

THE EPITAPHS FROM THE MERRY CEMETERY IN SĂPÂNȚA: A NAIVE LYRICAL-NARRATIVE KALEIDOSCOPE OF THE LIFE AND TRADITIONS SPECIFIC TO A MARAMUREȘ VILLAGE

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Abstract: In The Merry Cemetery/Cimitirul Vesel in Săpânța, there is a very old tradition regarding the epitaphs. The verses written on the tombstones seem to be inspired from the service dedicated to God's Calvary and Crucifixion on Good Friday/Prohod. Beginning with the pre-Christian times, in ancient Greece it was customary for the deceased to address the living through texts written on the funerary stelae, by using the first person perspective (the literary genre is that of prosopopea). This custom was preserved in the Christian practices of the first centuries. The custom was revived after 2,000 years by the Romanian peasants in Săpânța, a village in Maramureș County. The epitaphs are brief narrations of the whole life of the deceased, focusing on his/her flaws.

Keywords: cemetery, epitaph, humor, life, death

The so-called *Merry Cemetery* in Săpânța is undoubtedly renowned all over the world. It has consequently aroused different viewpoints, including reluctance-induced rejection: it has been claimed that it is a questionable invention, a simple strange local attraction, a kitschy idea, totally opposed to Christian piety. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The name *The Merry Cemetery/Cimitirul Vesel* (in Săpânța, Maramureș County)¹ is inappropriate. The apparent humor, obvious at first sight in the epitaphs on the tombstones², is not an expression of joy, but rather of a particular interest in understanding a certain “art”, which is concise in form and whose originality evinces itself by naïve, genuine poetry that describes briefly and sometimes atypically the life of the deceased and his/her posthumous wishes. It also includes the invocation of God's protection, the request not to be forgotten and the necessity for the descendants of the deceased to take care of the tomb and to adorn it with flowers.

All these are part of the cult for the dead, for our ancestors' memory which is to be preserved not only as a token of our gratitude towards them, but also because leaving their tombs in ruins would mean despising the past altogether. After death, the descendants would end up being buried in the same cemetery and to make sure they themselves will not be forgotten, they must respect the cult of the dead, including prayers and alms, thus invoking God to protect the souls of the deceased “gone to eternity”.

The crosses on the tombs have three components: the cross proper, with four arms and a painted roof (the wings of the soul) – on some crosses there is also a solar motif; a frame with the face of the deceased painted on it (he/she can be alone or accompanied); a text with sequences from the life of the deceased, starting with: *Aici eu mă odihnesc/ ...mă numesc... /Here I rest/ ... my name is...*, and continues with the type of work done, his/her accomplishments, his/her testamentary wishes, then mentions the time and cause of death, followed by the

¹ The carved and painted tombstones (shaped in the form of crosses) contain brief biographies of the deceased. The texts take the form of satirical folk poetry which probably resulted in the name of the cemetery: *The Merry Cemetery/Cimitirul Vesel*. This unique Romanian cemetery has become an outdoor traditional art museum, displaying quotations referring to the life and preoccupations of the village inhabitants.

² The tombstones have a distinct significance and exert a unique fascination since they are made of wood, painted in vivid colors and have original epitaphs.

invocation of God to protect and help those left behind: *Dumnezeu vă deie bine/ May God give you only good things*, closing by: *Și să nu uitați de mine..., Eu viața o lăsați la ... ani/ And don't you forget me ..., I ended my life at the age of ...* There are also mentioned the preoccupations/occupations of the deceased: shepherd, peasant, farmer, cattle raiser, forest worker, miner, village council clerk, butcher, etc. For women the typical occupations are housewives, wool spinners, blanket weavers, domestic animals caretakers. There follow the accomplishments, satisfaction, sorrows, sufferings, the concern for the members of the family left behind, then advice and wishes for children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren as in a sort of last will; the cause of death and appeal to God are also part of the epitaph.

The making of painted crosses (the background color is blue)³ with the image of the deceased and epitaphs in verse is due to a carver, Stan Ioan Pătraș, who, in 1935, made his first cross with ornaments, the image of the deceased and an epitaph, for a late relative of his, a fact which caused the other villagers to want similar epitaphs on their tombstones.

To meet the demand, Stan Ioan Pătraș went to school; he dictated the lines to a fellow of his, who typewrote them and then the author carved them on a special place on the cross. Later, Stan Ioan Pătraș wanted to have some followers who to continue his work, therefore he took an apprentice, Dumitru Pop Tincu, whom he sent to a vocational school in Timișoara, after which they worked together.

The story of the cemetery started when a poor woman asked Stan Ioan Pătraș to make a tombstone for her husband, who had just passed away. The carpenter took a long, thick plank, carved it in the form of a cross and to soothe the grieving widow carved the face of the deceased on it and added a short story about him. The text was written in the first person as if the deceased were telling his own life story.

The tomb crosses in Săpânța are a proof of Stan Ioan Pătraș's talent as a painter, sculptor and poet. What inspired him was the specificity of the wake ceremony where the participants recall the life of the deceased, make jokes about him, eat and drink. Thus, the folk artist made hundreds of tomb crosses on which he carved various comic messages, which impress by both their message and design.

In reference to the content of the epitaphs, one notices the form of naïve poetry, displaying grammar errors specific to popular style, such as preposition and pronominal direct object deletion and word order involving the dislocation of the attributive clause: *Crucea mea când s-a lucrat/ Care eu mi-am comandat.../ My tombstone when it was made/ Which I ordered...* The life and preoccupations of the villagers are also described and so is the regret of leaving the family (just before one's death). It is also important to mention the funny effect of some texts (which caused the cemetery to be called *The Merry Cemetery/Cimitirul Vesel*), even if there is nothing joyful in such a place. The moral message is triggered by the description of the consequences of some types of excess, such as alcohol consumption. The philosophical content of some epitaphs highlights the general lifeview specific to Romanians: the regret for the harsh destiny ending in death is counterbalanced by the Christian faith that the human being continues to live a spiritual life (protected or condemned by the Divinity according to the good or bad deeds of the deceased on Earth).

The role of the drawings on the crosses is extremely important. By looking at them one can find out the occupation of the deceased (farmer, tractorist, wool spinner, household caretaker, children raiser, etc.). Of course, there are also cases of lazy-bones, who are satirized in the epitaphs written on the crosses by the people in Maramureș, hard-working by definition. The

³ In *The Merry Cemetery/Cimitirul Vesel* in Săpânța the color of the crosses is not one which to induce the idea of death. The intense blue (as in the case of *Voroneț blue*, one can recognize the nuance *Săpânțablue*) "stays awake" on the tombstones of those buried in the cemetery. On each oak cross, against a blue painted background there are drawn in vivid colors (bright red, sunny yellow obtained from natural pigments) scenes from the life of the deceased, depicting important moments of his/her existence.

verses are generally written in the first person, i.e. the deceased narrates events of his/her own life: *Printre brazi plec pe cărare/ Duc la preot de mâncare./ M-am grăbit s-ajung la prânz/ Să mănânce cei flămânzi./ Among the fire trees I'm following the path/ Taking food to the priest/ I've hurried to get by noon/ For the hungry to eat.*

The style of the epitaphs on the tomb crosses ranges from informal to amusing conveying profound and universal meanings, the deceased "talking" directly to the lookers-on (and ultimately to the villagers and tourists): *Io am fost Stan Ioan Pătraș/ Să mă ascultați oameni buni/ Ce voi spune nu-s minciuni./ Câte zile am trăit/ Rău la nime n-am dorit./ Dar bine cât-am putut/ Orișicine mi-a cerut./ Vai săraca lumea mea./ Că greu am trăit în ea/ I was Stan Ioan Pătraș/ Listen to me, good people/ What I'll tell you is no lie./ For as long as I lived/ Ill to nobody I wished/ But well as much as I could/ To anyone in want of it./ Poor world./ What a hard time you gave me.*

The "confessions" include details about the family, work place, death (how one got sick, was sent to hospital, how long they lay in bed, how they were run over by the tractor/car, the place where they died (in the field, in bed, etc.), then getting to more delicate aspects: thus, from the cross epitaph one can find out which villager cheated on his wife or beat her. The epitaph poems don't spare the adulterine or lazy wives either. Anyway, death is something natural, in the order of things, man accepting with serenity this cycle of life and death. Death does not terrify anybody, it represents the resting period of those who have been working their whole life and whose bodies are tired. The afterlife, after the soul has left the body, is part of the belief in immortality and, as such, God's protection is invoked so that the deceased may be forgiven for his/her sins and judged according to his/her deeds during his/her earthly life. Romanians have a specific philosophy deeply rooted in tradition. Most people believe that those guilty of bad deeds will be punished by God Himself, and there is also the belief that He will give the deserved punishment: *God has punished him/her* or *God will punish him/her*. Some mortals are to meet at The Last Judgement, that is why they separate from those around them by saying *Good-bye*. Sarcastic, straightforward lines "store" images of maximal concentration and dramatism.

Not accidentally, *The Merry Cemetery/Cimitirul Vesel* reflects the Dacian belief, assumed with detachment by Romanian peasants, that death must be met with serenity, not with discontent or obstination. Dacians used to die with a smile on their faces, in full acceptance; precisely because death is little amusing or serene, their way of "passing away" was a joyful one. According to Christian belief, the idea of death becomes less frightening, and life acquires meaning, consistency and value, due to the "fight" for immortality/eternal life. For a Christian, death is not the terrifying tomb where everything ends, but the necessary passage towards a new existence. This position in relation to death allows the Christian not to be afraid but to find the strength and valiance to defy it. That is why the early Christians did not mourn the dead, but consider them blessed: *Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on* (Apocalipsa 14,13). A true believer ends his/her earthly life convinced that *there is, God, no death for Your believers when we exit our bodies and come to You, but transcendence from the sad things of life to happy ones, rest and joy* (the funeral service). It clearly results from this that the name *merry cemetery* is much more profound than it seems at first sight.

Death is "a law" that has to be accepted, without exception, includes everybody (it affects equally the righteous and the sinner). Nevertheless, death is not something natural to people, but an accident of his existence; it is not viewed in the same way by all, though, generally speaking, the idea of death scares and grieves us because death is the opposite of life. The Saints Parents of the Orthodox Church state that death is just "the passage door" towards a new life; it is the gate of the soul towards immortality, while the body decomposes into the natural elements: *Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it* (Ecclesiastes 12,7). In other words, the continuity of earthly life by the afterlife is interrupted by biological death, understood as a separation of the body from the soul, till the Resurrection.

Nowadays, for Christians, the tomb represents the hole dugged into the earth, the place where the body of the deceased “rests”. He/she had gone through a whole series of joys and sufferings and now returns into the dust he/she was made of: “dust to dust, ashes to ashes”; meantime, according to Christian beliefs, the soul goes to Paradise near God or to Hell near the devil, depending on the deeds performed throughout the earthly life.

The Merry Cemetery is a sort of an “archive” that preserves the villagers’ life stories carved in wood. Stan Ioan Pătraș adorned wood with the colors of life and changed a sad place into a merry one, gathering memories which can put any traveller/visitor/tourist into a good mood; therefore, he turned an ordinary Maramureș cemetery into a myth.

From the moment when the community in took over the idea of painting the tomb crosses till the phenomenon was noticed nationally and then all over the world, little time passed, and the cemetery became a priceless folk art monument. The epitaphs on the blue crosses reflect an irreverent attitude in relation to death, opposed to Christian piety, a reminiscence of pagan beliefs persistent in Romanian folk culture. We are in the middle of the world of old wake games and songs, funny and violent, such as *Bâza* or *Calul*, practised similarly in the bee evenings, but now taking place at the place of the deceased, with the participants wearing masks. Interpreted in this context, the texts on the tomb crosses acquire a new significance linked to a lost world.

In conclusion, the epitaphs are a synthesis of everyday life with its happy or sad moments, with its fulfilments or failures, including the resignation for leaving the family and the close ones, but also the belief in spiritual continuity after death. This form of the cult of the dead people buried in the cemetery in Săpânța has made it renowned and visited by so many tourists. Consequently, the ethnographic image results from an exciting puzzle which combines the simple description of daily realities, the humor with reference to the facts evoked and well-tempered nostalgia.

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