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Păcală, the Romanian Traditional Rogue, Trickster and Wanderer

Summary

The present study is a first attempt to reevaluate a famous series of Romanian traditional folk-tales from the perspective of the picaresque story. These stories appeared in the rural Romania roughly at the same time when the picaresque story appeared in Spain and then was soon acknowledged in Britain, France and Germany, as a reaction to the development of the medieval town with its problems. The picaroon, or the rogue is the main character of these stories, with its more dramatic or humorous characteristics, but displaying the same main features. We think that the Romanian hero Păcală belongs to the same family of heroes, he is a picaroon: a poor orphan, trying to find his place in society, having a profound understanding of human nature, playing on people's vices and greed, lying and deceiving in order to find a place in society, wearing various masks, planning tricks, etc. At the same time, the Romanian rogue story has other characteristics than the Spanish 'original' due to the special condition of the Romanian rural community, with its beliefs and behaviours. Thus, Păcală is meditative, but rarely introspective, he accepts things for what they are, not questioning their status, he understands the rules of the village and tries to find a place in his own village (unlike Spanish or English rogues who run as far as possible from their birthplaces, so that they can pretend to be someone they are not).

In the following studies, separate Păcală tales will be considered from the point of view of the picaresque content, form and style characteristics.

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The study of genres, although shadowed for almost two decades due to the newly developed studies on narratology and postmodernism, has ‘made up’ much for the ‘lost’ grounds with more recent studies such as those written by Stam (2000) and Devitt (2004). Stam is a film theoretician, and it is through film that he reached to the older texts, because he noticed that even though critics declare that genres are ‘dead’ and that Genette and Todorov have changed the whole discussion about genres and moved it in the realm of narratology and text grammar, the audience (viewers of movies, but also readers or hall-audiences) still define art in terms of genres. They do not say “I have read a postmodern novel that foregrounds the tribulations of the interior monologue of the characters”, but “I have read a psychological novel”. Amy Devitt, at her turn, attempted to give such a comprehensive definition of genre, as to ‘accommodate’ both the text, its author, the reader (or audience), the expectation of generations, the various readings that depend on such factors as social, political and economical background. She insists that “genre be seen not as a response to recurring situations but as a nexus between an individual’s actions and a socially defined context. Genre is a reciprocal dynamic within which individuals’ actions construct and are constructed by recurring contexts of situation, contexts of culture, and contexts of genres. Genre is visible in classification and form, relationships and patterns that develop when language users identify different tasks as being similar. But genre exists through people’s individual rhetorical actions at the nexus of the contexts of situation, culture, and genres” (31)

Frye and Genette viewed genres from the point of view of “universal genres” (Frye), and forms of “diegesis” (Genette). Thus, in *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Northrop Frye, representing the Second wave of the Formalist school of literary theory, considered that all literary texts are organized according to a range of universal genres, as well as universal modes. In his 1989 important study on genre, Alistair Fowler demonstrates that it is not only possible to apply generic studies to postmodern literature, but also that such studies can reveal many aspects that remain unclarified without such approach. He also refers to Bakhtin, Frye and Genette in considering that man has certain ways in which he tells his stories, and that genres are never pure, they come in various times under various forms, and they also mix to satisfy the taste of the readers.

The picaresque appeared as a genre in Medieval Spain, and spread in all Europe soon enough. The Spanish picaresque became the English rogue, the German Simplizzissimus, and the French Gil Blas, the tragic-comic story of the a character faced with both the predicaments of his destiny and the social prejudices and absurdities of the time lured many writers of the day. On and off, the picaresque has never left the scene of European literature, and especially Spanish and British literatures (Tomoiaga, doctoral thesis, unpublished). Eastern texts that belong to the genre have also made their way, with such a splendid example like *The Adventures of the Brave Soldier Svejek*, Hasek’s novel.

In Romania, the medieval times are not represented in literature by ‘high’ literature, we did not have a Cervantes, or a Fielding, but, still, there is one character in traditional culture, who is a picaresque, a trickster, and a wanderer at the same time – Păcală. In order that we may show the similarities and dissimilarities between Păcală and the ‘norm’ picaresque, the Spanish picaresque, we will look at those characteristics of the character that most critics agree upon (F.W. Chandler, 1958; Peter Dunn, 1982; Claudio Gullien, 1981; Ulrich Wicks, 1989; and A. Willis, 2005). Thus, critics



Casă din Preluca Nouă; foto: Felician Săteanu

show that the first “picaroons” were called “conversos”, as they were Jews who had to hide their real identity. They do not make of their personal histories dogmatic or doctrinarian comments, they are not real social critics, especially as they have to deal with more stringent matters, as Guillén notes: the picaroon has to deal with the “economic and social predicament of the most immediate and pressing nature” (77) and does not have very much time to draw moral and philosophical conclusions. There are two clear stages of the Spanish picaresque, a realistic one, in which the stories of an existing, real category of people were told, and the baroque stage, in which the picaresque story starts having a more aesthetic function (Munteanu 134).

The picaroon, especially in older stories, is an isolated individual, ‘thrown’ in a state of crisis, very often an orphan who is forced to face a hostile society. “After a series of events, he will soon discover that he has to find a social role, that he cannot just be an outsider, that society cannot be ignored. Thus, he will try to find a role to play, even though this means cheating, lying, deceiving, etc. He is not only urged by the need to belong to a certain social group, but also, by the even more urgent material needs, which make him be even more vigilant and a keener observer of social realities. Thus, he reaches the conclusion that evil has to be accepted as a natural phenomenon: the picaroon, in his social ascend, becomes, consequently, an icon of amorality” (Tomoiağa, doctoral thesis, unpublished).

Angela Willis gives five main coordinates that define the story of the picaroon as follows: “1. The protagonist is a young, unlucky individual who relentlessly fights against all odds, but who never loses his hope or ‘candour’; 2. Though he is mischievous, he remains ‘noble’. His very survival justifies his behaviour; 3. The picaresque novel criticizes institutions of social control, espe-

cially of the Church and the Inquisition in Lazarillo's case. Thus, it functions like a panoramic 'mural' of society; 4. Structurally, the tale is written as a missive or report and is addressed to a destinataire; 4. The novel's language is simple, yet replete with colourful 'irony, sarcasm and even exaggeration'".

The picaroon, thus, is, generally, a poor orphan, who is intelligent, lacks scruples, lazy, but resourceful, a keen observer of human behaviour and psychology, having no illusions, but with a sane belief in divine justice. His stories are humorous, even though they very often contain grotesque, and even horrible events. Many of these stories contain fortunate strikes of destiny to save the hero. The picaroon tries to settle down, to find a place of his own in this world, and often he succeeds to fool people that he has changed. He likes to live, he has *savoir vivre*, but cannot be satisfied with a simple, humble, eventless life, cannot settle for being poor and humiliated. He, thus, will serve many masters, he will pretend to be many people, he will fool others so that they could not get the chance to fool him, he will deceive, lie and corrupt, sometimes just to procure his everyday bread. Most of the times, though, he tries to climb the social ladder, in order to be a member of the higher ranks, by assuming false identities. In the meantime, he will also have fun, make jokes, play on people's trust and stupidity, play the rules of society to his advantage. These latter characteristics are especially to be found in English versions of the picaresque tale, where the rogues are very often tricksters, as well.

In the Romanian tales with Păcală, the main character shares many of these characteristics: his father dies when he is still young, he remains very poor (three brothers are left with no land, just a cow). He, then, has to trick his brothers and remain with the cow, but, as he is not a very keen worker, he decides he must sell the cow and make money. Thus, he leaves his village, his social status (a poor member of his village), and goes through numerous adventures, in which he tries to turn everything he notices about people to his own benefit. He likes to travel, to mix up things for the people he encounters, to cheat and deceive, and he has fun with all these. He is saved by fortune from most of the edgy situations (in the best tradition of the picaresque story). Păcală's favourite victims are priests, who prove to be greedy and very un-holy (similar to the Spanish picaresque tales, in which the Church as an Inquisitional Institution is represented in the darkest tones).

The main differences between the Romanian picaroon and the Western one, are a consequence of the very special characteristics of the Romanian peasant, of the village, the rural community, and, last but not least, from the different outlook on life, if we may say so, without falling in the traps of stereotypical thinking.

The rural community in Romania was the predominant type of community for much longer than in other countries (for most parts of the country it still is). If in Spain, in Britain, in France or Germany, the 17th century was the century when towns and cities started to develop at a quick pace, subsequently creating the framework for new social strata and new social behaviours, in our country towns were really scarce at that time, and for at least another two centuries. The village community dictated behaviour, way of life, the do's and don'ts of society. Even local barons and boyars had the same vision on life. Some of them would go to bigger towns once in a while, to București or Iași, but their mentality did not differ very much from that of the peasants, themselves. The very strict social casts in Spain, were paralleled in the Romanian village by virtually two 'classes': the land owners (be they buyers, or richer peasants), and the land-less peasants, who were not actually slaves, but who had almost no chance to become respected members of the community, from a socially point of view.

The village community's main activities revolved around working the land, raising cattle

and poultry (or sheep, in the mountains), growing vegetable and trees, and most customs and traditions regarded the succession of activities that needed to be performed so that these works be completed in time and with best results. Weather conditions were very important, and the right type of hard work needed to be respected. Having more land meant having more work to do, so villagers needed to be healthy, to have healthy children who could work hard in order that the land be preserved in the family. The lazy, the slow, the sick, and the mentally unstable were very quickly sanctioned and partly excluded from society. Nevertheless, the genius of the village traditional story tellers understood the special position of such a person – the lazy quick-witted Păcală – as he could observe everybody else from an outside position. When his father died he did not have to be part of the same well-established circle of work and life, the guiding and punishing instance of his life disappeared; he could do whatever he pleased now, and put his intelligence to work, instead.

Păcală plays tricks on priests, on church singers and land owners, on the rich and the poor, sanctioning especially their greed and selfishness, he understands how and why people get to be full of vices, he has a half-amused-half-bewildered attitude towards betrayal and deceit. Thus, his tricks, even when they seem rather cruel and merciless (when, for instance he drives all the men in a village in the river in a mass-suicidal attempt to find richness on the bottom of the river, and he remains the only man in a village full of young beautiful widowed wives), have a humorous tone. In fact, the reader understands that Păcală's actions are told by somebody who does not tell the truth, but wants to use these tales like funny and grotesque parables. Unlike Spanish or English rogue tales, and more like the German ones, the Romanian tales about Păcală, the picaroon, have an element of the absurd, of a dreamlike reality, and even a supernatural character. After leaving his home and selling the cow, Păcală and his brothers found a treasure under a tree, and then, being discovered by the thieves who used to bury their riches there, he got astray from his brothers. He did not try to carry any gold with him in his flight from the thieves, but a sack of holy incense, which he burned when he was safe. The smell of the incense rose to heaven, and God sent for him and granted him any gift he wanted to choose from his gardens. This passage is composed by the traditional story tellers in such a way as to render the whole irony of the stories. He trickster cannot think of anything else but playing tricks, and he does not take himself seriously at all, knowing who he is and what he deserves.

As compared to other European traditional picaroons, Păcală's attitude is different, telling the story of another type of community than the Spanish cast-based, inquisitorial one. He is also different from the English picaroon, who is also ironic and intelligent, but who is faced with another kind of problems, related to the city, to a world revolving around bad neighbourhoods and strange inns, around corrupt justice and superficial aristocratic manners. He is not slow witted or innocent, like the German Simplizzissimus, he is intelligent, witty, he enjoys life and likes people, but he also has the capacity to reveal the sometimes funny, other times vicious secrets they have. In the best Romanian tradition, Păcală, by laughing at human errors and by putting a mirror of truth in front of their deceits and vices, makes these look less horrible, makes people see themselves and this leads to a very sound psychological therapy. We can imagine the villagers listening to the story tellers and laughing at Păcală and his adventures, but also laughing at their own behaviours and falls. The readers/listeners are not faced with the gloomy world of thieves and beggars trying to make their way to a higher position that they obtain by deceiving and lying and by putting wit to work for their mischievous plans (as the Spanish and British traditions do), but with the settled, balanced world of the village, with its rules, customs and mores, but which, from time to time needs to be a little bit shaken by a short, humorous glimpse of its faults and stereotypes.

The Western European rogues are always trying to go as far as possible from their hometown, from people who can identify them with their true origin and facts. They find on the road new and new masks to put on and disguise their real identity, they sometimes forget who they initially were altogether, in their attempt to escape their bad fate. On the contrary, Păcală wants to go back to his village, one of the tales is even entitled like that, *Păcală Back To His Village*. It is there that he wants to be accepted for what he is, the formerly orphan, poor youth, who got to a better position after he wandered around the world. This attitude is typical for somebody who lives in a small community, it is the typical attitude for us, Romanians, generally, who always have this dream of coming back home, no matter how far away life might have taken us.

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