

Witchcraft and Manipulation in a Romanian Chronicle Dating from the Beginning of the XVIII Century

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In the Anonimul Brâncovenesc (The Brâncovenesc Anonymus), a Romanian chronicle, there is a happening, mentioned within another chronicle too, which narrates the killing of some nuns accused of witchcraft (1714). The story sets more reception levels, determined by the spectacular evolution of the message from emission to final reception. The writing points out the way these transformations occur. They are being placed in the labile area of Derrida's "more than present". Due to emotional and historical pressure the primary acceptance of the story comes across different areas of the public opinion and has to face the consequences of these meetings.*

A case of collective suggestion which occurred on a global emotional and unhappy background, is being narrated in a medieval chronicle. The happening dates back to the death of the Romanian prince, Constantin Brâncoveanu (1654-1714). This ruler was decapitated together with his sons, following the decision taken by the Ottomans. The chronicles state that the people repented his death and considered it unjust. Brâncoveanu's place as a ruler was taken by Ștefan Cantacuzino. People in Bucharest had already had an inkling about Ștefan's interference in Brâncoveanu's death, especially due to his father's contacts. On Saint Mary's Day (the 15th of August), it was known that Brâncoveanu's execution was taking place in Istanbul when people in Wallachia witnessed a miracle. Păuna, the new ruler's wife was hit by the Divine punishment while entering the church. The chronicler tells that the woman looked as if being possessed by Evil (devilish). Probably she had a hysteria crisis or had been given drugs as, the chronicler says *everybody around her felt frightened* and the illness continued for a few days. As there had already been a suspicion that Ștefan Cantacuzino could be blamed for Brâncoveanu's death, the scene in the church was enough to persuade everyone in believing that Păuna's diabolizing was the clear sign of Ștefan's sin. It is a very high probability that things would have worsen if Cantacuzino hadn't immediately found a way of redirecting the suggestion that had set in. He said that an unfaithful witch-nun, called Olimbiada was to be blamed for his wife's crisis. Consequently, the nun was locked in a cell and the door was built in. Only a little window was left opened, so that the nun could receive water and bread. More than that, to amplify the act of sorcery, a few other nuns at Olimbiada's orders were hanged.

It is interesting that the *diabolizing scene* happens in the church, on a rejoicing day, in front of many people. It is for this reason that, as in some other similar cases, the suggestion of the extraordinary happening grows deeper. The World was already prepared for this and was just waiting for a Divine sign. In cases of general discontent, it is a known fact that the crowd can be easily manipulated, and the main principle is not to contradict an already angry group. And that is the path followed by Cantacuzino, he does not deny what is obvious: it's

* Anonimul Brâncovenesc, în *Cronicari munteni*, București: Editura Fundației Naționale pentru Știință și Artă&Univers Enciclopedic, 2004, 746.

true that Păuna is diabolized but the witchcraft was responsible for that. Turned into a victim, it seems that she gained the community's sympathy. It was not proven that people believed in the nun's guilt, but the alternative appealed to them as being at least truth-like. Directed towards collective disasters and punishments, the human spirit is better prepared to accept evil. Orson Wells's experiment has the same features and in both cases, the suggestion earns strength because it is emitted by an authority. The radio drama in 1938 is credible because it was broadcasted under the title of "news" and the nun becomes a witch because the ruler himself states this. There is, though, another element that strengthens the suggestion: the truthfulness of the scenario. Ștefan Cantacuzino doesn't only make a simple accusation, but as Orson Wells will do later, he puts in stage a whole performance that takes place in front of a crowd already puzzled by a good ruler's drama, eager to revenge and convinced of the Divine miracle which had happened on a holy day.

Prince Ștefan Cantacuzino sends to death a few nuns who had been accused of witchcraft, this means they will face public hanging. He also immures Olimbiada, who is left to starve, detail that drags out the story, at least for a while. We are not talking about a simple performance but about a sacrifice methodically placed over the people's urge of sacrifice. This act determines discussions, secondary happenings, insignificant rows, things that entertain the community's on-going life. The insight settles gently and its core is not directly linked to the act of deciding to punish the witch, but to the eradication of the evil. Intentional meanings function here, like the ones born from the ruler's desire to switch the public attention from his own accusation of betrayal, but secondary meanings also appear. Once the debate around the idea of witchcraft is opened, new messages arise and automatically function together with the motif. They come from within the questions about the witch's motivation, the ritualistic like scenario, the relationship between Păuna and the nun. It must be said here that Olimbiada was Păuna's aunt. These details that are introduced in different combinations and under different circumstances inoculate the suggestion of a plot or the felling that malefic forces are ruling the World. They also induce the desire of purification, arouse the concern regarding the protection against the witches and even develop a feeling of collective guilt. And these are not the only suggestions that storm the community taking part in the conflict. An elaborated story that develops more with every given event generates a complex network made up of information that fulfills every reception level. And if this is a real masterpiece, it will also obtain the esthetic emotion and the ability to offer a pattern of knowing the World.

At this point, art and subliminal perception meet. The area of suggestion is fulfilled with petty information and some of them are placed within a semiotic system which allows them to preserve their functions even beyond consciousness. A text, an image, a pronounceable sentence or a simple word, each one contains numerous messages that form complex circuits and that are connected between them. A text is the *disaster of an infinite meaning*¹ and in order for it to be understood, it must be *deconstructed*, as both Julia Kristeva and Derrida say. In the same way, any message is understood as a unit, but it brings by other masked messages and is linked to numerous meanings and similarities. The message is surrounded by an area of constant birth, where it *reproduces itself and is dispersed into an infinite network of applications*² Though, the receiver can draw some lines of understanding and accepting the given message, even if we are talking about hypermessages. 'If polysemy is infinite, if we can not control it properly, that doesn't mean that a finite reading or writing isn't capable of exhausting a supra-abundance in meaning, providing that we move the

¹ Kristeva, Julia (1972). *Semanalyse et production de sens...*, în *Essais de sémiotique poétique*: Paris: Librairie Larousse, 234.

² Kristeva, J. *ibidem*, 216.

philosophical concept of being finite and reconstruct it according to the criteria and structure of the text.³

In the story above, we can fix a reception in connection to the way in which Brâncoveanu's drama was perceived at that time. But there are some other numerous messages hardly connected to this one. The hanging of the other nuns apart Olimpiada becomes an information with an emotional load. It cannot leave the reader untouched. But it cannot draw his attention for a long time, either. It sustains a feeling that does not take long, that is penetrant and with real abilities of stepping beyond the thin curtain of consciousness. This information is underlying connected to the religious life, to the time's habits of mind concerning the nuns, to the image of public hanging, etc. The text itself is in relation with other writings as the one belonging to Radu Popescu⁴, another chronicler of that times, or with the folklore developed around Brâncoveanu's death. In Radu Popescu's chronicle, the event is regarded with sobriety and Păuna's crisis is called *namelessness*. The nun's punishment is also treated concisely, but using two more details: that Olimpiada was an old woman and that the concrete number of the hanged nuns was of two. When talking about the modern novel, both Bahtin and Kristeva underline the existence of an interior *dialog*, of a permanent collation of contraries, as the author's speech is proportional with the other, with a co-speaker, with his own self, developing into an endless polyphony. This *carnival* of words seems to be following the chaotic way of a dream speech but, in fact, it runs after a subjective and mysterious logic. This is the image of the present message, "dressed" into different languages, bearing the changes due to the alliances and the confrontations it faces in the long way between the transmitter and the receiver and even more important, while it finds its above or subliminal place. Increased by colloquial comments, assessed in the times' public opinion through the sensational details, the story is narrated in the anonymous chronicle under the impulse of the lived event. More detached, Radu Popescu writes down the facts, making fun of the way the prince switched the meaning of the event which seems evident to the chronicler: Păuna's crisis represented the Devine warning regarding Brâncoveanu's betrayal. The first event that took place in front of a small crowd amplifies with Ștefan Cantacuzino's manipulation, becomes richer thanks to a cruel scenario, intersects other messages, etc. That means it lives its destiny *on the fourth wall* in Derrida's "more than present" used to define the reception act itself.

In an endless metamorphosis, a message has, among others, the ability to activate latent meanings which fell bellow consciousness, but it is also a vehicle that hides other messages. These hidden information get into the subconscious and their way of acting is similar to the one of the artistic message. As we well know, a composition bears a strong impression, develops feelings and attitudes, builds habits of mind in time, but also sends towards the receiver an important and unknown number of messages, capable of reproducing themselves. Many of them rise again, after a while, others stay "asleep" expecting another information capable of bringing it to life. The human being "works" thanks to permanent exchange of information.

From the numerous absorbed messages, many stay latent until a stimulus reaches them, an information capable of restoring them. As for the word's destiny, it is just the *simulation* of a world that stimulates the needs of the human imagination. In fact, what really happened to Păuna in the church is not exactly known as there wasn't such a large crowd there. But the receivers group was a very active one: people who came to the church, socially involved, able to popularize the scene. The group's reception came over Brâncoveanu's unfair

³ Derrida, Jacques (1997). *Diseminearea (La Dissémination)*, București: Editura Univers Enciclopedic, 251.

⁴ Popescu, Radu (2004). Cronica lui Nicolae Mavrocordat (Nicholas MavrocordatosChronicle), in *Cronicari munteni*, ed. cit., București, 777.

death and was increased by the nuns' punishment scenario. Even if Radu Popescu openly doubts the nuns' guilt, the women were still killed. The hanging was a public show, that took place in "The Fair from Outside", in the outskirts of Bucharest, where people trade, a puppet theatre functioned and all kinds of other popular places of entertainment were ran. Here, the hanging was an attraction too. As the writings of the time say, the bodies hanged for days, just for entertaining the crowd. It seems that, though unjust, the nuns' killing entered under the influence of another kind of message which was conducted by a force aimed at satisfying the human pleasures. The area of conflict where the need for entertainment and the riot against the ruler meet, re-establishes the succession of the individual priorities and the show will always win, while the moral principles are the runner-up. Brâncoveanu's death, Păuna's crisis, the charges against the prince are not forgotten. The show of the hanging preserves these semantic fields, it is also able to keep the finished event alive. A text, a narration or a word preserves the illusion of "tradition" at any level of an event, thanks to its reminiscent feature. By relating the reception and the whole process to a certain past, the appearance of some bench-marks is made possible and in accordance with them the appearance of some reagents which can nullify them. The ones who couldn't stand their urge for entertainment resent the nuns' death, the same way that the human desire of learning more about the witches' secret world continues to resist. Consequently, a similarity is born and nourished by the two antonymies that sustain the message itself: Păuna's diabolizing taken for a warning and a divine sign, following the witchcraft.

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1. David Jacques (1997) *Brâncoveanu* (La Brâncoveanu), Institutul Editural Universităţii Bucureşti, 127.
 2. Popescu Radu (2004) *Crónica de Nicolae Brâncoveanu*, Editura Universităţii din Cluj, Cluj, 177.