

Dan Radu Munteanu /PRIESTS — THE MOUNTAINS HIGH

It is impossible to discuss Romanian spirituality, without paying a pious respect to the tutelary entity that has made it possible — Romanian folklore. One of the richest in Europe, it is the decanted expression of an attitude towards life, as is any folklore in the world. As such, it is both universally true and unique. Its uniqueness might be described as a form of constructive pessimism that helps man overcome the numberless obstacles of phenomenal existence, to eventually achieve a mild transcendence, which in the Romanian vision is inextricably related to nature. In spite of the often chaotic and painful forms that existence may take, in spite of the innumerable sufferings that one may be subjected to, the lesson of Romanian tradition is balance. The only effort worth making, regardless of circumstances, is the effort towards equilibrium — an equilibrium that is more profound than the classical Roman concept of virtue, since it derives its strength not from an austere mental concept, but from nature itself. Tragic conscience is not characteristic of the Romanian vision. Romanian history is replete with tragedy and probably that is why, in order to prevail, one has to aim higher and seek support from an order beyond contradiction.

The highest artistic expression of this vision is the ballad *Miorita* (the Ewe-lamb). A strange poem, it tells the story of a shepherd in mortal danger. His two mates, out of envy and greed, plan to kill him at sunset and appropriate his flocks. He is warned about their plan by one of his ewe-lambs which, having magically acquired human speech, relates to him the conversation of the other two shepherds. At this point, the logical cause-effect order is broken. The hero of the ballad ignores the warning. Even more, he takes it as an accomplished fact. He does not act, nor does he comment. He merely asks the ewe-lamb to tell the shepherds that his wish is to be buried close to his sheepfold and to have three small pipes laid beside him: one of beech, one of

bone, and one of elder so that the blowing wind will play on them and the sheep will hear and weep. But the sheep must not be told of his death. Instead, the ewe-lamb must tell them that the shepherd has gone to marry. Following is a cosmic allegory of death as a wedding: "At my wedding, tell/How a bright star fell./ Sun and moon came down/ To hold my bridal crown,/ Firs and maple trees/ Were my guests; my priests/ Were the mountains high;/ Fiddlers birds that fly,/ All birds of the sky;/ Torchlights, stars on high."¹

What seems a curious inability to respond appropriately to a deadly challenge is, in fact, a leap into transcendence which re-establishes the balance, not by means of catharsis as a result of tragic confrontation, but by direct identification with the universal order. Dialectics governs the two murderous shepherds, not the hero of the ballad.

In the Romanian folklore conception, the human condition is flawed because of its alienation from nature. Hence a return to the order of nature is the path to salvation. One could say that a defining trace of Romanian folklore is a sense of the lost paradise. One of its most frequently recurring motifs is that of *dor*. The word is hard to translate owing to its complex connotations. It means "yearning," "longing," "nostalgia," but also "heart's desire," "torment of love," "woe." It expresses an aspiration towards an equilibrium that humanity has lost and has been deeply missing ever since. However, it should be noted that the "dor" motif is not mystical, but philosophical. The mystical state strives to achieve ecstasy, which is intense tension culminating in the explosion of contradiction. The "dor" concept aims at the same thing, yet it does not explode the contradiction but, rather, nullifies it. The Romanian peasant has a structural aversion for violence. He is tolerant and he believes in harmony.

This conception of existence has profoundly influenced Romanian

1. *Romanian Popular Ballads*, Minerva Publishing House, Bucharest, 1980, pp. 375-377.

culture. Consequently, the extraordinary changes occurring in Romania today must be looked at in order to be understood, bearing in mind the lesson folklore has to teach. Like anywhere in Eastern Europe, Romanian intellectuals are engaged in an effort to rethink the relationship between man and the fundamental entities: society, history, God. The fifth decade of this century brought about in Eastern Europe what the Romanian writer N. Steinhardt called "tremendum": a social experiment that started in Russia in 1917 and spilt over its borders into the neighbouring countries claiming to liberate man from injustice and return his long lost dignity. But the new system did exactly the opposite. It came into being and lasted for so long because it capitalized on the dark side of human nature. It offered a subtle and terribly tempting deal: it claimed one's freedom in exchange for one's absolution from responsibility. And so, it came to pass that institutions lost their meaning and were turned into a mockery. Generations were born and people began to learn that, as Milan Kundera put it, life is elsewhere. But they had to cope with the new realities. And they did. Some succumbed and accepted the absolution from responsibility with relish. Thus, a new class was created and it infested the whole social structure. However, the majority did not sign the pact. Instead, they developed an elaborate system of subterfuge and role playing designed to give to Caesar what was Caesar's and to God what was God's. But that was not an easy exercise and it generated an ever growing pressure of alienation, of existing on two levels. Nowhere in Eastern Europe was this pressure so hard to bear as in Romania, in the '80s.

This tension may be a partial explanation for the violent events of December 1989. What can be stated with certainty is that period marked the beginning of labours that are far from over. Romania is in a process of redefining itself. The institutions of the state have to be rebuilt, a process that requires serious meditation. A new constitution is subject to public debate. Consequently, the meaning and role of the three powers in a state — the legislative, executive, and judiciary — have become a matter of general concern. Economic collapse has generated an acute sense of fear, insecurity, and confusion. The unsolved problem of the Hungarian minority is used by some to justify

an emerging nationalistic trend, quite disturbing since it is so alien to the Romanian spirit of tolerance.

Given these complex realities, as well as the Romanian traditional predisposition to dream the transcendence, the relationship between man and the sacred is one of utmost importance. The following two texts reflect it. It should be noted, however, that the religious debate going on at present in Romania is not so much concerned with matters of dogma, but rather with the broader question of faith. Quite often, this is translated into Christian Orthodox terms, as Mr. Plesu does in his response to Mr. Liiceanu's interview with Eugène Ionesco. The reason is that, on the one hand, for centuries, the Romanian people have been predominantly Christian Orthodox and, on the other, that one needs a specialized terminology when discussing matters of faith. The Christian Orthodox vocabulary is just as good as any. What is, in fact, under scrutiny in the following two texts, is the existence of evil in the world, the miracle of love, the mystery of death, and the presence or absence of God. These fundamental great questions gain their full relevance if one remembers that the anonymous author of the ballad *Miorita* situates his cosmic drama "Near a low foothill/ At Heaven's doorsill."

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