The Forest, Labyrinth of the Unconscious: Țugulea, the Son of the Old Couple (Petre Ispirescu)

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Among the genres of folk literature, tales have become, in our opinion, the most important means of breaking the boundaries between generations and of going back to our “world within”, to our Self. The analysis of tales involves an interdisciplinary approach. Folklore studies make the material available to us, but it cannot be studied without resorting to the theory of mentalities, the history of religions and myths, or the new approaches of the theory of imaginary and of cultural anthropology. Understanding the pre-Christian substratum, but most of all getting inside the mentality of archaic communities is extremely difficult, because mentalities adapt to historical events.

In Romanian culture, forests are ambivalent spaces, of protection and safety, but also of fears and wandering. They are deemed passages to the other world, realms of initiation, of incursion into the subconscious, of preparation for entering a new stage of life. To study the extraordinary voyages into the forest, we will analyse Țugulea, the Son of the Old Couple, a tale gathered by Petre Ispirescu. Crossing the border and returning to the familiar space are the best proof of the existence of another dimension.

Keywords: Romanian folk tale, theory of imaginary, the forest, theory of the limit.

In Romanian culture, forests are ambivalent spaces, of protection and safety, but also of fears and wandering. They are deemed passages to the other world, realms of initiation, of incursion into the subconscious, of preparation for entering a new stage of life. The crossing of the forest is a rite of initiation in itself. It doesn't only involve a separation from the community, but also the entrance to the unknown, beyond the borders of *ecumenia*, to a space which functions by other norms, where the order is completely different. Every time, the forest reveals other paths; each step may lead to unknown places, to the *heart* of the forest, synonymous with the unconscious, a dangerous space hiding mysteries that are unfathomable to the uninitiated. Here, one can lose or find oneself, can stay forever its prisoner or can be set free by it and granted a new outlook on the world. Forests hide in order to protect, they are a space of germination and of preparation for another stage of existence, just like the maternal womb. Regardless of the means by which the heroes of Romanian tales enter the other world – an imaginary of ascension or one of descent – the forest appears as a constant. Even if the journey is made along a vertical axis, it includes a passage through the forest, a probing of the unconscious (the tale *The World's Beauty, the World's Brave*, gathered by I. Oprişan). That seems natural for a civilization of the wood, organically linked to nature. Quite often, tale

characters live at the edge of the forest, in the world at the border, guarding the entry to the natural sanctuary.

Țugulea, the Son of the Old Couple is a tale gathered by Petre Ispirescu[1] and included in the volume *Legende sau basmele românilor (Romanian Legends or Folk Tales)*; in Lazăr Șăineanu's classification, it belongs to "The Cycle of *Heroic Deeds*", "The Type *Live and Dead Water*"[2]. The tale starts with an introduction of characters, an old man and an old woman, "poor as church-rats. When they had flour, they didn't have any salt; when they had salt and flour, they didn't have any vegetables. They lived from hand to mouth. They had three children, dressed in rags and sloven, and wretched. The youngest one was clearly smarter than the eldest two, but he was crippled of both his legs. His name was Țugulea."[3] Heroes are "barren" of any worldly possession; they always lack something essential for survival. The rags highlight "the superiority of the profound self over the superficial self"[4].

The "reverse analogy" Vasile Lovinescu[5] spoke of is very well outlined. The ones apparently having less chances to achieve something have the best prospects available to them once they challenge their destiny. But the tale immediately shows us the exceptional side of that situation. The old couple's family live near a boundary: "They were neighbours with the Mother Ogress". She is guilty of their youngest son's misfortune, because "at Țugulea's birth, when the fairy godmothers came, the Mother Ogress also happened to be there. She had heard his destiny and, out of envy, she then took his veins and left him a cripple."[6]

The character acquires new valences. He is no longer the crippled son of an old couple, but a boy whose veins were stolen, out of envy or as a precautionary measure. We are dealing with a character considered dangerous by the Mother Ogress. The fact that she "happened to be there" when the fairy godmothers decided the destiny of the infant is a proof of the interaction between the two worlds. She comes from outside the village boundaries, from the world beyond the border guarded by the archetypal ancestors (the old couple).

Since "the legs are a symbol of the soul"[7], we can argue that the Ogress steals the child's soul, which she protects by placing it in a box that she keeps behind the stove, at the centre of her world. Thus, the youngest brother belongs to the category of imbalanced, incomplete characters. This is why he grows to be mocked by his brothers and the entire community. His poverty and handicap homologate him as a "blank", "unwritten" character, ready to become filled with knowledge.

The trigger of the tale's action is the moment when Țugulea asks his mother to beg her rich brother to give them "'a runt of a mare, so that on her back we can go hunting, 'cause I can't stand to sit around like a hen on her eggs and do nothing'." The character feels *the inner limit* as a drawback, and he has reached "the negative moment" when it becomes *a limit to overcome*. Thus, he aims for *the limit to be reached*, for "the achievement of his destiny"[8], which he provokes by detaching himself from the space of his home. The hearth is considered the centre of the house and implicitly of the world, a true "centre sanctioned and established in a magical and ritual manner"[9]. The hero wishes to break out from that space, feminine by definition (he brings into discussion "sitting around like a hen on her eggs"), and wants to "go hunting", a typically male occupation. The hunt is the prerogative of exceptional heroes, an act bringing the establishment of the young man within the community, an attribute of youth, of the one preparing oneself to enter the ranks of adults, i.e. preparing oneself for the ritual of initiation. The hunt is an "expansion of divine creation; it consists of pushing farther the limits of the Chaos, which, in the form of a wild creature, continues to exist at the boundaries of organized world."[10]

The three brothers go hunting for three days, *extra muros*, outside the village territory. Țugulea proves surprisingly quick-handed: "Not one arrow missed its target. They all hit the flesh." On the third night, Țugulea has a dream: "It appeared like he was in a garden beautiful like the Heavens. (...) Birds were singing heartily. The leaves on the trees whispered in the gentle wind and the flowers exuded an intoxicating perfume." We are guided to look downwards, first listening to the birds, then seeing the whispering trees, and in the end contemplating the flowers, whose smell has a hallucinogen effect. Țugulea, only a passive spectator in a corner of this Paradise, "sad and sick at heart that he couldn't walk in the garden and enjoy its beauties", asks God to take away his life.

At that moment, a fairy appears, "so beautiful and gentle, the likes of whom he had never seen any being." The fairy, his good godmother, reveals to him that his destiny is to become an emperor and that the Mother Ogress took his veins, then she gives him a sash that, worn around his waist, "will turn you into whatever you want to be, if you tumble head over heels three times."[11] The lad wakes up with the sash in his hand. "Tale heroes tumble head over heels three times so that they undergo a metamorphosis. (...) they turn into a spiralling swirl which leads them to a matrix point, (...) where they become what they want to and get redistributed in the realm that they search for."[12] This way, Țugulea is given the capacity to probe the matrix space, in order to regain his stolen veins.

A few days later, they go hunting again. When his brothers go to sleep, it is the right time for the youngest one to try the powers of his sash. He turns into a bee "and goes north, where the Mother Ogress lived". He enters her house and listens on the conversation between her, who is the embodiment of telluric and diabolical femininity, her three daughters and her sons-in-law. He finds out that his veins are kept at the

centre of the ogres' world, behind the stove of Mother Ogress, in a box. The ogres receive the following piece of advice: "Beware of this Ţugulea boy, damned be his name; I myself am afraid of him, even if I took away his veins."[13]

In Romanian folk cosmogony, there are several animals and insects that take an active part, next to God and the devil, in the creation of the world and the organic, coherent process that follows. "The hedgehog, the frog, the bee, the spider, the pigeon, the stag, St. John, Noah and other folk representations accomplish, *together* with the canonical beings, or *in their place*, all the fundamental actions related to the making of the things around us." [author's emphasis] [14] The participation in the creation of the world turns bees into mediators between this world and the other, because "they exist before the material universe, have the power and knowledge specific to any demiurge, institute and establish forms of the current universe." Bees, just like hedgehogs and frogs, "have a surplus of knowledge and of creative power, which enable them to replace Christian representations."[15] Ţugulea finds out that, in order to prepare for the wedding of her youngest daughter, "the nasty ogress sent each of her sons-in-law hunting in a different place."[16] By establishing the route of each ogre, the Ogress proves her authority.

On another evening, when the Ogress wasn't home, Ţugulea, turned into a fly, entered the room, "took the veins from the box and put them on his legs. Instantly, the veins stuck to his legs like they were never taken off."[17] The hero gets back his blood, the essence of life, "vehicle and symbol of life"[18], thus becoming whole. In Gorj, a Romanian county, there is this custom of painting the room where someone died, after the funeral. It is considered that „'the archangel had severed the soul of the dead person from the body' and the blood had been splattered on the walls of the room, which consequently had to be painted."[19] The blood is perceived as the keeper of one's soul. Only now, after getting his veins back, Ţugulea becomes a complete hero, ready to fight the ogres and able to make the journey towards his own destiny, that of an emperor.

On the following night, the lad "came in the way of the eldest ogre", and, after a fair fight, cut his head and took his horse and weapons (the attributes of any warrior). The second ogre shares the same fate as the eldest, and Ţugulea starts for the youngest ogre. That one is killed in his turn and his horse and weapons are taken; the entire escapade to the other world has to be concluded before dawn, when the hero heads back to the world at the border, back home. The night "is associated with darkness, Chaos, hell, earth, death, ignorance, confusion, the unconscious. (...) it is the beginning of all things good and evil. (...) It's the time of gestation, germination, the time for preparing the actions and processes that start to manifest in the daylight."[20]

The time between the first cockcrow, at midnight, and the third cockcrow, around 3-3:30 AM, is controlled by evil spirits. Midnight is perceived as a turning point, a moment of precarious balance, the middle of the road, where evil spirits take over our universe. By his action, Ţugulea must restore the order, starting with the recovery of his own blood and continuing with fighting the ogress's sons-in-law. This way he prepares himself for the confrontation with his northern neighbour.

On the following morning, riding the horse of the youngest ogre, Ţugulea, accompanied by his brothers, goes hunting. Discovering that the veins are missing, the Ogress knows that her sons-in-law have been killed and sends her daughters to kill Ţugulea. The ogress's eldest daughter turns into a vine laden with grapes, in the middle of the forest. The hero cuts the vine that bleeds "blood the colour of black oil". The second daughter metamorphoses into a plum-tree orchard, and the youngest daughter into a fountain. They are all killed by Ţugulea with his sword.

The old ogress goes herself after the lad to kill him, in the shape of a "small red cloud approaching" like the wind. Ţugulea advises his brothers to go home, to a protective space. He hides in a cave and waits for the "forsaken ogress" to pass him by. The cave is "a matrix symbol, associated both with the maternal womb, and with the earth – the womb that gave birth to all beings." [21] It is a place that provides protection.

After the ogress "passed by the cave like the lightning and went forward", the lad heads "back to the east". At the beginning of the journey, the hero's travelling direction was the south-north axis, and now coordinates change, the hero heading east, and the ogress west. If we use north and east as temporal reference points, and not as spatial landmarks, the text becomes more coherent. Midnight is "the peak of the raging of the evil spirits of darkness"[22], it is the time of the first cockcrow. The tale hero heads east, to the court of an emperor "who for twenty years had been building a very tall wall between his kingdom and the ogress's lands (...) and he had just finished it."[23] The moment when Ţugulea arrives at the emperor's court is one of completion. The separation from the ogress's realm is now complete. "The *intra muros* space is centred and enclosed (has borders), cultivated and cultural, inhabited and ordered, in a word, it is a space turned *cosmic* (in the Pythagorean meaning of the word *Kosmos* = a well-ordered universe)."[24] By building this wall, the emperor tries to separate himself from chaos, which is "non-enclosed", "non-centred" and "unordered". The *extra muros* space "is, for the mythical mentality, a 'world beyond', where not only the beasts

live, but also the dragons and the witches, the disease demons and evil spirits; a world that is undecided and unenclosed, unsure, unknown, foreign, even hostile, a world of all the virtualities and latencies."[25]

Țugulea asked the emperor to "quickly command all the blacksmiths to make him at once a big iron mace with which he would kill the old ogress too". "He asked them to make a whole in the middle of the city wall, and then ordered them to bring a great pile of woods, which he set on fire in the middle of the city; on that fire he put the iron mace, in order to burn it and make it red-hot."[26] The crossing from a world to another can only be done through the centre of each world. This is why the whole has to be in the middle of the wall, and the iron mace has to be kept in a fire made in the centre of the city. The weapon will be charged with positive energies in the purifying fire, so that it can defeat the one coming from the *non-cosmic* space. The ogress shows her devouring capacity when, finding the breach in the wall, "starts to suck, wanting to swallow everything there was in the city. (...) Țugulea, (...) keeping his mace red as fire by its handle, went to the whole. When the ogress sucked in, she absorbed the burning mace, which went straight to her heart."[27] The mace is "the weapon of archaic warriors, initially a wooden club, turned into a mace in the age of metal working; it symbolizes the brute and primitive force, but is the weapon of gods and heroes." [28] We think that the weapon in this text is actually a mace and not a club, since it is stated that it is made by blacksmiths. The symbolism of the two weapons is similar: they have a double value – beneficial and maleficent, and they are "a symbol of the warrior initiation brotherhoods". [29]

Given a high rank, Țugulea stays at the emperor's court, but attracts the envy of the nobles. Their council convinces the emperor that the hero wanted to take his country and, to get rid of him, the lad is sent to "the emperor of the Strirs, to ask for the hand of his daughter". Țugulea first meets with his brothers and tells them everything that happened to him, making them envious of him too.

In his journey, he encounters "a man who yelled that he was dying of hunger. He got close to him in order to see what kind of man he was. But what did he see? A man like any other, who was following seven ploughs at work and didn't stop yelling." He "represents the personification of human voracity, but he also seems to be a chthonian demon, symbolizing the devouring power of the earth all forms of life and all man-made objects come from and return to."[30]

The hero will later on encounter "another man, in whose mouth the water from nine fountains was pouring, but he kept on yelling that he was dying of thirst", and another one who had tied two grindstones to his legs, but he still "jumped from one mountain to another and when he ran, he got to touch the hares on their backs, and still yelled that he didn't have enough room to run". These are embodiments of excess, true Gargantuas, who swallow without chewing, without destroying things, and are willing to place their extraordinary abilities in the service of the hero. Țugulea also encounters "a man with a moustache half white and half black, dressed in nine sheepskin coats, who yelled that he was dying of cold", as well as an unexcelled archer, "who looked up with the bow in his hand" and wanted to shoot an arrow at a mosquito that was flying with "the raging wind, up where birds cannot fly". The journey will take the six men to "some mountains filled with trees and greenery", where they encounter "a man who kept on mumbling unintelligibly and, when he threatened with his staff, one hundred little birds appeared before him out of the blue."[31] Even if it doesn't explicitly occur, the forest is suggested during the entire tale. The hero finds himself six helpers: they represent the extremes of hunger, thirst, travelling speed, hunting, cold and heat control, and in the end he encounters the wizard, the mage.

A group of 6+1 will arrive at the Strir emperor's court. Seven is a number with multiple mystical and esoteric significances. "It is the symbolic number of the cosmic wholeness, in accordance with the equation 3-sky + 4-earth = 7-cosmos. (...) It stands for perfection, harmony, luck and happiness."[32] It is the figure signifying the ending of a cycle and the beginning of another; this is why it can be unsettling. Six, the number of the hero's helpers, is "the number of reciprocal gifts and of antagonisms, of the mystical destiny."[33] In Romanian folk tales, it is a symbol related to the realm beyond, to the crossing between the two worlds. All six characters subordinate to one, Țugulea, whom everyone has heard of. He is unanimously considered the bravest of the brave, since he killed the entire ogre family. Țugulea is the singular, the unrepeatable, just like birth or death, God, the Moon or the Sun. One "is a unifying symbol and a sign of reconciled contraries."[34]

In order to gain the hand of the emperor's daughter, the heroes are subject to five trials. The first ones are trials of excess: eating nine ovens of bread and drinking nine barrels of wine. Nine is "the number of plenty", "symbolizes the crowning of efforts, the accomplishment of a creation"[35]. Now, when they have to pass the trials together, 6+1 becomes 7. The characters prepare themselves for entering another cycle of existence. The first symbolic trials involve the consumption of bread and wine in excess. This is some kind of re-enactment of the Agricultural New Year, the Martyrs' holiday, celebrated on the 9th of March, when 40 or 44 "martyr's bagels", anthropomorphic representations made out of bread, are eaten, and 40 or 44 glasses of wine are drunk in order to stimulate nature's fertility.

Then, they are asked to enter a heated oven. The

crossing of the fire is a widespread practice in great folk celebrations. Its purpose is that of purification, but also of renewal of the calendar year. It's the turn of the master of the fire/ice antinomy to help the heroes. He plucks several whiskers of his white moustache and throws them in the oven. "Suddenly, there was frost at the hole of the oven". They all entered and started to yell that they were cold. The emperor threw nine more cartloads of wood in the fire, "but it seemed like the fire burned on ice". The following trial is to bring water from the Fountain of the Witches. The difficulty of this resides in the fact that the emperor organizes a race between one of the hero's helpers, the one with the grindstones tied to his legs, and a maid who "used to race with the greyhounds". The girl makes the helper fall asleep with his head in her lap, and then puts his head on a "dried-up horse head". Also gifted with the capacity to see very far away, the hunter sees what was happening and shoots an arrow "straight into the horse head, making it jump away from under the man's head". Awaken, the hero resumes the race, which he wins; before reaching the emperor, when he passes by the girl, he makes her spill her water. For the last trial, the heroes have to make "fifty barren women give birth in one night"; the trial doesn't seem to pose any problems to the wizard, who, "entering the women's rooms, mumbled something to each and every one of them, and touched each one lightly on the back with his staff, then came out."[36]

As we can see, none of the trials is accomplished by Ţugulea. His status is clear, he has nothing more to prove. All the trials make reference to fertility rites. The Martyrs' holiday is in connection with nature's rebirth; the oven is a symbol of the purifying fire and of the sun; the spilled water is a practice specific to the holiday of St. George, a god of vegetation, having the purpose to ensure wealth and prosperity, and the last trial is the most explicit. It also involves the contraction of time, because the children must be born on the same night. The number nine, which occurs so often in the tale, directly suggests the gestation period. The touching with the staff (the branch full of leaves) has the same connotations related to fertility and rebirth. A "magical transfer of the energies stored in a tree" occurs.[37]

The Strir emperor is forced to admit that the hand of the princess has been won, and the heroes begin their return journey. Each of the helpers will remain "where he had been taken from", and Ţugulea with the emperor's daughter continue their journey.

Ţugulea sees an eagle that he wants to kill, but he spares it in exchange of the promise to help him in need ("'I will do you good when you will be in trouble and you'll think of me'"). Then, they get to a forest where they stop for the night. The road back home must pass through the same high forest that is an access gate to "the white world". Here, in *extra muros*, the two spend the night. Ţugulea helps a bear who had a thorn in its paw, and it also promises the hero its help when it will be summoned. The eagle is considered an intermediary between the two worlds, being "the vehicle of souls to the other world", but also a solar symbol and an "emblem of sovereignty and of supreme power."[38] The bear appears in many cultures as a totemic animal or as a civilizing hero. If the eagle is the master of the sky, the bear is "the master of the world below, a zoomorphic twin of man, occupying an intermediate place between animals and humanity. (...) As a chthonian and lunar animal, he possesses apotropaic, medical and meteorological virtues."[39] Thus, Ţugulea acquires other two helpers, beings tied to the sky and earth.

They arrive at the emperor who had sent the lad to find him a wife, but he wants to get rid of Ţugulea, whom he continues to suspect of the intention to steal his throne; he offers him riches and the girl's hand in marriage, on condition that he goes back home. The lad gladly accepts and resumes his return journey to his parents' home. On the road, he meets his brothers who, out of envy, plan to murder him. The eldest is to take the girl, and the second son will take the horse of their little brother. During the night, hands trembling with fear, they kill him. But, since they didn't cut off his head, "Ţugulea escapes with a sparkle of life, not being completely killed by his brothers." His new friends come to his rescue. The eagle asks the bear to tie to his legs "'two small buckets (...), and I'll fly like the wind to bring remedies for Ţugulea from the water of Jordan, where there are two fountains, with live and dead water'" [40] Thanks to the live and dead water, brought from beyond the sacred waters, the bear and the eagle manage to cure the hero. The dead water has the capacity to close the wounds, and the live water heals.

Finding out from the eagle that the emperor's daughter is forced to marry his eldest brother, Ţugulea heads home, together with his friends. He retrieves his weapons and horse, becoming a complete hero again. His initiatory journey, as well as his getting close to death, completely metamorphoses him, making him unrecognisable even to his old parents. The order is restored by the hero's horse, which tramples the elder brothers under his hooves.

On their deathbed, the Strir emperor and the emperor that Ţugulea had gotten rid of the ogress appoint him as the heir to their thrones. His destiny is now fulfilled, and he becomes emperor of the two kingdoms.

Notes:

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11. Petre Ispirescu, *op.cit*., p. 241.
12. Vasile Lovinescu, *op.cit.*, p. 131.
13. Petre Ispirescu, *op.cit.*, p. 242.
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15. *Ibidem*
16. Petre Ispirescu, *op.cit.*, p. 242.
17. Petre Ispirescu, *op.cit.,* p. 242.
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21. Ivan Evseev, *op.cit.*, p. 365.
22. Ivan Evseev, *op.cit.*, p. 303.
23. Petre Ispirescu, *op.cit.,* p. 244.
24. Mihai Coman, *op.cit.*, p. 158.
25. Mihai Coman, *op.cit.*, pp. 159-160.
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28. Ivan Evseev, *op.cit.*, p. 262.
29. Ivan Evseev, *op.cit.*, p. 262.
30. Ivan Evseev, *op.cit.*, p. 140.
31. Petre Ispirescu, *op.cit.,* pp. 245-246.
32. Ivan Evseev, *op.cit.*, p. 447.
33. Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1995, Tom 3, p. 313.
34. Ivan Evseev, *op.cit.*, p. 474.
35. Chevalier, Gheerbrant, *op.cit.*, Tom 2, p. 349.
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