoi, that, according to tradition, are responsible for a number of magical practices*" (Hedeșan, 2000: 63). In her positive hypostasis, Sfânta Vineri is the patroness of women and travellers, of animals and birds. This dual nature makes it possible for the traits and attributes of Saint Parascheva/Vineri to be transferred upon Aunt Paraschiva, *the holy strigoi*.

Folklorists often exclude from the definitions they give to contemporary legends such phenomena as the paranormal, the supernatural or cryptozoological elements. According to the American researcher Jan Harold Brunvand, few of the stories classified as "urban legends" involve the intervention of the supernatural, although most of

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them display bizarre, unusual and generally *un*natural features (Brunvand, 2001: 429), such as "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" or "The Devil at the Disco". Still, Brunvand states, these are updated versions of traditional supernatural legends and are related to folk traditions of the past, while modern legends rely on real, though unusual, situations. By naming their object of study *modern*, *contemporary* or *urban* legend, folklorists do not include in this category those supernatural narratives, survivals of the times of yore, pushing them to the realm of *traditional* or *rural* folklore.

On the other hand, the Hungarian-American expert Linda Dégh challenged these views, convinced that modern industrial society favours and cultivates the irrational and the legend is precisely the perfect manifestation of it (Brunvand, 2001: 429). Dégh justifies her opinion giving as an example the existence of contemporary sects and cults, the numerous stories about haunted houses and the return of the dead or the attention to supernatural themes in the media. Hence, the researcher suggests that the legend be also defined as an account "*about an extranormal (supernatural or its equivalent) experience attested by situational facts*" which "*happens to average people within their cultural realms but contradicts accepted norms and values of society at large*" (Brunvand, 2001: 430).

The tales about supernatural beings are, according to the Romanian ethnologist Constantin Eretescu, a prolific category, as human existence cannot be conceived outside mythological beings. "*They accompany us, watch over our actions, punish and sometimes bless up*" (Eretescu, 2003: 34). Moreover, Eretescu believes, modern society has in no way altered ancient concepts about afterlife, reincarnation or spiritual survival after physical death (Eretescu, 2010: 16). The supernatural envelops the natural world and the dead stay with the living in a very real sense, witnessing the events of the earthly world and sometimes being even able to intervene.

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