

The Image of the Roma in Vasile Alecsandri's *Istoria unui galben si a unei parale* and
Vasile Porojan

Historically speaking, the basic idea about the second half of the 19th century transition is that we have the Revolution of 1848, we replace the Slavonic alphabet with the Latin alphabet, we have the Union between Moldova and Tara Romaneasca, and we also have the social and cultural emancipation movement, abolition of slavery included.

This emancipation spirit animated the main Romanian newspapers of the time, as Mr Victor Visinescu shows us in his 2000 book, *O istorie a presei romanesti*. Although he does not exactly approach abolitionism, he does tell us about Kogalniceanu's main ideals, regarding "Romanian history as our essential reading", and the names of all those writers and politicians who fought "with the weapon of writing, and who, despite certain political and cultural views, caused by their intellectual training and their different ages, are still united by this common idea: nationality, liberty, social equality", Vasile Alecsandri among them. So, in this context, we can see Balcescu, Negruzzi and Alecsandri's enthusiastic writing at *Dacia Literara* (1840), *Arhiva Romaneasca* (1840), *Propasirea* (1844), *Magazin Istoric pentru Dacia* (1845) where they combine the verse and the prose, the drama and the satire.

Speaking about satire and literature, let's now pass on to the first of Alecsandri's work I'm going to analyze here, namely *Istoria unui galbin si a unei parale*, a dialogue between a golden Dutch Ducat and a Turkish silver coin, published in 1876, but who tells different stories since 1820 until 1844, that is, before the Union and during slavery. The story is a combination of the picaresque genre, the literature of traveling and fable, and theatre, according to critics. I would also say it is a sort of a newspaper article, since it

begins with the author, Alecsandri, that introduces us to this dialogue he will objectively and fully relate, and it also finishes with him, when he unfortunately loses the silver coin.

From the picaresque novel Alecsandri took the idea of a character, the picaro, this time not a rascal of low degree, but “a beautiful and noble Dutch” as the silver coin calls the golden one, as “the best way to try the human nature”, that is, the one who is given from hand to hand and pocket to pocket among types of different social classes in the then Romanian society. This is how the Ducat tells us about a little boyar afraid of thieves who keeps it in his boot, then about a chief justice whose pockets “had no limits nor a bottom”, and where he has the surprise of living among “a mixed population of Dutch and German golden Ducats, old and new Turkish coins, of roubles, even German pennies, even golden Transylvanian pennies/kreutzers, that were all living in a surprising harmony in that period of fighting between nations”, an allusion to justice being made through money, according to Maciuca. The next characters are a parasite young man whose main occupation is to play cards, a prefect who had two small estates taken from free peasants, with some “Roma souls” and who was known as a nice householder, even if “he was not ashamed to order for a Romanian to be beaten at soles when the person could not pay his taxes, right when he [the master] was praying Holy Father”. From this last ‘master’, the Ducat is somehow thrown into the ground and here we have both the first idea about liberty and its being taken by his most beloved type in this dialogue, Zamfira, the Gypsy woman: “nothing in the world is dearest and more sacred than liberty.....a nation is about to die when it doesn’t hear the voice of liberty any more.”

The image of the Roma starts with the physical beauty of Zamfira, this young woman who finds the golden Ducate and turns it into a medallion. Then we have the description and organization of any Roma tribe in Romania. And the last part, the origins and early childhood of Zamfira and her miserable life as a slave. All this description is a mixture of prose and poetry, of Roma and Romanian peasant behavior, perhaps a reminder of Alecsandri's idyllic way of seeing his villagers.

Zamfira's image is depicted with great detail, from physical appearance to her pure and rich way of dressing. She is young, black-haired, "with tresses adorned with flowers and little silver coins", she has a red and white pearl necklace, and she is of a delightful wilderness, all this portrait telling precisely of a Roma woman. From Romanian peasants she borrows the white shirt with ornaments of thread and silk and the blue peasant skirt with dark red stripes. And I would say that she is also endowed with a body taken from fairytales, as we can see in the verses that follow:

Her eyes, like the clear sky after the rain or like the chicory flower.
Her eyelashes, as large as a silk veil
Her eyebrows, well arched as the arch of the 'amoriu'
Her cheeks, long-round and slightly painted by daybreak's purple,
That smiles when it appears [.....]
Her mouth, a half blossomed rose bud,
Her teeth, apple pip without husk or a pearl
Her neck, that of a swam, in the old custom
Her breast.....(round and beautiful)

After another poem dedicated to the angel that Zamfira becomes for the Ducat, we should pass to the general description of the tribe. First, there is Nedelcu, Zamfira's boyfriend, a tall, agile, strong Roma lad, with big dark eyes, dark long hair, and his face burnt by the sun, but beautiful and smart, a famous musician. It is the moment when we are introduced to Nedelcu and Zamfira as fugitive slaves. The rest of their story will be

told only after the next two parts of the dialogue, the organization of the tribe and Zamfira's early childhood.

A lot of picturesque details make the image of such a tribe, this time a very different character from an Alecsandri's traditional village. First of all, Gypsies have a nomadic way of life, so, instead of talking about a permanent home, we must find out about their carriage and the tent:

Each Gypsy has his tent, made by several smoked rugs, and a carriage with high wheels, which serves him for bed, when he stops, and where he carries all his family and all his crafts when he travels.

A poem by Russian writer Puskin adds to this image:

The donkeys carry pick-a-back
The little kids; and the others,
Women and girls and men,
After carriages go by foot,
All patched and undressed.

What joy, what songs!
What words and what a hum!
The bear roars, the dogs bark
And there creaks the unoiled wheel.

The description continues with the organization of a Gypsy band on the move. The first is their white beard, black faced prince, on his horse, dressed with a red festive coat and surrounded by three or four serious old men, dressed in long blue festive coats. They are followed by plenty of high carriages with kids, goats and rags, which the Gypsy seem to find indispensable. Then there are the old men, sleeping and sunbathing on the carriages and next to them, everybody else on foot:

Old round-shouldered men were lying in the carriages and were sunbathing, and the rest of the family were going by foot: women with kids in their arms, young girls with white wooden pails on their heads, lads tearing after them bears, horses, foals, cows, dogs, all of them crowded together, all speaking, roaring, neighing, yelling and filling the field with a wild noise that gives you the shivers.

After another poem taken from Puskin, the description continues with the Roma division of duties, when they camp next to a market-town or village. The men, who are blacksmiths or spoon makers, sell Jew's harps, troughs, padlocks, spindles. The old women guess for Romanian girls, the lads play the bear in the boyars' yards, the wives stay and cook, while the kids play naked on the fields. The tribe is followed into the evening when kids scream for food, dogs bark, young girls and lads sing while coming back from picking up wild strawberries in the waterside, all being covered by quarrels, caressing, groans, roars of laughter, exultant shouts, sounds of kobsas, fiddles, Jew's harps, and into the night when all is completely silent.

From now on we are introduced into Zamfira's happy childhood, followed by slavery and finished with her insanity.

Zamfira was born under the tent, on the Olt shore, where a band of Gypsy spoon makers had camped for summer. Her father was the tribe's judge/prefect, her mother was famous, as a Gypsy woman, in telling people's fortune, a "weak and stupid reminder of that occult science, so developed with ancient Egyptians", in Alecsandri's words. The nomadic life offered her a happy childhood, even if she was dressed only in a broken shirt and knew nothing about shoes.

The last episode of the Roma image here starts when she was 7 years of age, the moment when the Romanian master of the Gypsy's band had gone into poverty and decided to sell them in order to pay his duties, an episode most commonly known from American literature rather than Romanian. And here we have the full description of such a slave-market in our country before the abolition of slavery:

The market was crammed with Gypsies lying down on the earth with their Gypsy women and children, crying together and lamenting themselves as if sentenced to death. A lot of boyars and merchants were walking among them, trampling them underfoot and pointing at them with their fingers as if at cows.

[...] A boyar with a large round bottomed fur cap and red boots had come near Zamfira, had taken her hand and turned her to the left and to the right, looking at her from top to bottom. Then he ordered her to walk a little , to see she was not lame; he looked at her teeth and said:

“Ten Ducats for the judge’s daughter”[...]

The rest of the trade can be easily imagined if we remember the African slavery in the United States: the new master buys the Roma slave, her parents cry and ask him to please buy them too, and he refuses and threatens them with corporal punishment, except that here he does not call them “niggers” but “crows”.

What follows is only the sad story of Zamfira being forced to work for the master and his spoiled servant, being punished for every little mistake or without it, from 8 to 15 years when she turned from little child into the beautiful woman the Ducat had presented at the beginning of the story. This time the boyar sort of likes her for her womanhood, although, we are told, she was too innocent to understand his wicked propositions. Her only savior and future lover, the very Nedelcu from the beginning, her friend since early childhood, comes now to rescue her and they both run away to meet her parent’s band again. Like most slaves, they are caught after six months of freedom and happiness, he kills the boyar, is sentenced to death and hanged, while she becomes insane.

Poor Zamfira! Such a beautiful woman like her, had you seen her a few weeks later, you would have been scared.....Her eyes had entered deep into her head, her cheeks had dried, and her hair flowed loose and tousled on her shoulders. Such a beautiful body like hers was now only skin and bones. Poor Zamfira! In what a miserable condition was she brought by despair! [...] She died a few months later at the Voratic monastery, after many hard pains!

Another protest against social injustice is *Vasile Porojan*, published in 1880, after the abolition of slavery, this time a letter mourning the death of Alecsandri’s dearest friend since childhood, the Gypsy Porojan, a name “rather from a tent/band than from a saloon”.

He is described with nostalgia for the happy times when the two were playing knucklebone and were throwing stones over the St Ilie church in Iasi, fifty years before,

when “we were both equal under the sun”, except that Porojan was the only one punished when necessary since he was the Roma and Alecsandri the landowner’s sun. The many talents that Porojan had in all sorts of childhood games as well as artistic inclinations were not even close enough not to condemn him at a life of simply making bread, in Alecsandri’s words “but all his talents being unaccounted for, he was destined to become a baker”. While at the French school in Romania, the white young master sadly remembers the new image of his black friend:

The image of Porojan passed before my eyes, not black and happy, but powdered with flour and humiliated by this unnatural whiteness. [...] The rulers of the country could be deposed, traditions could change in Moldavia, the face of the world could turn into anything; me, his former friend, I could have turned from salesman into a Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prime Minister, even into a ruler,Porojan was destined to become and remain the same baker until the end of his life!.....Strange injustice of the destiny!

Like Zamfira, Porojan escapes the next day after Alecsandri’s departure for Paris, and he will not return until his friend is back home, for fear of the policeman who was there to punish all Roma too fond of their liberty, together with the lazy and thieves.

Although belonging to the aristocratic world, Alecsandri is known as one of those boyars who freed all his slaves without asking for any financial compensation. This episode of his life is remembered here, and takes place after his parents’ death, as a reward for Porojan’s friendship. He promises his slaves that “they will not be taken their children any more to be educated and made servants in the boyar’s home and they will be allowed to leave wherever they want to.” After a wild exclamation, and a thousand improper jumps, three old men ask him not to free and abandon them, since no one else would take care of them, dress and feed them, wed them and bury them from that moment on.

However all of them tried to assert and enjoy their freedom, not as free workers, but as thieves, and drunkards until they ended up in jails and finally returned to their

former master, “naked, sick, starved with hunger, frozen, and kneeled before me asking me to receive them again as my slaves as in those good old times, as they were saying”.

This scene made Alecsandri think of how to free one’s slaves in order to actually do them good:

This coming back to slavery by their own will made me think deeply on the way to free those people that are enslaved by birth and I became convinced that it is as inhuman to deny someone’s freedom as it is unwise to suddenly free a slave without a proper training for the happiness that is waiting for him and without defending him of the shortcomings of a rash freedom.

The last former slave who comes back and asks for mercy is the very Porojan, a “stranger in a coat and bare-naked” who will disappear again in 2 days, with the manager’s horse.

Alecsandri’s conclusion regards Porojan’s death, and I think it sums up all his opinions on slavery:

He died taking with him that part of the social picture that shows us the boyar’s families surrounded by Gypsy slaves, like the houses of Roman patricians full of slaves brought from the whole world.