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PARTY IN THE BALKANS

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Abstract: *Our research on identity issues and patterns has drawn us towards the metaphor of the carnival which has been analyzed by many well-established critics such as Mikhail Bakhtin in Rablais and his world or by Jean Rousset in Baroque literature in France, to mention just a few. We have connected the above studies to two sample texts by a Romanian writer, Vasile Voiculescu, who has a name in the field of traditional writing with a special interest for our folktales and rituals, along with Nikos Kazantzakis' novel, Zorba the Greek, putting focus on the main character and emphasizing his joy for life.*

The purpose of such a quest is to set the type of behaviour typical to the populations living in the Balkan Peninsula. We could have not been successful in this journey of knowledge and of reflecting our image in the mirror, without the help of another core study, Imagining the Balkans, belonging to a Bulgarian scholar, Maria Todorova.

Homo Balkanicus, as the forehand researcher names it, describes the quintessential features of a man that only lives for indulging in the pleasures of life, but not for the sheer feeling of pleasure, as more for the philosophy behind the Epicurean slogan of seizing the day. The theatrical setting for the Homo Balkanicus to unfold all his personality finds an excellent home in the carnival. Undoubtedly, the texts selected from Vasile Voculescu and from Nikos Kazantzakis can provide a better understanding of the metaphor, of the characters involved in the plot, and not in the least, of the space that generated them all, the Balkans.

Keywords: *Balkans, party, life, joy, carnival*

SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Mircea Muthu, discussing the problem of Balkanism in literature, especially in Romanian literature, observes that the South-Eastern European spirituality is the meeting point of severe contradictions. The intense feeling of melancholy cannot possibly be erased by comical literary pieces such as those written by classical Romanian writers, be it Anton Pann or I.L. Caragiale. Being melancholic and easily amused, give birth, therefore, to two essential features of the paradoxical culture in question. They are also the main components of the carnival, the metaphor which describes best the Balkan Peninsula.

Furthermore, the above-mentioned scholar identifies two major stages of development for the Romanian literary Balkanism: the age of tragic history as portrayed in early medieval writings and the age of parody, not confined historically. Both of them are to be found in Vasile Voiculescu's stories (our focus is set on *Party at the monastery*, in this research) and in Nikos Kazantzakis' world famous novel, *Zorba the Greek*.

Analyzing Voiculescu's *Party at the monastery*, Ion Apetroaie, a Romanian researcher, stresses that the Balkan picturesqueness relies on "the endless list of dishes displayed like in a window frame" (Apetroaie, 228, our translation) to be sold which express wealth and an enormous joy for life.

The never-ending feasting might be regarded as shallow, but it does symbolize celebrating an unique manner of perceiving life, the Balkan manner, through joy and carnival. The power of the ritual feasting, along with exaggerated laughter and licentious speech had been permanent coordinates for medieval societies, thus are to be present in literary productions depicting those societies.

Middle Ages' folk culture established as core symbols, laughter in its diverse forms of manifestation, outdoor festivities, clowns, mad men, giants, costumed party goers and other out of worldly beings. All its forms of manifestation convey a single meaning: laughter is the very essence of human survival, it is a way of facing hardship, of dealing with a less fortunate destiny. Carnival festivities in the Middle Ages had a powerful effect on daily activities. The mad men's feast (Festa Stultorum), The Donkey Feast, The Pascal Laughter (Risus Pascalis) encouraged a type of deliberate celebration, freed from all conventions, ruled by rituals, customs and tradition. Almost every religious event was marked, as tradition requested it, by folk comic feasts to be held in public squares as means of liberation.

All forms of ritual spectacle in medieval times represented the world and its people seen outside rules and regulations. They made up a second world and a second life as Mikhail Bakhtin puts it when talking about the context that generated Rabelais's work. In archaic communities, the two major aspects of human living, the serious and the easy –going, mocking one, were equally sacred, equally official, but, in time, the gap between them has deepened.

THE ROMANIAN CARNIVAL

Voiculescu's *Party at the monastery* reinterprets the manifestations and the significance of the Medieval carnival, together with the hyperbolic feast containing hidden messages, the noisy laughter and the contagious joy for life. The archpriest Ilie, the representative of the clergy, once he had arrived at abbot Iosafat's monastery, alongside priest Bolindache, cannot refrain himself from joining the party, being actually eager to stand aside such a jolly crowd :

“The abbot and all the monks jumped pleading in one voice, surrounding him from all sides: - Such a thing is not permitted! We won't allow it. To leave in the middle of the night? To let the abbot become an easy prey for the thieves? To have his mare stolen? We won't let them go under no circumstances, they cannot disobey the rules of hospitality like this. (Voiculescu, 52, our translation)”.

In fact, not the evoked rules of hospitality is what the monks are concerned about, but the unwritten rules of the carnival that all participants must consider and keep to, are the things to be respected the most.

As a matter of consequence, the monastery turns into a place meant for an enormous feast, for the Balkan never ending carnival: “The monastery has become a fortress.” (Voiculescu, 53, our translation). As long as all participants devote themselves to the carnival, the historic time abolishes, thus its place is taken by a sacred time, destined not to piety, but to insane celebrations. This is the case of the events described by Voiculescu at the monastery in his story.

The social barriers between participants are faded during the carnival and what used to be forbidden in every day regular life becomes the rule now. Voiculescu's narrative piece confirms the beatnik-like state of mind for the participants, the freedom from worries, all in one, an experience that the priests in discussion, both the guests and the host, enjoy to the fullest: “...serenity was covering them all, liberation, carelessness, in the vicinity of spells, all in an island-like happy territory. We might experience such happiness, sometimes, in the afterlife.” (Voiculescu, 54)

Mircea Eliade, considering the myths of the modern world, distinguishes two crucial ways of escaping the day-to-day reality, convenient for the unhappy stressed civilized man: performance (any kind of show) and reading. The human behavior recomposes, even in modern circumstances, the mythical behaviour being the primary purpose of this pursuit:

“The archaic levels of culture religion maintains the "opening" toward a superhuman world, the world of axiological value. These values are "transcendent," in the sense that they are held to be revealed by Divine Beings or mythical Ancestors. Hence they constitute absolute value , paradigm for all human activities... Myth are the most general and effective mean of awakening and maintaining consciousness of another world, a beyond, whether it be the divine world or the world of the Ancestor . This "other world" represent a superhuman, "transcendent" plane, the plane of absolute realities. It is the experience of the sacred-that, an encounter with a transhuman reality-which give birth to the idea that something really exists, that hence there are absolute values capable of guiding man and giving a meaning to human existence . It is, then, through the experience of the sacred that the ideas of reality, truth, and significance first dawn, to be later elaborated and systematized by metaphorical speculation (Eliade, 139).”

What else are Voiculescu's monks doing but stepping out of history and projecting themselves into a primordial and paradisiac time by mimicking the mythical behaviour through enormous amounts of food and drinks?

The carnival induces an overwhelming state of mind because it

“does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone

participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants. (Bakhtin, 31)".

Therefore, being ardent supporters of the carnival, Voiculescu's party goes forget about the holy and the humbleness imposed by clergy canons and they become the spokespeople of the commoners whose joy for life renews the universe. The limits of the "official" social life are stepped over with glee and dancing: "and again songs, with games and laughter, and giggles and frolics done by friar Minodor who was dancing polka leaping from arm to arm in a brotherhood-like sharing between the monks." (Voiculescu, 346, our translation).

As seen above, the carnival cannot be labeled as a theatrical show, but it stands as a real life form being fully assumed by its contributors. Those who dare to venture in this game of reality live for good, they do not pretend, but instead they embrace a type of behavior typical of theatrical performance. Mention needs to be made of the fact that, in Middle Ages, such carnival manifestations were strongly connected to religious events, even though they did not coincide with any sacred events or saint's days, taking place during the days before the Advent begun.

The monks in *Party at the monastery* led by archpriest Ilie (a mocking figure of Saint Ilie, the justice maker) and by the abbot, enter, through feasting, into an utopic, ideal universe where the only concerns are food, drink and partying beyond any constrain: "The most difficult was choosing the wines. The lamb fitted one type, the mutton another....The final decision was to lay all the wines on the table...." (Voiculescu, 348, our translation). All that the participants to the feast need to do is to choose the right food and drinks, effortlessly, the same enterprise as "the good savage" (in Mircea Eliade's terminology which is commonly spread through his research) applied because he did not have to work, God being the provider for all his earthly necessities.

M. Bakhtin stresses on the fact that, even thought, the forms of ritual-shows were spread all over Europe, folk manifestations "were remarkable due to complexity and richness in Latin countries." (Bakhtin, 10). Romania, as a Latin country, in comparison with other countries, has kept the tradition of outstanding feasts.

Erasing the social relationships of power amongst people during the carnival facilitates a special sort of communication which is less common in daily life. Expressing emotions is done with the help of special language and gestures, changing like the shapes of the Greek God Proteus, characterized by dynamism and inconsistency. The proper language for the carnival relies on the logic of "up-side-down", of contradictions, of bizarre values. The image of the world during the carnival reflects best in fair deformed mirrors where shapes and forms appear misleading, turning the "reality" into a smaller world or a bigger one, constantly moving and looping. The carnival world proves to be a parody of the ordinary world, but it is not a negative reflection of the former, but a parody that denies, regenerates and nourishes, at the same time. The Balkan Peninsula reveals itself to the world as a baroque space par excellence, in other words, a space prone to metamorphose, a hidden or an occult space which is awkwardly open to be deciphered, still it preserves as a real paradox.

Historically speaking, the Baroque Period dates back to the XVII th century. Yet, some scholars, amongst whom, Edgar Papu, perceive it as "a way of living" (Papu, 4, our translation), an observation that allows the connection with different cultural realms, regardless of their history or philosophy of life. As an extension to the space discussed, the Baroque man stands not surprisingly as "multiform" as Jean Rousset defines him as being "multi-shaped" (Rousset, 4, our translation) because he "only lives to be able to transform himself" (Rousset, 35, our translation). The Baroque man's main features defines him as being unstable and under constant movement. His nature bears many similarities to that of Circe's, the renowned witch in Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*. Through substitution, the Balkan man unveils his nature equal to that of the Baroque man. The former's very nature is to be discovered in performances of any kind.

Besides feasting, the carnival thrives on laughter which cannot be mistaken for an individual reaction to something funny, but which needs to be recognized as the very essence of laughter, the supreme laughter that points at all. Having this set, we also have to underline that Voiculescu's

narrator in *Party at the monastery* does not mock at the monks, instead, he laughs with them, on this account celebrating the true spirit of the carnival.

Stamping laughter as ambivalent reaction to the world's spectacle, Bakhtin states the following:

“Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope: it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival. (Bakhtin, 11)”.

Voiculescu's narrator could have not agreed more because he seems to participate to the carnival side by side with his animated characters.

The carnivalesque language engages the uncommon such as the abusive use of invective. Unexpectedly, swearing becomes a lexical genre, expressing the free spirit of common people, always ready to put on a show, in the market place. Offending the gods is not excluded, but encouraged as in ancient ludicrous cultures. During the carnival, bad language possesses the same bipolar function as laughter. It humiliates and renews the sacred at the same time. The overall dissolute atmosphere appropriate for any carnival finds support in this verbal abuse, unthinkable of, throughout the normal course of life.

Language abuse is also typical for the carnival. They can be regarded as similar to swearing, having the same double meaning and hilarious touch. When the archpriest arrived at the monastery, the monks were handling the wine barrels in the basement. The name of the Lord is mentioned in connection with the monks' less orthodox deeds. The effect becomes comical due to the contradiction between the carnivalesque atmosphere which surrounds the monastery and the significance of the red wine representing our Lord's blood spilt to wash away our sins:

“- Did you serve? is the archpriest asking, a little bit concerned. –Yes, down there in the basement, is the abbot answering innocently, because God does not stay in one place, he is to be found everywhere.

- And how did you do it?

- We said some prayers and we made the cross sign in piety.

- Near the barrels of wine?

- The barrels keep safe the holy blood of our Lord, he added.” (Voiculescu, 342, our translation)

In such an up-side-down world, any actions which might be absurd in the normal, regular register of living, are now justified. The abnormal takes the place of the normal. The scene where the abbot Iosafat is eating as if for two people with the purpose of skipping the devil's number, thirteen (represented in the text by the number of people participating in the feast) does not surprise us, on the contrary, it is considered a reason for pride, especially for those enjoying watching the grotesque performance in real time:

“When he was drinking with one glass of wine in each of his hands and toasting to himself, a holy silence lay on all. Everybody was looking at his ability to pour both glasses into his mouth at the same time, leaning his head backwards without spilling a drop.” (Voiculescu, 343, our translation)

There are a lot of cultural explanations for the behaviour shown above. The folk culture of laughter celebrates life for its physical side. The never ending parties of the monks in *Party at the monastery* bear a positive meaning, promoting fertility, wealth, thus praising the concrete, touchable so to speak, faction of living. Those who eat and drink while the carnival unfolds and becomes contagious, can no longer be seen as biological individual beings, but as parts of a “collective body”. The physical principle renders the core essence of celebration, of joy, of feasting beyond the limits of imagination.

The food and drinks in Voiculescu's story do not symbolize the daily meals necessary for ordinary people, but it stands for a folk feast with more profound implications. The images of feasting are always accompanied by the images of grotesque bodies, by proverbs or sayings, by undeniable truths.

The grotesque body through its own manifestations, mainly through eating and drinking, possesses an open nature, unfulfilled and, as a consequence, it permanently interacts with the world. During the act of eating, so concrete and tangible, the body crosses its boundaries, it swallows

everything, it devours the world and it grows enormously at the world's expense. The meeting of man and the universe takes place, metaphorically speaking, in his wide open mouth:

“Man's encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself. The limits between man and the world are erased, to man's advantage.” (Bakhtin, 281)

Within the ancient imagistic system, food was tied to work, being equivalent to the latter. Food, labeled as the ultimate victorious step in the process of work, sometimes replaces the whole process in question. In the old times, there was not a clear distinction between food and work because they were considered two shades of the very same phenomenon: the fight of man against the universe, the former always coming victorious out of it.

Eating and working stood for collective activities in which all members of the community participated. If food is to be separated from work, the importance of man encountering the universe in “the open mouth” (Bakhtin, 282) vanishes, too.

In Voiculescu's story, separating food from work does not occur. In this manner, the sacred encounter spoken of above is reiterated. The monks succeed, at the same time, to drink, to eat and to work that is to say to arrange the wine barrels of the monastery and to perform the daily service, their absolute duty as God's servants.

In the process of eating, the limits between the body and the universe are abolished in the favour of the body, Bakhtin explains :

“In the act of eating, as we have said, the confines between the body and the world are overstepped by the body; it triumphs over the world, over its enemy, celebrates its victory, grows at the world's expense. This element of victory and triumph is inherent in all banquet images. No meal can be sad. Sadness and food are incompatible (while death and food are perfectly compatible). The banquet always celebrates a victory and this is part of its very nature. Further, the triumphal banquet is always universal. It is the triumph of life over death. In this respect it is equivalent to conception and birth. The victorious body receives the defeated world and is renewed.” (Bakhtin, 282-283)

Voiculescu's carnivalesque characters fight the universe on their account by swallowing it to obtain supremacy:

“ The whole day of Tuesday was not enough to finish all the food given by the grace of God, no matter how hard the monks and their guests had tried. A third night was required to take the work to an end, especially because fish and the lobster are difficult to chew on. (Voiculescu, 342, our translation).

Abbot Iosafat's grotesque body ignores its earthly limits and becomes expandable, like an octopus putting its tentacles around the entire universe:

“He had one spoon in his right hand and another in his left hand and he was eating broth with both of them at once as if he were two people. Using the same manner, with both hands armed with forks, he was gobbling two steaks in an instance together with two rolls of pickled cucumbers which were breaking between his teeth making a squishy sound as if wolfing down pastry.” (Voiculescu, 342, our translation)

Feasting arises as a remarkable opportunity to speak words of wisdom. There has always been an association that relates feasting to such words spoken wisely, in the shape of a moral. When feasting time happens, words are let out without any inhibitions to permit the true nature of man to come to light. Fear disappears, all canons are disregarded and words regain their original function that of giving birth to the universe.

This prime carnival rule is to be submitted by all Voiculescu's protagonists role playing in the story. The host of the fortress-monastery “undresses” the clergy clothes and starts to philosophize next to the wine containers, just like the carnival requires it:

“This manner of serving the wine, added the abbot, in always full jugs, is well above the way people drink in pubs or in homes, that is to say, from bottles....But with this particular custom, having the jugs always full and steady on the table, they trigger inspiration... “(Voiculescu, 345, our translation).

Such a way of thinking speaks not of barbarism, but of a way of being in the world, the Balkan way which cherishes the so-called superficial side of life.

THE GREEK CARNIVAL

Voiculescu's perspective on life as seen through his characters does not stand alone. One can easily identify a handful of other examples with many Balkan writers. One of them, is definitely, Nikos Kazantzakis with his famous novel *Zorba, the Greek*. The main character, a modern barbarian by the name of Alexis Zorba does not treasure anything else in life above freedom, as he often points out.

Zorba proves to be a wise picaroon relying on nothing but life's learnt lessons which taught him to do everything passionately, putting his whole heart at stake. First, he was a petty merchant, at the same time, he was fighting for Crete's independence and while doing it, he continued to believe in people, to love women and to praise whatever challenges life has given him.

Zorba stands bold enough to laugh in the face of time. He does not care about ageing and its connected difficulties. He only lives in the foremost times when all things were possible and men could not have been denied any pleasures. An Epicurean nature such as Zorba's does not limit to being superficial, but, instead, knows how to penetrate beyond people's masks or to clearly see through them as he has long been trained to do so.

The exacerbated eroticism that characterizes Zorba in the spirit of a true Homo Balkanicus can be obviously linked to the love of freedom of the outlaw men of the Balkan Peninsula. What Zorba values above all is not to be found in pecuniary wealth, but in a man's soul, alongside his joy for life and the ability not to regret a single thing done in his path. Zorba the Greek stands in opposition to the civilized man who came from the West to run a coal business in Crete. Their relationship builds up as a variation from the traditional domination of power relationship between the West and the East. There is fascination, exoticism that unleashes constantly as this relationship develops.

For Homo Balkanicus, any occasion can turn into a moment of celebrating and feasting, thus these kinds of moments count plentiful in Kazantzakis' novel. For both Zorba and the monks in *Party at the monastery*, there is nothing in the world to stop them from enjoying life, to fight back its problems and to be conquerors in the end. The encounter of man and the world happens in the exceptional time of the carnival, liberated from all constrains. In this particular case, the feast involves Zorba, madame Hortense, an old French courtesan, lost in the lands of Greece and the narrator of the story, the Western businessman that is constantly amazed and fascinated by Zorba.

The pecuniary-bodily principle of life becomes sovereign during the carnival supported by music, dancing and good mood:

"Come! Eat, eat!" he cried, clapping his hands together. "Let's begin with the foundation--the belly. After that, my sweet, we'll take care of what's below!" But the atmosphere was troubled by the old siren's sighs." (Kazantzakis, 81)

The same spirit of celebrating the universe, of revitalizing it through the act of eating (the same for Voiculescu's monks) pushes Zorba to embrace life's little pleasures:

"Eat," he said, "eat, my treasure, so that Saint Basil will come to our village! If you don't, you know, he won't come to us! He'll go back to his own country, to Caesarea. He'll pick up the inkhorn and paper, the Twelfth Cake, the New Year gifts, the children's toys, even this little sucking pig, and away with them all! So open your little mouth, my Bouboulina, and eat!" (Kazantzakis, 81)

Or

"He made a leap, rushed out of the hut, cast off his shoes, his coat, his vest, rolled his trousers up to his knees, and started dancing. His face was still black with coal. The whites of his eyes gleamed." (Kazantzakis, 44)

The narrator witnessing the feast, does not seem to understand completely what is happening, still, he is enchanted by this modern barbarian, this outlaw who knows how to make the best of life's moments. Zorba teaches the businessman a lesson, not on purpose, but demonstrating that the values of life are not money or possessions, but a man's heart and joyfulness.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, both the texts examined here support the idea that the literary productions of the Balkan Peninsula express a whole range of beliefs and an exclusive manner of creating bonds in a society. They offer the reader an insight into a particular type of culture tailored, yet permanently reinvented, by the Middle Ages' carnival and by the Baroque Period with its luxurious and over the edge feasting, celebrations and metamorphoses.

The Balkans are yet to be discovered. They continue to fascinate and to surprise the outsider whose perception would be almost equal to that of a traveler from the Enlightenment as a Bulgarian scholar stresses:

“the Balkans per se, that is, as a distinct geographic, social, and cultural entity, were “discovered” by European travelers only from the late eighteenth century on, with the beginning of an awareness that the European possessions of the Ottoman Empire had a distinct physiognomy of their own that merited separate attention apart from their treatment as mere provinces of the Ottomans or simply as archeological sites.”(Todorova, 62)

The Balkans are worth discovering through their identity, distinct from that of the Ottoman Empire. The journey of discovery could start by reading the most representative pieces of literature as those discussed here. Our research could be regarded as a starting point in this quest of understanding and enjoying life as a carnival to its fullest potential.

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