

***IMMORTALITY OF FLESH AND LONGING OF HAPPINESS IN THE GERMAN
LEGEND OF TANNHÄUSER AND PETRE ISPIRESCU'S „YOUTH EVERLASTING
AND LIFE WITHOUT END”***

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Abstract: Two tales: a German medieval legend with Christian influences, beloved by Romantic writers and painters and a Romanian fairy tale. Two impossible stories about longing for Paradise and immortality of flesh and soul. One mighty knight repenting, a handsome prince losing his gift, none of them being able to escape Time and its linearity. None of them succeeding in transcending the human nature and fatality. Each depicts the mentality of its time- The medieval values of a Christian knight clashing with the desire for sensuous happiness and beauty in the cave of the pagan Lady Venus and the human nostalgia and longing for the past of the almost philosophical Romanian tale. The present paper analyses the cultural differences between the two quests for happiness and the manner in which they face Time.

Keywords: *Ispirescu, Tannhäuser, immortality, Christianity, legend.*

Petre Ispirescu, Romanian editor, folklorist, printer and publicist, was born in January 1830, Bucharest and has died at 23 November 1887. He was a folk –lore collector, much appreciated by Delavrancea. Petre Ispirescu has written *Folk Anecdotes and Folk Tales* (1874), *The Life and Feats of Mihai Viteazu* (1876), *Tales of the Wise Old Man* (1879), *Parables and riddles* (1880), *Romanian Fairy Tales* (1882) *Tales, Anecdotes, and Jests* (1883), *Children's Toys and Games* (1885), *Moral Stories. About the Christmas Tree* (1886).

The rise of romanticism in the 19th century revived interest in traditional folk stories and to Ispirescu it represented a pure form of national literature and culture.

The tale *Youth without Age and Life without Death* known by every Romanian pupil, since it is studied in school, dwells upon ideas of Romanian folk philosophy, and deals with issues such as the position and the purpose of man in the world or the meaning and limits of happiness.

The structure of the two stories is fairly similar. Two young men go in search of immortality and lust. In the Romanian tale, the hero (called Handsome-Son) has been promised by his father, at his birth, *youth everlasting and life without end*. Now, turned 18 years old, the Prince is decided to look for the promised bounty- everlasting youth and immortality- the very thing he was born for. On his quest, he has to defeat two women /forces of nature (Woodpecker and the Shrew) to reach the palace where he will find youth everlasting and life without death. At the mighty palace he encounters three sisters and marries the youngest. Life here is sweet, peaceful and quiet and our hero is allowed everything, but hunting into the *Valley of Tears*. Time does not flow. Nevertheless, he trespasses and is suddenly haunted by memories of home, a strange sadness and a longing to see his parents. In spite of the princesses'/fairies' warnings, he decides to return home.

The very name of the forbidden area, the *Valley of Tears* is not a Romanian invention, but Ispirescu might have used it for its metaphorical value, that of the earthly realm, full of

tears and suffering, reminiscing of biblical times. Even the rabbit he was hunting after symbolizes fertility, for men can only “live forever” through their children.

Handsome-Son, the one who had been born only to have everlasting youth and life without end, represents quite a philosophical problem, as Ioana Parvulescu¹ points out. He symbolizes the human condition, revolting against the death sentence we all are born with.

The road back home is but unrecognizable to him, and the wondrous creatures he encountered on his way to the magical realm are now just old tales to the inhabitants. People laugh at him considering him a lunatic, and he does not notice that his hair and beard had suddenly turned to grey.

Finally arriving at his father’s palace, deserted by his magical horse (a smart, fabulous horse with four wings, a speaking Pegasus), our prince finds himself lost between ruins and decay. Thus, he regains his human condition as mortal, because death cannot be defeated. He dies, symbolizing the fact that the human existential condition cannot be surpassed. The folk tale argues that life out of time, and outside of the range of temporality rules is impossible, and if possible, it is only temporarily until will completely obliterate any trace of that person’s existence.

The theme is atypical for a fairytale: there is no clashing between the forces of good and devil, but reveals the inherent human right to happiness and refusal to accept an ordinary life, bound between the limits of human possibility.

The rich knight and minstrel Tannhäuser (var. Tannhauser, Waldhauser, Baldhauser, Balthauser, Danuser, Dannhäuser, Dutch Danielken, Danyser)² riding through Thuringia, enticed by beautiful singing and alluring women, enters the magical Venusberg/Hoselloch Cavern. There enchanted, he spends a period of 7 years in the subterranean home of Lady Venus, the *pagan Queen of Love*³ worshipping the goddess, living in luxury and sensuous pleasure. Suddenly, he is plagued by remorse and travels to Rome to ask the Pope for absolution of his sins. He confesses all his sexual debauchery, and asks God for forgiveness. Pope Urban IV refuses to ease his mind and tells him that forgiveness is impossible; as his pilgrim’s staff will never put on leaf again, so his sins can never be forgiven. In despair and with his soul darkened, Tannhäuser returns to the court of Lady Venus, the only asylum open to him, to the Venusberg. There he is welcomed by Venus as one welcomes a long absent lover and he chooses to remain there forever. After three days, the Pope’s staff began to grow leaves and he sent for Tannhäuser- but he was nowhere to be found. The return of the rueful knight to the Venusberg shows signs of old heathen, middle age stubbornness.

The Brothers Grimm have first collected the legend of the *Tannhäuser*⁴. This version ends with the words ”so muss er nun sitzen [im Berg] bis zum jüngsten Tag, wo ihn Gott

¹ I. Parvulescu. *Ce-i cu „Valea Plângerii?“* Romania Literara Revue, No. 39, 2009

² J. G. Th. Gräbe *Der Tannhäuser und der ewige Jude, Zwei deutsche Sagen , in ihrer Erscheinung und Entwicklung historisch, mythologisch und bibliographisch verfolgt und erklärt* G. Schönfeld’s Buchhandlung, Dresden 1961, p. 20.

³ John Davidson *A Ballad of Tannhäuser*. In: *The Poems of John Davidson*. 2 vols. Andrew .Turnbull. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic P, 1973, p. 84

⁴ Brothers Grimm *Tannhäuser*. Nr. 207 In. *German Legends Vol. I*, published by the Brothers Grimm, Imd. Verl., Frankfurt am Main, 1981, p. 171

*vielleicht anderswohin weisen wird.*⁵(*There he will remain until Judgment Day, at which time God may send him to a different place*”).

First published in 1515 in Nürnberg, the ballad had a great echo, mainly after it had been included into the poetry collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn/The Boy's Magic Horn: Old German Songs* (1805-1808). The publication of this folk songs and verses signaled and promoted the emergence of the German national thinking and of the appreciation of German culture, as opposed to the French one.

Numerous Romantic poets have reflected on the legend. Heinrich Heine has written in 1836 the ballad *Der Tannhäuser. A Legend*⁶ on the same medieval theme. He makes Tannhäuser to the typical representative of his contemporary fellows: saturated by life, searching for change and new adventures, never fulfilled nor in the world of the senses and delights nor in the world of Christian morality. A man who could not find his way.

Finally, Richard Wagner used 1845 the raw material of the myth for his Romantic 3 acts opera *Tannhäuser and the Singers' Contest at Wartburg Castle*.

Both our heroes have found what they wanted; the land of immortality (and everlasting youth, in the case of the handsome fairy tale prince), and love or sensuous gratification (the case of Tannhäuser) at no cost to their quest. Why then are they homesick?

Handsome-Son, however much he tries, cannot escape Time, and its linearity. Living out of history is an aberration, and the proof is the inability of the Handsome Son to understand how everything has changed while he was not in the world, and while traveling, he ages exponentially.

Finally, even his horse leaves him -his friend and conscience, part of his identity -and Death finally gets her hand on him. Thus, the rabbit is only a foreshadowing of the inevitable, a harbinger of the impossibility of humans to live out of time, the symbol of hazard and circumstance. The first sign that our hero has left the realm of everlasting youth and that he has entered the one with short life and guaranteed old age is nostalgia and longing. He misses his parents. For Ispirescu, at least, the main characteristic of earthly, normal life is nostalgia, the feeling of loss and longing for the past, for the beloved. Even in this interpretation, if the rabbit represent fertility, it is essential that Handsome-Son chases it and through this he is restored to historicity.

The time axis that the two protagonists are moving along is not a linear, chronological one. Handsome-Son is moving from the present to ahistory and future, while Tannhäuser from present, ahistory, present again and then refuges to ahistory *for as long God wishes him to*. Both heroes cannot deal with history and temporality: Handsome-Son is caught in the web of nostalgia and regret and finally dies; Tannhäuser chooses acceptance and refuge from the harsh judgment of Christianity and men. In the perfect realm of the Arcadia, the Utopia where they have found Paradise, time is suspended: each hour Tannhäuser has spent there, represented a year, and Handsome Son's parents and entire kingdom have disappeared during his stay in the magic realm.

In his quest, Handsome Son performs Christian deeds, renouncing to fortune and fame and giving away his possessions, fighting the evil creatures -the mythical Woodpecker and the

⁵ Idem, p. 172

⁶ Heinrich Heine *Der Tannhäuser A Legend*. In: *Sämtliche Gedichte in zeitlicher Folge*. Ed. by Klaus Briegleb. Insel Taschenbuch Verlag 1997, p. 398-406

Shrew who were threatening the villagers, forgives the sinners (puts back the Woodpecker's leg, and the Shrew's head). Like any good Christian too, he longs for immortality. Indeed, he is successful, until he associates with fairies (pagan gods) and chases lust. Tannhäuser too has mingled with fauns, pixies and even with the great pagan Goddess of Love.

The medieval story of Tannhäuser has a mythological basis that has been overlaid by medieval Christian thought. Tannhäuser, the Christian knight, raised to live by the medieval code of chivalry requiring courage, honor, courtesy, justice, readiness to help the weak and gallantry comes into a cognitive dissonance with all his life values: With Venus he enjoyed life properly. She fulfilled his every whim. The two enjoyed the sensual part of life (lust, fine eating, drinking) to the fullest. Venus also took on the role of housewife for him. After a time he longed for what had been missing from his new life -tears, pain, sorrow. In the folk ballad, Venus offers him a wife, the most beautiful of her maids, but Tannhäuser refuses, telling Venus that he no longer wants to be a slave of the world of erotic pleasure:

*Nehme ich dann ein ander Weib,
Als ich hab in meinem Sinne,
So muß ich in der Höllenglut
Da ewiglich verbrennen.⁷*

(Should I take another wife,/than the one I think of/I would have to burn in hell forever)

These verses may be indication of Tannhäuser's broken vow of celibacy- this is the specific sin driving him to Rome. According to the church law, the only one who could forgive the break of celibacy was the Pope. Tannhäuser grows aware of the seriousness of his situation and puts his only hope with the Virgin Mary. His pure heart longs for the eternal bride, for the Virgin Mary and for the church. He calls Venus a "devil" and reluctantly, she agrees to allow him to leave, but he shall praise her name everywhere he goes.

We find the same Christian knight attitude in John Davidson's *A Ballad of Tannhäuser* (1896), whilst listening to a morning bell, reminding him of the church.

*It beat my soul as with a rod
Tingling with horror of my sin;
I thought of Christ, I thought of God,
And of the fame I meant to win.⁸*

The ballad of the Tannhäuser as well as the Romanian fairytale follow the scheme of the union of a mortal hero with an immortal woman (Handsome Son also falls in love with a fairy), their desire to return to earth/past life, and the return in the mundane world only to learn that time has passed him by. There is scarcely a collection of European folk-lore which does not contain a story founded on this root.

The legend of the Tannhäuser celebrates a synthesis of opposites: Tannhäuser is saturated by bliss and conflict. He is torn between two different worlds-the world of sensuous

⁷ Brothers Grimm. *Tannhäuser*. No. 207 In: *Deutsche Sagen* Vol. I, Ed. By Brothers Grimm Imd. Verl., Frankfurt am Main, 1981, p. 171.

⁸ John Davidson. *A Ballad of Tannhäuser*. In: *The Poems of John Davidson*. 2 vols. Andrew .Turnbull. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic P, 1973, p. 80

pleasure and bliss, and the Christian world he still belongs to. The legend does not have a satisfactory ending: Tannhäuser is still living in the Venusberg. And there he must dwell until the Last Days, when perhaps God would show him another way. The anonymous creator imparts but a Christian message: A priest should never discourage a sinner but should forgive all who present themselves with remorse and penance. (*Und kein Priester soll einem sündigen Menschen Mißtrost geben, sondern verzeihen, wenn er sich anbietet zu Buße und Reue*)⁹

Youth without Age and Life without Death is a fairytale with no happy ending. While other tales end with "...and they lived happily ever after", and the hero's triumph over his enemies or fate, this tale ends in a bitter note. *Death, who had dived to a hook in the bottom of the trunk, gave him one slap, and he fell dead and turned to dust right away.*¹⁰ After an extravagant adventure in the realm of the impossible, the human prince and the reader are reminded again about the law of the reality, about the human truth, and the drama of human existence. The fairy tale is a meditation upon the meaning and limits of happiness, life death and men's place in the Universe.

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⁹ Brothers Grimm. *Tannhäuser*. No. 207 In: *Deutsche Sagen* Vol. I, Ed. By Brothers Grimm Imd. Verl., Frankfurt am Main, 1981, p. 171

¹⁰ http://translations.observatorcultural.ro/Youth-Without-Age-and-Life-Without-%20Death*articleID_40-oarticles_details.html