

The Image of the Black Slave in Vasile Alecsandri's *Istoria Unui Galben și a Unei Parale* and in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the way in which Romanian 19th century writer Vasile Alecsandri and white American 19th century writer Harriet Beecher Stowe denounce the institution of slavery in the Romanian Principalities and America, respectively, through their sympathies towards Gypsy and Black slaves.

Lucrarea analizează felul în care scriitorul român din secolul XIX Vasile Alecsandri și scriitoarea albă americană de secol XIX Harriet Beecher Stowe denunță instituția sclaviei în Principatele Române și, respectiv, în America, prin simpatia lor față de țigani și sclavii negri.

Key-words: țigan, Roma, Alecsandri, Stowe, Revolution, slavery, abolitionism

In Romania's history, the first half of the 19th century meant modernization, both politically and culturally speaking. On the one hand, this was defined by the introduction of European habits, dressing and the French language in the higher classes of the then Romanian society. To this we must add the replacement of the Slavonic alphabet with the Latin one and the emergence of a national and nationalist literature, inspired from history, landscape and folklore. On the other hand, we are talking about the Romanian political emancipation, followed by the abolition of peasants' serfdom and that of the Gypsy slaves, by what it is called the generation of 1848.

The first important issue characterizing the mentality of this generation was, according to Nicolae Isar's 2006 book *Din Istoria Generației de la 1848: Revoluție – Exil-Destin istoric*, patriotism deeply interwoven with a moral and religious education. And one example would be Eufrosin Poteca, a famous teacher from St. Sava College, who made the first documented pleading for Abolitionism in 1831, asking:

not only the founding of schools for the enlightenment of the many, but also, for instance, the equality at paying taxes from rulers to the ploughmen and to those feeding beasts, the abolition of Gypsy slavery, the reorganization of justice and administration¹. (Isar 19)

This same spirit seems to have continued, according to Isar, to be one of the dominant characteristics of the period until the 1848 Revolution, when C.A. Rosetti used a motto from Matei's Gospel for his newspaper *Pruncul Român*, while the *Poporul Sveran* published by Dimitrie Bolintineanu and Nicolae Bălcescu had as its slogan *Vox populi – Vox Dei* added to the famous *Libertate, Egalitate, Fraternitate*. And, here we have a quotation from this same newspaper,

¹ My translation

July 13, 1848, asking for Romanian freedom and the abolition of slavery at the same time:

Divine liberty, that had come from sky to earth, may your name be sanctified, your kingdom alive, may your wish be done, in France as well as in Romania. Our most wanted brotherhood give it to us today, together with its justice and its union and break the chains of our slavery, the same as we will break those of all our slaves, and don't lead us into discord and save us from the Barbarian². (Isar 26)

In the United States' history, the same period meant territorial expansion, such as the Louisiana Purchase in 1804, the War with Mexico, and the annexation of Texas, Oregon and California, or the 'Manifest Destiny', as John O'Sullivan called it in 1845. Politically and socially speaking, this was also the beginning of debates regarding slavery and abolitionism. Basically, the North was based on commercial agriculture and the growth of cities and industry, while the South was tied to a plantation system that enslaved the one-third of all Southerners who were black and excluded more and more whites.

Just like the Roma made one important part of the 19th century Romanian population, blacks in the U.S. made an important part of the 19th century American population, whether they were slaves, as in the South, or free as in the North. Speaking about the Abolitionist movement in the U.S., it started with the North that passed gradual emancipation laws. However, according to the *Encarta Encyclopedia*, African-Americans:

"...were excluded from white churches and public schools and, increasingly, from the skilled crafts, dock labor, and household service at which they have been employed. [...] African-Americans responded by building their own institutions: Methodist and Baptist churches, Masonic lodges, schools, charitable and social organizations, and newspapers." (Encarta 1)

In an atmosphere of passionate revolutionary enthusiasm, of the awakening and active involvement of the national consciousness into obtaining social, political and cultural rights for all Romanians, political leaders like Mihail Kogălniceanu were pleading for democratic ideas supporting social progress, such as "the Abolition of Gypsy slavery, the erasing of boyars' privileges, the emancipation of the peasants"³ (Kogălniceanu 127). The national(ist) literature I've mentioned at the beginning of the paper will be represented, according to Victor Vişinescu in his *O Istorie a Presei Românești*, among others, by Nicolae Bălcescu, Costache Negruzzi and Vasile Alecsandri's enthusiastic writing at *Dacia Literară* (1840), *Arhiva Românească* (1840), *Propășirea* (1844), *Magazin Istoric pentru Dacia* (1845) where they combine the verse and the prose, the drama and the satire, in order to denounce the social injustice of their times.

² my translation

³ idem

At the same time, the 1830s and early 1840s, the decade of the beginning of Abolitionist speeches in Romania, are known in America as:

“...those years that the Abolitionist movement made its greatest contribution to American life and faced its most difficult task: to awaken public opinion to the horror of slavery and to stimulate it to take action against the evil.” (Ruchames 11)

And, according to the same Louis Ruchames:

there are few periods in American history that offer as remarkable an opportunity for the molding of American character to the highest standards of humanity as that in which the men and women known as Abolitionists lived and wrought. Devoted to the ideals of brotherhood and equality of opportunity for all men, their consciences seared by the heartlessness of slavery in the South and racial prejudice in the North, they consecrated their lives to the eradication of both evils.

The period was defined by the Underground Railroad meant to help black slaves escape South in order to reach the free states of North and Canada, by such prominent characters as William Lloyd Garrison whose abolitionist newspapers were widely read and who was among those using religion in order to oppose slavery. Or, by famous Frederick Douglass, the former runaway slave whose first written autobiography from 1845, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, had enjoyed such a success as to make him run to England so that he won't be recaptured by his former masters. While the year 1852 was the year of the Fugitive Slave Law that so much annoyed white abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe and made her write her famous *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

For both countries, this was the political and cultural context when “protest literature” appeared, aimed at “promoting social change by exposing current injustices”, in the words of Carolyn Karcher.

Speaking about this type of literature, let's now pass on to the first of Vasile Alecsandri's work I'm going to analyze here, namely *Istoria unui galbin și a unei parale*, a dialogue between a golden Dutch Ducat and a Turkish silver coin, published in 1844, and 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, according to Constantin Măciucă and Tudor Cristea, of travel literature and fable, also according to Tudor Cristea, and theatre, according to Mihai Gafița. I would also say it is written in the style 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” (Alecsandri 12) as the silver coin calls the golden one, as “the best way to try the human nature” (Cristea XIII), that is, the one who is given from hand to hand and

pocket to pocket among types of different social classes in the then Moldavian society. This is how the Ducat tells 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” (Alecsandri 20), 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 kreutzers, that were all living in a surprising harmony in that period of fighting between nations”⁴ (Alecsandri 21), an allusion to justice being made through money, according to Măciucă. And I would add, a pledge for peace and tolerance in a world divided by social classes and racism.

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 “Gypsy souls” and who was known as a good Christian, because “he knew the Greek *Creed* by heart” (Alecsandri 31), because he “received the Eucharist twice a year” (Alecsandri 31) and “because he was often bidding prayers at his home” (Alecsandri 31). However, “he was not ashamed to order for some Romanian to be beaten at soles when such person could not pay his taxes, right when he was praying *Holy Father*, and right when he was saying *piously*, ‘And may God forgive us our mistakes, the same we forgive to those who do us wrong’⁵ (Alecsandri 31), just like Marie St. Claire, the selfish white mistress depicted by Stowe. From this last ‘master’, the Ducat is somehow thrown into the ground and here we have both the first idea about liberty and the idea of its being taken from someone: “nothing in the world is dearest and more sacred than liberty. And I’m telling you that a nation is about to die when it becomes deaf to the voice of liberty.”⁶ (Alecsandri 34)

The same idea about liberty can be met eight years later, in the American soil, in the chapter called “Liberty” from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, where it is defined as the ultimate dream of the runaway slaves Eliza and George Harris.:

“Their night was now far spent, and the morning star of liberty rose fair before them. Liberty! electric word! [...] Why, men and women of America, does your heart’s blood thrill at that word, for which your fathers bled, and your braver mothers were willing that their noblest and best should die? Is there anything in it glorious and dear for a nation, that is not also glorious and dear for a man? What is freedom to a nation, but freedom to the individuals in it?” (Stowe 543)

The next image we have in Vasile Alexandri is the Gypsy band structured in four parts: the physical beauty of Zamfira, the young Gypsy woman who finds the golden Ducat and turns it into a medallion; the description and organization of a Gypsy band; the origins and early childhood of Zamfira and, finally, her miserable life as a slave. All this description seems a mixture of prose and poetry, of Gypsy

⁴ my translation

⁵ idem

⁶ idem

and Romanian peasant behavior, perhaps a reminder of Alecsandri's idyllic way of seeing his villagers. To this it might added a possible way of bridging the gap between Romanian peasants and Gypsies, in order to appeal to Romanian readers. According to George Călinescu in his *Istoria Literaturii Române de la Origini până în Prezent*, the author was "sparing himself", and he also "had mercy on others and looked terrified at the peasants who came in winter bare-headed to sing carols. He asked them to immediately cover their heads"⁷(Călinescu 274). After the age of forty he wrote the "pasteluri" ("descriptive poems"), a "poetry of rural happiness", where the peasants "live in elation like Paul and Virginie in Ile de France" (Călinescu 274). Since Alecsandri was thinking about the Agrarian Reform, he was honestly believing in the happy life of the peasant hereafter, and "he was also praising Ioan Cuza for the abolition of serfdom" (Călinescu 274).

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" (Alecsandri 108), she has a red and white pearl necklace, and she is of a delightful wilderness, this word being meant to remind us precisely of a Gypsy 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....⁸(Alecsandri 108)

From this poetic description, as well as from her becoming an "angel" for the Ducat we can see that we don't actually have a black face or a black body, but only the most beautiful elements that could have depicted a woman in the eyes of a Romanian male poet and of a Romanian reading public.

The same happens with Harriet Beecher Stowe's Eliza, the "tragic mulatta" in the words of Caroline Karcher, "a light-skinned ladylike heroine who shared the white reader's feminine delicacy and idealization of sexual purity, but faced the sordid prospects of concubinaje or rape." (Karcher 205). Eliza is brown, her dress "of the neatest possible fit", her shape "finely moulded", her hand "delicately formed" and her foot and ankle "trim". She is also a mother, with "that peculiar air of refinement, that softness of voice and manner, which seems in many cases to be a particular gift to the quadron and mulatto woman." (Stowe 27)

⁷ my translation

⁸ my translation

Regarding the male protagonists, Vasile Alecsandri has Nedelcu, Zamfira's boyfriend, a tall, agile, strong Gypsy lad, with big dark eyes, dark long hair, and his face burnt by the sun, but beautiful and smart, a famous musician. In Stowe's case, we have two most important Afro male characters. The first is Uncle Tom "Mr. Shelby's best hand",

"a large, broad-chested, powerfully-made man, of a full glossy black, and a face whose truly African features were characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense, united with much kindness and benevolence. There was something about his whole air self-respecting and dignified, yet united with a confiding and humble simplicity." (Stowe 39)

The other is George Harris, Eliza's husband and Harry's father, "a bright and talented young mulatto man", who had "invented a machine for the cleaning of the hemp", and "was possessed of a handsome person and pleasing manners, and was a general favorite in the factory." (Stowe 32)

As we can see, both authors have chosen smart, strong and handsome male characters in order to prove their thesis, that Gypsy/black slaves deserve a better fate.

The next step for Vasile Alecsandri is the description of the Gypsy band, with lots of picturesque details, this time very different from his 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 travels⁹. (Alecsandri 112)

A poem by Russian writer Puskin, translated in Romanian by A.Donici, 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.¹⁰ (Alecsandri 111)

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

⁹ my translation

¹⁰ idem

blue festive coats. They are followed by plenty of high carriages with kids, goats and rags, which the Gypsies seem to find indispensable. Then there are the old men, sleeping and sunbathing on the carriages and next to them, everybody else on foot.

After another poem taken from Puskin, the description continues with the Gypsy 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 band 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 kobzas, fiddles, Jew's harps, and into the night when all is completely silent.

The next step for Beecher Stowe is the description of Uncle Tom and his family, that is, a family of blacks in their own house, "a small log building". We do not have a nomadic kind of people, so, instead:

In front it had a neat garden-patch, where, every summer, strawberries, raspberries, and variety of fruits and vegetables, flourished under careful tending. The whole front of it was covered by a large scarlet bignonia and a native multiflora rose, which, entwining and interlacing, left scarce a vestige of the rough logs to be seen. Here, also, in summer, various brilliant annuals, such as marigolds, petunias, four o'clocks, found an indulgent corner in which to unfold their splendors, and were the delight and pride of Aunt Chloe's heart. (Stowe 38)

The last step for Alecsandri is 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 band's judge, her mother was famous, as a Gypsy woman, in telling people's fortune, a "craft introduced in this country with the Gypsies' arrival, a weak and stupid reminder of that occult science, so developed with ancient Egyptians"¹¹ (Alecsandri 113), 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. Here we can either explain the happiness through the author's way of writing "pasteluri" or, we can believe it if we think about Frederick Douglass, who, in his 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom* dedicates a whole chapter to his black mother and grandparents and his joyful life as a slave child, half-naked but eating, sleeping and playing free at his grandmother's house, before eight years of age.

Stowe also approaches this family-child episode, first with Eliza's child, sold by their master but saved through his mother's heroic run from home, and later with pious girls like Emmeline, or George's sister, separated from their

¹¹ my translation

mothers in order to be sold as concubines. Her emphasis is, besides the accent put on family as such, on the good, moral education they all receive at home and which is seriously jeopardized by their inevitable bad fate caused by the legislature of a slave system.

The last episode of the Gypsy image in Alecsandri starts when Zamfira was seven years of age, the moment when the master of the Gypsy band had gone into poverty and decided to sell them in order to pay his duties. We might say this episode reminds us of American literature, *Uncle Tom* especially, if we didn't know that *Istoria*.....was actually written eight years earlier. This might mean, either that other authors of slavery literature had reached Moldavia before 1852, or that slave markets were actually a truth here, too. Let us now have a look at the 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”¹²[...] (Alecsandri 114)

There is no difference in what follows between the American and the Romanian procedure: the new master buys the Gypsy 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”.

A little description of the “slave warehouse” from *Uncle Tom* will suffice to complete this comparison:

A little before the sale commenced, a short, broad, muscular man, in a checked shirt considerably open at the bosom, and pantaloons much the worse for dirt and wear, elbowed his way through the crowd, like one who is going actively into a business; and, coming up to the group, began to examine them systematically. [...] He seized Tom by the jaw, and pulled open his mouth to inspect his teeth; made him strip up his sleeve, to show his muscle; turned him round, made him jump and spring, to show his paces. [...] Again he stopped before Susan and Emmeline. He put out his heavy, dirty hand, and drew the girl towards him; passed it over her neck and bust, felt her arms, looked at her teeth [...]. (Stowe 464)

What follows in Alecsandri is only the sad story of Zamfira being forced to work for the master and his spoiled servant, being punished for every little mistake

¹² my translation

or without it, from eight to fifteen years of age 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, another break with the negative stereotype of the Gypsy woman as a whore. 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 parents' band again. Like most slaves, they are caught after six months of freedom and happiness, he kills the boyar, as a non-submission sign, 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! (Alecsandri 119)

What follows for Stowe is Tom's tragic end, killed by his last master's whipping, in a Christ-like manner, trusting his soul to God, and forgiving all his enemies.

'Who –who-who shall separate us from the love of Christ?' he said, in a voice that contended with mortal weakness; and with a smile, he fell asleep. [...]

Pity him not! Such a life and death is not for pity! Not in the riches of omnipotence is the chief glory of God, but in self-denying, suffering love! And blessed are the men whom he calls to fellowship with him, bearing their cross after him with patience. Of such it is written, 'Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.'

But, besides this ending, meant to impress the readers to tears, like in the case of Zamfira's death, but at the same time, underlying the spiritual triumph of the good (which the black) over the evil (which is the white), Stowe chooses to send the mulattos Eliza and George, together with Cassy, Emmeline and George's sisters, and Topsy to freedom in Canada, and later, even to Liberia.

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