

THE RHETORICS OF HEROISM IN THE ROMANIAN POETRY OF THE INDEPENDENCE WAR (1877)

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Abstract After re-reading the lyric poetry of Vasile Alecsandri and George Coșbuc, the article aims to highlight the mechanism through which the War of Independence (1877-1878) of the Kingdom of Romania, bringing an end to a revolutionary epoch, enters the consciousness of posterity literary instrumented by the poems of two civilian writers, fueling the myth of the heroic Romanian soldier while writing not only from a significant geographical distance in relation to the battlefield, but also from a temporal one, biologically speaking.

Keywords Heroism, nation, War of Independence, distance, memory, civil poets.

As demonstrated within the scholarly literature, “manufacturing” heroes is, regardless of folk, a phenomenon characteristic of the process of defining the identity of a community, much more visible in the epoch of the affirmation of the nation-state, but never truly finished, inasmuch as every society keeps building its heroic figures according to the historical context and the particular political circumstances. Thus, if the emergence of the national hero “is never historically given, but socially and culturally built, its figure being able to vary depending on the various political and historical periods and political contexts”¹, it means that the most tumultuous moments of the national history are also the most creative regarding the production of solutions to configuring the heroic patterns which the community admits and identifies with.

From this point of view, the late nineteenth-century, a century characterized by revolution and by the emergence of the nation-states in Europe *par excellence*, offers, in the Romanian example, a very interesting model of literary “manufacturing” the autochthonous heroism, observable in the War of

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¹ See Claudie Voisenat, *Avant-propos*, in *Pierre Centlivres, Daniel Fabre, Françoise Zonabend (dir.), La fabrique des héros* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’Homme, 1999), X. [t.l.P.]

Independence (1877-1878) inspired poetry. Concluding with the victory which marked the achievement of the century-old Romanian ideal – independence from the Ottoman Empire – this war, won as a consequence of the strategic positioning of the Kingdom of Romania on the side of the Russian Empire, was destined to endure in the collective memory as a bright chapter of plenary statement of the national spirit. In completing the heroic canvas of the event, preserved as such in the cultural heritage of the posterity, the literary production of the moment has greatly contributed in all its genres: lyric (George Sion, Barbu Ștefănescu Delavrancea, Vasile Alecsandri, Alexandru Macedonski, Iosif Vulcan, George Baronzi, George Coșbuc etc.), epic (Nicolae Gane, Duiliu Zamfirescu, George Coșbuc, Emil Gârleanu, Gala Galaction etc.) or drama (George Sion, Grigore Ventura etc.)²

However, similar to the case of the partisan literature of the Forty-Eighters, poetry has proven itself the richest creative territory, being the most effective at conveying the mobilizing message in a concise and memorable manner, as remarked by Emil Manu in the preface of the anthology published on the centenary of the War of Independence: “The number of poems dedicated to war is impressive, as poetry proves to be the best genre for political stirring. Our writers have always dedicated body and soul to the fight of our soldiers on the battlefield”³. In reality, if the expression “body and soul” were to be taken literally, it would be more honest to say that our writers only dedicated their soul and not their bodies, for they never became soldiers themselves, keeping in mind that the nineteenth century still preserved a preferential recruitment, therefore protecting the cultural and economic elites. In other words, those who immortalized the heroic deeds of the Romanian soldiers in 1877, did so from a safe distance, not only geographical, but also temporal, and that is why it deserves to be critically interrogated.

The two most eloquent examples in this regard are offered by the established poets of the War of Independence themselves, whose lyrics have been read, quoted and requoted by entire generations: Vasile Alecsandri [1821-1890] and George Coșbuc [1866-1918]. Paradoxically, even though the poets are immortalising the brave deeds of the Romanian army in a detailed and vivid manner, both of them are parted from the reality of the battlefield by considerable distance – a *spatial* one in the case of Vasile Alecsandri, who writes the lines for (*Ostașii noștri*) [*Our soldiers*]⁴ in the safe environment of his manor back in Mircești, and *spatio-temporal* in Coșbuc’s case, who was only 11 years old (!) at that time, spending his childhood far away in Năsăud, in his native Transylvania, and whose *Cântece de vitejie* [*Songs*

² See also Ion Roman, *Eroica. 1877* (Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură, 1967).

³ Emil Manu, *România la 1877*, in *România la 1877* (Bucharest: Editura Ion Creangă, 1977), 8. [t.l.p.].

⁴ V. Vasile Alecsandri, *Ostașii noștri*, în *Opere*, vol. II – *Poezii* (Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură, 1966).

of *Bravery*]⁵ will only be written two decades later. Practically, the most significant lyric voices of the War of Independence prove to be, simultaneously, the furthest away from the truth of battle which they rebuilt with patriotic commitment by the power of their imagination.

Although surprising, the phenomenon is not isolated during its time, given that for the entire generation the war generally is an event taking place far away, passing from public into private space by the means of written text, therefore, via literature, and that means through the filter of imagination, because, as Mary A. Favret puts it in *War at a Distance*, “If we take wartime less as an object of cognition bounded by dates – a period – and more as an affecting experience [...] than wartime literature becomes an attempt to trace and give shape to such affect, to register its wayward power”⁶. Literature, starting from Romanticism, represents that which creates the modern experience of war in Favret’s take, by the simple fact that its representations cause amongst civilians something between the authentic sensation of the conflict and the comforting feeling of an abstract violence taking place far away. This ambiguous affective status in whose conception literature plays no small part is characteristic of the modern experience of war, according to Favret, its defining starting from romanticism, and not from the beginning of the twentieth century with World War I, as claimed in the study of Paul Fussel, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, where the emphasis lies on the idea of *total* war, which ultimately overthrows the order of things and gives birth to irony, as a dominant form of (modern) understanding of the world: “But the Great War was more ironic than any before or since. It was a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century. It reversed the Idea of Progress.”⁷

Moreover, the entire bibliography dedicated to the Great War insists upon the birth of a new tendency, a lucid contemplation of the event, since, due to its magnitude and unimaginable violence, it disrupts the mentality and the sensibility of the foregoing century. In *Du témoignage*, Jean Norton Cru commences in turn an extensive demystifying process, dismantling as an ex-serviceman all the myths of heroism to be found in the literature and the memoirs of World War I and condemning the distorted taste of the readership: “Writers with a public sense, aware of the morbid attraction exercised by the criminal gesture, the bleeding knife, the mutilated corpse, have flirted with deforming art and served the lot of cattle the same thing it’s always been reading but with an up-to-date coloration”⁸. The demythologization of the heroism clichés and the ironic representation of the reality

⁵ See George Coşbuc, *Cântece de vitejie*, în *Opere*, vol. I – *Poezii* (Bucharest: Editura Univers Enciclopedic, 2006).

⁶ See Mary A. Favret, *War at a Distance. Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton&Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 11.

⁷ Paul Fussel, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 8.

⁸ Jean Norton Cru, *Du témoignage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1930), 92. [t.I.P.]

of the battlefield are therefore mutations in the literary and artistic representations of World War I, while the taste for the exceptional, bravery and supreme sacrifice are invariants of the pre-war literature. The status of the author most certainly contributes to this segregation of vision and mood, the perspective of the combatant writers proves to be a rather demystifying one, while the perspective of the civilian writers is generally tributary to the culturally inherited commonplaces for reasons which Emmanuel Godo summarizes so: “The civilians develop an ultra-patriotic discourse out of sheer conformism or to compensate, by ideological or linguistic means, for their non-enlisting.”⁹ This explanatory note is essential in any debate on the nature of war literature.

As our civilian poets evoke the deeds of bravery in the War of Independence, Vasile Alecsandri and George Coșbuc rebuild in their own hyperbolised vision of heroic sacrifice for the future of the country, perpetuated by the autochthonous cultural memory, but not confirmed by the confessions of the soldiers, as noted by Ovid Densusianu: “As I walked many counties I never met a single peasant who would talk to me about this event with the joy and enthusiasm awoken by the belief that he took part in a great deed, but rather the loathing for an order he was forced to obey.”¹⁰ The poems of both Alecsandri and Coșbuc emphasize precisely the enthusiasm, abnegation, bravery and especially the self-sacrificing spirit of the infantry whom they transform into the national heroes via “transfer of sacredness,”¹¹ that which the scientific literature calls the identifying of the soldier’s image with the Messianic model, which holds a privileged position in affirming a homeland nation.

Thereby, in the *Ostașii noștri* [*Our soldiers*] cycle, first published in 1878, the same Vasile Alecsandri who upon visiting the war theatre in Crimea and the ruins of Sevastopol in 1855 had written the pacifist poem *La Sevastopol* [*In Sevastopol*] terrified by the aftermath of the conflict, now discards the pacifist attitude and embraces a warlike tone, even more surprising if we consider that the War of Independence finds the poet retired from the public life and political conflicts, as shown in *Epistola generalului Florescu* [*Letter to General Florescu*], appeared in 1876. The awaited news of Romania’s army entering the war which could finally achieve the much dreamed of independence for his country reanimates the creative spirit of the Forty-Eighter poet on the verge of old age, isolated in Mircești, from where he decides to answer the call to arms with his own weapon: poetry. The exaltation of the poet should be understood not only on the background of his prior patriotic commitment proved during the Revolution

⁹ Emmanuel Godo, *Pourquoi nous battons-nous? 1914-1918: les écrivains face à leur guerre* (Paris: Les Éditions du CERF, 2014), 61. [t.i.P.].

¹⁰ Ovid Densusianu, *Folclorul. Cum trebuie înțeleș*, in Octav Păun (coord.), *Elogiu folclorului românesc* (Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură, 1969), 271. [t.i.P.].

¹¹ V. Mona Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire. 1789-1799* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

of 1848 or during the Union of the Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia in 1859, but on the background of a separated diplomatic experience, because immediately after the Union he is sent by the Ruler Alexandru Ioan Cuza into a diplomatic mission close to the governments of France, England and Piedmont, thus having the occasion to walk the battlefield of the Austro-French Piedmontese War. Thereupon, “when, in 1859, [...] Alecsandri has the opportunity to follow closely the diplomatic upheavals and even the Italian sacrifices on the field of battle for the liberty and the unity of their nation, his consciousness reacts as if they belonged to his own country.¹²” This is the origin of the poems *Presimțire* [Foreboding], *Pilotul* [The Pilot], *La Magenta* [By Magenta] etc., which praise the heroism of the young Italians, anticipating the formula of *Ostașii noștri* [Our soldiers]. In other words, in 1877, old Alecsandri processes the theme of the new war of the Romanians through the lens of his old diplomatic experiences, authorising in fact a purely literary perception of the events, also remarked by Sorin Alexandrescu: “From his manor in Mircești, Alecsandri had a typical literary perception of the events: what was happening on the battlefield was, in his mind, a renewal of the old battles fought by the Romanians in the Middle Ages. That is why no significant difference can be pinpointed between the *Ostașii noștri* [Our soldiers] and the *Legende* [Legends] cycle.¹³”

The verses dedicated by Alecsandri to The War of Independence therefore illustrate a heroic imagery indebted to the traditional literary genres, including for instance the folk tale – because the danger represented by the enemy is a “dreadful dragon” who threatens with his “unseen claw” the Romanian soldiers, real “sons of Gods” with “seven lives”, hurling themselves, “Through fire, swords, through smoke and bullets,/ Through thousands of bayonets,¹⁴” into a hyperbolized and symbolically biased fight (*Peneș Curcanul*) [*Peneș the Gobbler*] –, the ballad (*Căpitanul Romano*) [*Captain Romano*], the ode (*Oda ostașilor români*) [*Ode to the Romanian Soldiers*] or the hora (*Hora de la Plevna, Hora de la Grivița*) [*The Hora of Pleven; The Hora of Grivitsa*]. Regardless of genre, the hero’s profile follows the same pattern: soldier of modest origin, exponent of the peasantry, offspring of the traditional village, for “In every shepherd proudly a squire lies this day!” and “Today, in all Romanians an infantry man lay!¹⁵” (*Păstorii și plugarii*) [*The Shepherds and the Ploughmen*], fearless, eagerly aspiring “the valiant death” (*Peneș Curcanul*) [*Peneș the Gobbler*], akin to his forebearers, for „In his enormous eyes, like vulture’s, deep and edged / Were passing gleaming

¹² G. C. Nicolescu, *Studiu introductiv*, in Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. I – *Poezii* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, 1965), 18. [t.i.p.]

¹³ Sorin Alexandrescu, *Război și semnificație. România în 1877*, in *Privind înapoi, modernitatea* (Bucharest: Editura Univers, 1999), 34. [t.i.p.]

¹⁴ “Prin foc, prin spăgi, prin glonți, prin fum,/ Prin mii de baionete”. [t.i.p.]

¹⁵ “În tot păstorul astăzi există-un scutier!”; “În tot românul astăzi există-un dorobanț!”. [t.i.p.]

shadows of heroes from the legend¹⁶ (*Sergentul*) [*The Sergeant*] and proud, given that he fights laughing (*Frații Jderi*) [*The Jderi Brothers*] and dies smiling (*Căpitanul Romano*) [*Captain Romano*]. The heroic type as outlined in Alecsandri's poems is obviously implausible. However, the inspiring potential of the verses has proven impressive, provided that "the *Ostașii noștri* cycle knew an immense public success in all the Romanian provinces during its time, especially in Transylvania, where it greatly contributed to the patriotic education of the youth and has found numerous imitators.¹⁷" Artistically converting the victorious battles imagined from a comfortable distance, Alecsandri's pathos-infused poems have had thereby a remarkable impact on the Romanians of Transylvania out of the ranks of which the second greatest bard of the War of Independence will rise, George Coșbuc.

Therefore, if Vasile Alecsandri was only spatially parted (and notably so) from the frontline, George Coșbuc's case is even more distant since he was separated from the episode of the Independence War both spatially and temporally. The poet published the volume *Cântece de vitejie* [*Songs of Bravery*] only in 1904, meaning two and a half decades after the end of the war. By doing so, Coșbuc reinvests meaning into a glorious episode of the national history, already literary instrumented to suit, this time, the aspiration of the Romanians of Transylvania still under the Austro-Hungarian domination: "George Coșbuc's poems of historic inspiration bore meanings of actuality for the time in which they appeared. Spokesman [...] of the Transylvanian Romanians, oppressed by the Habsburg Empire, the poet's ultimate goal was to inspire [...] the desire for freedom.¹⁸" The War of Independence is, therefore, "recycled" by the young George Coșbuc out of ethnic and political reasons, although the initiative is not unusual because it can be integrated into a more ample tendency identified by Teodor Vârgolici in the literary press of the time: "Our literary magazines of the first decades of that century continued to publish poems which evoked the War of Independence, constantly refreshing the memory of the readers with images of the fights back then, nourishing the cult of heroes.¹⁹" For example, proceeding in a similar manner, Nicolae Vulovici, a poet who left us two entire volumes dedicated to the War of Independence which he did not physically experience, wrote not a single verse about The Great War in which he fought but perished rather soon.

Published one at a time starting from 1896 and finally regrouped in the volume of 1904, Coșbuc's songs of bravery recreate in a manner similar to

¹⁶ "-n ochii lui de vultur adânci, vioi și mari/ Treceau lucioase umbre de eroi legendari". [t.l.p.]

¹⁷ Sara Iercoșan, *Ostașii noștri*, in Ion Pop (coord.), *Dicționarul analitic de opere literare românești* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Casa Cărții de Știință, 2007), 717. [t.l.p.]

¹⁸ Teodor Vârgolici, *Ecourile literare ale cuceririi independenței naționale* (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1976), 202. [t.l.p.]

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 262. [t.l.p.]

Alecsandri, paying attention to details and with an increased appetite for the exceptional, the life of the soldiers on the frontline using all the conventions of the genre, which the combatant writers of World War I will not hesitate to criticise later. The poems craft heroic scenarios out of which the figure of the brave infantryman shines, eager to sacrifice himself for his nation (*Dorobanțul*) [*The Infantry Man*], animated “By love of country solely” and having only “the Holy Lord as shield” (*Scut și armă*) [*Shield and Weapon*]. Coșbuc’s partisan verses are passed through, in an alert rhythm, by the same “merry batallions” (*Pe drumul Plevnei*) [*On the Pleven Road*] facing the danger with “rebellious anger” (*La Smârdan*) [*In Smurdan*], advancing unleashed in the hyperbolic whirlpool of battle: “We’re fighting as bereft of wits,/ We’re biting hard, with clenching fists/ [...] Dropping like leaves before the frost,/ While our blood was pouring froth²⁰” (*Coloana de atac*) [*The Attack Column*]. The description of the clash is bookish, the origin of the rivers of blood in war literature goes back, as shown by Jean Norton Cru, to Homer himself, whose epics are echoed in Coșbuc by the recurring attributes of the warriors: “All of them like lions fought” (*În spital*) [*In the Hospital*]. Thus, “carefully recreating [...] the war life of 1877-1878, the writer emphasizes the heroic dimension of the struggle for independence²¹” in a series of poems which, observed by Dumitru Micu, “have educated generations and can nurture even today the love of country among the youth.²²” More so than a patriotism “lesson”, these verses should constitute a starting point for a critical reflection concerning literature’s capacity to influence social dynamics in watershed historical moments, via strategies of mystifying and fictionalising the brutal realities to which the civilian writers are complete strangers.

In this regard, the change of heart to be found in Alecsandri’s *Eroii de la Plevna* [*The Heroes of Plevna*]— a poem bitterly treating the misery of the veterans of the War of Independence, but which, and this is an important detail, will not appear in the 1878 edition, nor in the 1880 one –, along with Coșbuc’s change of heart to be found in the poem *Morți, - pentru cine?* [*Dead, - whom for?*], a text from 1914 which can be read as an ironic sequel to *Trei, Doamne, și toți trei* [*Three, oh Lord, and three together*], are enough ground to highlight the fact that the rhetorics of heroism ends up abandoned by the very writers who have climbed it to the ranks of art when they experience, one way or another, the painful revelation of the real consequence of war. Finally, with or without this revelation, the literary instrumentalization of any historical event should be critically interrogated, because the representation of violence and death

²⁰ “Ne batem ca-n pierzarea minții,/ Cu pumnii dăm, mușcăm cu dinții/ [...] Cădeam ca frunzele de brumă,/ Iar sângele curgea cu spumă”. [t.I.P.]

²¹ Dumitru Micu, *Studiu introductiv*, in George Coșbuc, *Op. Cit.*, LXIV. [t.I.P.]

²² *Ibidem*, XLVI. [t.I.P.]

remains, as recently proven by Maria Bucur in her admirable study *Eroi și victime*,²³ a problem of cultural history just as captivating as it is complex.

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²³ V. Maria Bucur, *Eroi și victime. România și memoria celor două războaie mondiale* (Iași: Polirom, 2019).