

THE INN OF THE CROWS, A PLACE OF AWAKENING TO HUMANITY

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*Abstract:* This article brings forward a new, unknown Slavici, the one who deals with fantastic prose maybe for the first time in his short story writing. *The Inn of the Crows*, is an attempt to send a moralist literary message. In this text, we find all the elements common to the universe of Slavici's writings such as: the theme of money, the emphasis on character psychology or a traditional conception about the world with its superstitions. But *The Inn of the Crows* has an innovative theme for Slavici's work, namely he places his character face to face with the unknown of fantastic type. Maybe because of this exception that he makes to the rule, the critical references to this short story are so rare.

*Keywords:* fantastic, inn, path, money, humanity

The novel *The Inn of the Crows* is a very special presence, perhaps the only instance of fantastic prose in Slavici's creation, which has not so much attracted the attention of literary criticism. The critical references to the novel are rare, perhaps because of this exception that it makes from the rule.

Slavici's novel starts with the dialogue between Tașcă, a barley merchant from the market, who is returning home to Bucharest, with the oats bought from Alexandria, and Sfredeluș. They were talking over a glass of wine, discussing about money which is the root of all evil. The names of the two characters are not meaningless. The word *tașcă*, is a word used especially in Transylvania, due to the Hungarian influence. *The Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian language* provides the following information: "leather or cloth bag, in which different objects are kept; leather bag in which tobacco, money, etc. is kept; *tecșilă, tășulă*. – from Ukrainian *Taška*, Hungarian *Táska*" (1998: 463). The name *Sfredeluș* may also be of popular inspiration, referring to the name of a clever dwarf from the tales, as Slavici was very familiar with the popular world of Romanian fairy tales, but it also may refer to *sfredel*: "a bar-shaped tool, provided at an end with sharp edges or edged and used for the making of holes; drill" (1998: 456). The character typology is easy to clarify because of these indices, all the more as the dialogue of the two characters is as revealing as possible.

Sfredeluș seems more frightened and hesitant, wary, thinking as a an ordinary man dominated by all sorts of superstitions about deserted roads and unclean money: "You can walk on your own, passing lightheartedly across the open field, and through the thick woods, but you feel uneasy when you find yourself on some deserted road, and it takes quite a man to take shelter at night in an empty house" (Slavici, 2001, II: 29). Before setting off for their journey together, Sfredeluș is the one who during their discussion involuntarily induces doubt, hesitation and insecurity, speaking of money tied "meant to be robbed and taken to powder". When you get that kind of money, you're afraid, without realizing why, and it is fear that leads you there where the money is finally taken to powder" (*Ibidem*: 29). Sfredeluș' words, suggestive of his name, seem to act as a drilling tool on reason and conscience, hinting at mystery: "Whatever it is or it isn't, only God knows, but surely there has to be something". The folk conception regarding the unclean money must be mentioned here.

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There are such folk superstitions about wicked money that does not remain with its owners. This kind of money passes from one owner to another, it cannot be kept, is dirty, cursed or unfairly taken: “Money, my fellow, is the root of all evil. Fear of it doesn’t come out of the blue. How can you possibly know through what kind of hands the money has passed on to you?! You know how hungrily the man chases for it and how fiercely he keeps it. You took it, but maybe the one from whom you took it, didn’t give it to you with all his heart: there’s money tied up, that is meant to be robbed and taken to powder” (*Ibidem*: 28). A deal is made for such money. The theme of the deal with the devil occurs, says Cornel Ungureanu, in several of Slavici’s works, including *The Inn of the Crows*, where the character is forced to make a deal with the devil for the money he receives (2002: 10). Trașcă was burdened with such a deal that took his peace of mind away: he had stolen his brother’s fortune. Besides, one of the final sentences of the short story, which actually leads straight to the cause of all the strange happenings, refers to this pact: “It’s a great thing when a man has something on his heart” (Slavici, 2001: 41).

This phrase may also explain all the strange events as being, in fact, the result of the character’s qualms, of the illusions brought forth by these frustrations, which would eventually turn fantasy into weirdness. On the other hand, “he was very anxious” because they were all laughing in vain. He was convinced that he had not closed an eye the night before and that he had not dreamt. This final restlessness between believing in the psychological result of his qualms and nightmare and totally denying his dream, and therefore accepting a miraculous fact is nothing but a hesitation between what is real and unreal. Throughout the short story, each mysterious fact is sought a real justification.

The presented dialogue seems essential in the context of the short story, especially as it deals with one of the key topics of the author: the theme of money, taking into account that “no writer in the Romanian literature approached this topic (the greed to getting rich) with more insistence” (Dumitrescu, 1997: 64). As hinted by his name, the main character seems to be one of the typical Slavici characters, a man devoted to, and eager for money, sure of himself, very determined and inflexible with the folk superstitions which he scorns. This trust in his own powers, that “he knew that he had never been hated, nor could he be”, can only denote an ego, a vanity so common to the Slavici characters (Lica Sămădău, Ghiță). Besides, Slavici focuses his attention in his works on two essential forms of the interhuman relationship: love and vanity (Popescu, 1977: 136).

These vain people in Slavici’s work are powerful, impenetrable men who try to face up destiny. However, they are tormented most of the times not only by their own vanity, but also by the desire to have money. “In the universe of Slavici, where the force of money governs the social field, passions govern the affect. Under the veil of discretion and delicate behavior, the heroes of Slavici, generally sombre and silent people, are haunted by strong passions” (Dumitrescu, 1997: 87).

Sfredeluș seems more like a projection of the main character’s own consciousness than a character of his own. He is like a drilling tool for the doubts and qualms, the good elf who tortures his conscience. He represents the voice of the choir in the ancient Greek tragedy that advocates for the preservation of balance, old traditions, for tempering vanity. It seems a voice of the wisdom that warns the dangers which, inevitably, due to the obstinacy of Trașcă, are bound to happen. That’s how the good takes revenge from the world. On a second reading of the short story, the dialogue between the two characters reveals briefly the entire issue of this literary work, it warns and anticipates the events that will follow.

However, one more aspect must be stated before proceeding to a more indepth analysis of the issues dealt with in this short story. This is the literary conception of Ioan

Slavici. Once he had confessed that: “I could never come to terms with the thought that reading of any kind is just a pleasant loss of time. In my mind, the purpose of writing has always been to offer guidance for a living suitable for the human nature” (Slavici, 2001, VI: 283). The conflict between ethics and aesthetics was widely discussed in the case of Slavici’s work. Especially because of the moralist aspect that the writer insisted on, his work was accused of supporting pedantically some theses. The moral aspect, however, created highly powerful literary characters, struggling with inner moral conflicts. Furthermore, “The writer insists, particularly, on moral problems, without neglecting the concrete human nature, the physical aspects of his characters. It depicts them especially in decisive moments, in borderline situations, in disturbing moral crises. Most of his characters are looking for moral purity, a soul balance incompatible with immoral acts” (Balan, 1985: 86). The troubled inner life generated by moral conflicts was carefully conveyed in the author’s writing, giving the Romanian literature an abysmal Slavici, attentive to human nature and the problems that tense it. He thus manages to pursue his characters in critical situations, analysing thoroughly not only physical portraits, but especially unique psychological portraits.

Magdalena Popescu, in the well-known monography dedicated to Slavici, says that the writer usually creates two types of portraits: “The physical portrait and the perception of the subjective interiority of a character are at Slavici in complementary distribution. Usually, the character that can be received as an external entity, autonomous (by physical portrait) remains opaque, impenetrable in his subjectivity, while those who exist as voices of interiority, borrowing their perspective from the author himself, are never seen from the outside” (Popescu, 1977: 154).

Such a character is Tașcă, pursued in his spiritual evolution from his starting point and the dialogue with Sfredeluș until the end.

Therefore, the theme of money, the focus on character’s psychology and the traditional conception of the world with superstitions are the starting points in this short story. But there’s something important to be said. If all these starting points are found in the universe of Slavici’s creation in general, it remains a unique aspect that must necessarily be singled out. Sfredeluș represents the man from the people, superstitious and great keeper of traditions, while Tașcă embodies the lucid man, who refuses to believe in the unknown, who rejects fantasy. It is an unprecedented problem for the work of Slavici to make his character face the unknown, the world of fantasy and is visible mostly in Sfredeluș’s insistence on the image of the empty house or the deserted road.

Ioan Slavici, being a good expert of folk treasure, besides superstitions about the wicked money, introduces through Sfredeluș references to deserted houses and roads: “That’s why I speak of deserted roads and empty houses: it’s not good when a road has been abandoned or a house hasn’t been inhabited anymore!” (Slavici, 2001, II: 2).

The experience of the road, however, reveals at Slavici an essential significance: the path of destiny, the path of life which must be carried out in accordance with the moral laws of mankind. Any deviation from these laws has disastrous consequences: “Slavici’s man is placed in a vast horizon, incomparably wider than that of his predecessors. It is the horizon of human nature, in which the existence of the individual is shown as a complex relationship with history, whether optimistic or tragic, a relation of confrontation with a historically entailed overindividual destiny” (Călinescu, 2000: 766).

Which is Tașcă’s path? At the beginning of the journey, the inner state of the character emanates self-assurance, ambition and confidence: “he passed along the wide road at the Bridge of the Fair, leaving always the travellers’ carts behind him. He had done good work and was cheerful” (Slavici, 2001, II: 30). After he had left Alexandria, the weather was

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very beautiful, but “this was not good”. However, he was brave and nothing seemed to stop him from his determination to reach his destination. But the weather becomes worse and after lunch the icy wind starts blowing. Although everybody around him is seeking shelter, Tașcă does not let himself be persuaded: “It was true that the icy wind was hitting him right in his face and, and as if it were a set-up, the horse didn’t move like it used to; But he had travelled worse in his life and he wouldn’t even think of spending the night at Cîrcei” (*Ibidem*: 31). The weather, like life, may overcome you unexpectedly. The restless weather is trying to take over, to induce its own chaos into the character’s mind to prepare him for the fantastic atmosphere.

Likewise, in fantastic prose, time expands uncontrollably. “Time seems suppressed, it extends far beyond what we consider possible” (Todorov, 1973: 143), the sacred night is not valued, as the night “charged with representations of the demonic”(Ilie, 2013: 111). Tașcă had spent more than half an hour, more than he thought it would take him, to reach the inn. Temporal references come back later. Tașcă was sure he hadn’t closed his eyes at all to sleep, when in fact, a whole night had passed. Florin Călinescu notes that “every time, a normal life plan is altered by the intervention of some delaying factors” (1983: 184), which here are the inn, the bad weather.

The character’s thoughts go fast. He sees the inn ahead, he’s aware that staying at the inn means altering his way and at first he doesn’t even think of stopping by. “He didn’t have to stop by the Inn of the Crows”, and then spontaneously changes his mind and straightens himself as if under the effect of hypnosis. He thinks he’s much closer “he didn’t need half an hour” (Slavici, 2001, II: 31) and leaves the main road.

Through his eyes, the first description of the *Inn of Crows* is made as an old desolate castle: “Far ahead of him, to the left, on the road coming from Pitești, the poplars of the *Inn of the Crows* were seen. He had never been there; he didn’t have what to look for on that area; but he knew that there was the *Inn of the Crows* because you couldn’t even go back and forth without seeing from afar the long path lined by poplars and the big house next to them”(Ibidem: 31). It’s interesting this positioning of the inn that is not on the main road, is not like any inn, on the way of travellers. To reach the inn requires a *deviation from the road*, which in the context of the road as life can be significant. The inn also represents the unforeseen life, the surprise of destiny that unexpectedly overcomes the main character, a man confident in his own forces and in his powers to pursue imperturbably his own path. Against this vanity of the character, the presence of the inn is like a revenge of destiny that is not fully controllable. The inn is described, as Slavici used to do, in a very suggestive literary image. All symbols and suggestions send to the idea of a bad place and everything around him seems a warning. The *Inn of the Crows* has all the traits of an evil place. Heading towards the inn, he understands that “it’s not a clean thing” and “it’s like it was fake” while he kept losing the inn from his sight. However, the state of ambiguity becomes increasingly intense as he enters more and more into the heart of the inn: “Tașcă finally became unable to realize whether things were happening or he was only dreaming” (*Ibidem*: 36). The hesitation between dream and reality places the character in a fantasy area. As G. Bădărău says, “it is sufficient for the dream to overlap reality, to confront it, to set it up or to substitute it, in order to find us in the deepest fantastic atmosphere” (2003: 24).

Now there was a big flock of crows spinning over the poplars that rose towards sundown, and it was a little ugly to look there. “On the side of the road, the inn is always a threat. Nothing from the comfort of the inn from Caragiale’s novel in which the characters return home and nothing from the protective air emanating from the walls as of a castle like in *Ancuța’s Inn*. The poplars and crows are symbols reminiscent of death and have gloomy

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connotations. The scenery is of fantastic origin. Poplars as a symbol send to the idea of hell, but also of duality. The dictionary of symbols presents the poplar as being in the Greek legends “consecrated to Herakles. When he descended into hell, the hero made a crown of poplar branches. The side of the leaves turned to him remained of light colours, the side turned to outside borrow the dark colour of the smoke” (Chevalier, 1993, III: 111). This duality also sends to the duality of the inn with its unknown face, the fantastic, hidden type.

Furthermore, the poplar is suggestive of hell, of the temptations and trials that the merchant will be faced with in the inn: “This tree is also associated to hell, pain, sacrifice and tears. As a burial tree, it symbolizes the regressive forces of nature, remembrance more than hope, time more than the future of rebirths” (*Ibidem*). These last meanings of poplar throw on the theme of the inn other suggestions. The Inn is not just a fantastic space with infernal connotations, but a space of the gloomy past, of regrets, of memories.

From this point of view, the inn assumes only the return to hell (with all its attributes), but especially to an inner hell, in a hidden, gloomy past. Perhaps, at the psychological level, the inn represents the space of the subconscious where the shameful facts, the regrets, were rejected from consciousness. Tașcă’s way to the inn is the way to his inner side, to his past, to the hell that grinds him. The text is sprinkled with such references everywhere, the fantastic is almost like Eliade’s: “What a bad thing this is, groping alone at night trying to find your way in unknown places” (Slavici, 2001, II: 32).

He hardly manages to find the inn. Though from afar it seems real, when closing to it, the inn seems to escape, as if it were alive: “The horse was going on and on, but the *Inn of the Crows* did not stay in the same place, but was moving” (*Ibidem*: 31). In search of the inn, the character wanders like in a personal maze in which the wilderness reigns “the road was deserted,” and the houses of the inn “resembled of wilderness, so that he felt he couldn’t even leave his horse” (*Ibidem*: 33) as it had been anticipated by Sfredeluș, the goblin of consciousness, acting as an Oracle of Delphi. Once arrived in front of the inn, Trașcă exclaims suggestively: “What inn is this, two shootings away from the main road?” (*Ibidem*: 32). Through a common, popular expression, Slavici succeeds here (in Caragiale’s style) to refer to the sins of the character, to the inner dimension where the wrongdoings of the character have been concealed. The inn is here such a meeting of the man with his own sins, in an inner hell.

In the inn he meets four men who seemed “all tired and sleepy who startle when he enters” (*Ibidem*: 33). His visit seems unexpected and strange, and these characters, two Walachians, a German and the innkeeper, equally strange, “with weird looks in the eyes in their head” didn’t make him feel at ease (*Ibidem*: 33). Staying overnight in such a place terrifies him.

The dialogue he has with them completely reveals the burden on the guest’s soul, his personal obsessions and the “sin” that he cannot forget. When he talks to them, he is tormented by the thought that he doesn’t have enough money to pay. Out of vanity Tașcă, seems very concerned not to be considered poor, a shame deserving condition in his opinion. The monologue about money is very well written, exposing the money grubber, the vanity of the rich and strong man, the need for money, the fear of not being stolen: “Three lei and a few coppers, are money alright, but too little for a man who is hungry and thirsty and tired of the road, and who also has a horse. Being without money upon him, Tașcă felt at ease, but still it would have been better if he had some more money. He didn’t need it. However, who saw him knew he was a man who could pay, but the innkeeper would laugh if he told him he had on him only three lei and a few coppers. He looks too much as a rich man (*Ibidem*: 34). And Tașcă, like most of Slavici’s characters, carries in his soul the burden of this sin, the

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obsession for money. For him, as for the other characters, “money is a starting point in the dehumanization of the characters, a source of struggle, of drama and tragedy” (Balan, 1985: 98).

Moreover, this obsession for money pushes him to gestures without humanity. The dialogue, as by coincidence, refers to the owner of the inn, priest without an heir, who seems to be still waiting for his heir. The German tells how he is looking for a brother of his dead father, or how he heard of “a rich butcher who died of starvation as soon as his grandson came, as it was on the grandson’s luck that he had gathered the wealth” (*Ibidem*: 36). One of the Walachians seems to have recognized him, and confirms that he also had a brother. For Tașcă, all the references to his life and the allusions to the mistakes he makes to his niece are more than frightening: “But it was like a set up that they were talking about his brother, who had been dead for about three years. The deceased had been a companion in the trade, and he had also left a little girl, whom Tașcă was bringing up, as he would say, for nothing” (*Ibidem*: 35). This injustice made to his niece is on his soul as a remorse. He will then put everything that will happen to him on account of this remorse.

The diversion to the inn and the difficult experience from here, the strangeness of space, of this ‘non-place’ (2005: 19), as Irina Petraș calls any public place, all disturbs him. The character is known through the monologues. That’s how he expresses his reaction to the location, from where most of the time, although the inn captivates him, hypnotizes him with his strangeness, he feels the need to run away: “Then the place was so that you felt somehow charmed in it, a room both large and short, with walls stained by flies and yellowed by smoke, almost empty and illuminated by a bad lamp, which is located in the wall of the counter” (Slavici, 2001, II: 36). The people from the inn seem to have come from the darkside of the soul. The German appears to be close to a demonic suggestion: “An almost complete darkness was in the corner where the German was laughing, a lickspittle of a bad man, with a few red hairs as a beard, with the pitched voice and the small eyes, as Tașcă imagined the Satan” (*Ibidem*: 36). Slavici created here a fairytale character, very close to the negative forces as perceived in folk thinking. In this sense, Cornel Ungureanu says, “What does Slavici’s character meet in another world? Often only substitutes of the devil” (2002: 10).

For the first time, Tașcă, the adamant man, feels disoriented. Sfredeluș’s fears are confirmed, the wilderness of the place and the strangeness of men frighten him. Moreover, the uncertainty and disorientation make him refuse sleep: “He didn’t feel like going to the room where his bed was prepared. He would have been happier to talk all night. He feared, however, sleep would overcome him, and no one was glad to sleep with people he had never seen or known who they were” (Slavici, 2001, II: 37).

The night is going to be strange. The inn seems to be moving from all its joints, as if it has a life of its own: “The doors and the windows were shaking as if on a ship carried away by waves” (*Ibidem*: 37). The comparison of the inn with a ship is not accidental. The inn becomes a source of unrest; it can no longer provide protection. It is neither the privileged space of the traveller nor the protective place. In the *Dictionary of symbols*, the ship symbolizes “the image of life, for which man must choose its centre and ensure its direction” (Chevalier, 1993, I: 365). Tașcă is also at crossroads, the inn is always positioned between choices, where you choose the direction. Slavici’s hero has to make a decision. The inn becomes a completely uncomfortable place, open to all options. The noises, the ringing of the icy wind, the moving of the doors and windows translates this storm and kneading into the soul.

The character can neither be released from this space, nor isolate himself in order to feel safe. No matter how well he would barricade himself in the room, the icy wind would

still opens the doors. The inn, easily crossed by the wind, is completely insecure, but it does close all roads for the character. The old inn visited by the ghost of Tașcă's brother seems more like a deserted Gothic castle. Dreaming or not, the blame sounds clearly in the night through the evil voice of the German: "You gather – the German seemed to be saying – on the luck of your niece: that's why you're doing so well. And you will die after you have gathered enough, right when the world is dearer to you than ever" (Slavici, 2001, II: 39). In front of his brother's spectrum, Tașcă is ready to make the promise, deciding to give his niece what has been promised to her. Although he was sure he hadn't slept, everything seemed to have happened as if in a dream. When, finally he came down, the others confirmed that he had slept an entire night:

– Well, he said, are you going to stay awake all night?

The innkeeper stared at him, while the German started laughing again.

- Well, you must have slept soundly if you say it's still night, said the innkeeper.

- I haven't closed my eyes since I left you, answered Tașcă. Damn house!

And in vain was the German laughing, and in vain did the innkeeper say that it was daylight, he believed something else, that not two hours had passed since he went to sleep" (*Ibidem*: 41).

The dream can be an essential dimension of the human being that brings out the disturbances of the human soul.

The inn's experience was revealing and transfigured him: "And though he was very anxious, dawn was there and he still did not feel like other times" (*Ibidem*: 41). Inner certainty, the vanity of man who is sure to control his destiny has melted. The end of the short story converts it into a moralist type. Once back home, Tașcă makes it up to his niece, he corrects the wrongdoings, "It's a great thing when a man has something on his soul. Sfredeluș was right: it's not good to keep the money obtained unfairly. As he arrived home, Tașcă kept his word: he made the calculations, and he honestly decided what belonged to the girl and what was his" (*Ibidem*: 41). The conclusion of the short story supports the supremacy of ethics on aesthetics. For the writer, the lesson transmitted, the moral aspect prevails over the esthetic value of his writing.

The protagonist of the *Inn of the Crows* was given by the writer another chance. Destiny has not definitively punished him, because Slavici believes in the kindness of man. When he creates his characters, "Ioan Slavici always takes into account the complexity of man, who is neither angel nor demon but man, flashed by shadows and lights, moulded by passion and lies, but carrying in him a good virtual seed, a grain of humanity" (Balan, 1985: 105).

The finality of fiction at Slavici consists in highlighting the qualities of the human being who struggles to recover these qualities: "The short stories and sketches display most often the same structure, showing people who fail by leaving, or save themselves by reconquering the horizon of humanity" (Călinescu, 2000: 767). The inn is here nothing but a space for the recovery of the self, a place of awakening to humanity and of reconsidering values.

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