

# UPDATING THE TRAGIC HERO EPOS

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**Abstract:** The epical hero is a daring fighter, and very often, behaving as a nonconformist, as he used to break the rules... He is not just an adventurer, but a personality assuming the responsibility of searching life's significance. Novac's Gruia, the hero of a South-East European ballad cycle willingly enters the space where the wild girl lives to fight her and to obtain her as a wife. He cuts the line of the enemies provoking them to fight, in order to demonstrate for the other and for himself that he can challenge his capability. Another hero provokes Frost as God's power and loses his entire army in that competition with a non-human authority. Apart from the hero in the fairy tales, the hero in songs has no miraculous helpers. He is a fighter but not an adventurer. He is a searcher who wants to test the norm by himself. On that coordinates the modern hero of the audio-visual productions related with a new psychological attitude tries to find the reason of his actions but more like an individual who has to be persuaded that the social rules are correct. Frequently the end is dramatic. Breaking the traditional law and the link with the group he is alone from the very beginning and at a disadvantage. When he loses he frequently dies as a tragic hero.

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The *hero with thousand faces* (CAMPBELL 1956) is the prototype of any central character of a narrative – in prose or verse, recited or sung, no matter what it is – myth, fairy-tale, legend, heroic epic, ballad, etc. Every category necessarily finds its identity also on the status of the hero – who is he, wherefrom does he come, who are his ancestors and parents, where does he go, whom does he fight, which is his end. The civilizing hero of a myth reveals sacred knowledge and initiates people. The civilizing hero of a legend is a discoverer. The civilizing hero of a fairy-tale is an initiate about whom the story goes. The hero of the sung story covers all these existential sequences and is also a representative of domestic life, with its every-day tragedies and complexes of all kinds.

The heroic legend and the heroic epic are histories of the society and culture which evolve depending on the cult of the hero (DE VRIES 1963). In contradiction to the divine hero, god or demigod, the traditional human hero exerts only a transient influence on mankind's history. A certain "conceptual pattern" of sung versified epics – the same from East to West – refers to the genesis, role, status of creators and interprets, qualities of the epic heroes and their actions. This pattern, intrinsically related to history, acts in a different way in different cultures and different historic periods. Epos heroes are the bearers of ideal "symbols" and turn into symbols themselves. Various stories, associated to the name of one and the same hero, may

have very different sources and originate from diverse historic ages. The heroes of an epic are characterized by their being knights, fighters, arm-bearers. The class of people whose life was devoted to honor was held in high respect by the Greek. The same may be said about the *chevalier* of the French mediaeval epic, as well as about the Spanish *caballero*, the Anglo-Saxon *cempa*, the Russian *bogatyr*, the Serbian *junak*, the Albanian *trim*, the Old German *held*, the Norwegian *jarl*, the Tartar *batyr*, the Uzbek *pavlan*, the Romanian *viteaz*.

The Byzantine chronicler Michael Ducas related events occurring in the South East of Europe between 1396 and 1402 and referred to the custom that young captive knights used to sing heroic songs in their native language for the banquets of Sultan Bajazet Ilderim. Beside Slavs, Magyars, Germans, he also mentions Wallachians. A document dated September 1, 1399 at Marienburg speaks about "Ein Walachischer Spielman". The Moldavian chronicle relates that in 1497 Moldavia's Prince, Stephen the Great, celebrated St. Nicholas' feast-day in his country-side residence of Hârlău. He invited his noblemen and his *viteji* to a banquet and musicians sang *songs of bravery*. In 1574, the Polish chronicler Matej Strykowski crossed the Romanian principalities on his way to Constantinople and he was astonished to find there "a glorious age-old custom of praising the feats of princes and *viteji* by songs accompanied by violins, lutes and kobzas" (POP 1998: 315–316).

We shall dwell now on the popular song centered on bravery. The prevailing theme is the idea of the heroes' contests as to their physical and moral power. To perform such narrative songs, an appropriate spatial and temporal framework was needed, beside a specific creative technique and a well-informed audience. The evocative power of words accompanied by melody gave birth to genuine conceptual types of heroes. Their actions were described rigorously observing significant details, since every aspect of their dress, arms, horse harness and even of their stallion, was essential. In many heroic poems the horse is often a "character". This is the case of the horse of some Romanian *viteji*, such as Iovan Iorgovan and Toma Alimos, or of Șaraț, the horse of the well-known Marcu Kral. These heroes had no face – they could be endowed with hundreds of faces, since their qualities and individuality never changed; they were type-heroes and a real *exemplum*.

The hero of the epic song is a daring fighter, very often behaving as a nonconformist, as he used to break the rules. He is not just an adventurer, but a personality assuming the responsibility of searching life's significance. He penetrates the lines of the enemies challenging them to fight, in order to prove to the others and to himself his own valour. Apart from the hero in the fairy tales, the hero in songs has no miraculous helpers. He is a searcher who wants to test the norm by himself.

Some of the earliest themes of heroic epos are related to the search for a wife, who was obtained by fighting monsters, her own family or even herself. The wife to be is first described as an aggressive female, carrying arms, who has to be subdued and tamed (WAGNER 1929: 1936; PROPP 1958; ZUMTHOR 1954: 1983; LE GOFF 1986; ISPAS 1995). After Christianization, the dynasty founders struggled against demons. Epic heroes became genuine "Christian knights", defeating dark forces, the same as military saints did. These heroes challenged the dark force, looked for it and

tried to kill it, even at the cost of their own life. The removal of evil, of destructive forces, of monsters – dragons – represented actions linked to the personality of the hero of the heroic epic and fairy-tale.

He was fearless, transcending human condition, as a symbol of the liberator, the justice-administrator, the spotless knight. This category includes the heroes who fight with the dragon or other monsters. The Romanian heroic epic knows several types of heroic epic songs whose heroes fight against dragons, giant snakes or other non-human forces. Yet, these knight-heroes are not always seen as “just”. Sometimes their fight ends tragically; it does not result in liberation but hurts people. Such a hero is Iovan Iorgovan, who is both winner and defeated in the fight with a monstrous animal. (AMZULESCU 1981: 59–60). The knight-hero, equipped for hunting, with a proper horse, beater-dogs, falcon and appropriate arms, goes “on a Thursday morning” – an ill-fated day – to the Cerna river, where “many brave ones” went, never to return. He finds there a maiden with a giant snake coiled around her body. The snake warns him not to kill him, lest ecological disasters, destroy everything around, people and animals. Iorgovan, characterized by the song performer as “evil *viteaz*, may God chastise him”, kills the snake, frees the maiden, kisses her and finds out that she is his own sister, run wild. The girl curses him for having kissed her “in the mouth”. On their way back, in the middle of the Cerna river, the hero and his horse turn into stone blocks and the maiden becomes a flower. The snake was a *genius lectalis*, a defensor of the family. From its head there spring killer-flies, which lay waste the county.

The family of fighting tragic heroes also includes Marcos Pasha [That ballad provided subject matter for long-term disputes relative to the historic character of sung epics, in Romanian folkloristics. (AMZULESCU 1981: 62–64)]. The brave army commander Marcos Pasha takes the initiative of challenging Jack Frost. He goes to the well where that atmospheric force is dwelling and invites him to fight: “Come out from the well, ye, Frost. So that I may fight with you... And I shall kill you like a dog”. Jack Frost agrees to fight and freezes the hero’s whole army with his power. Marcos is the only one who survives, to serve as an example for other thoughtless persons that would like to wrestle with non-human powers. Iovan Iorgovan and Marcos Pasha are tragic heroes; they sin by hybris and transgress the rule of living in harmony or tolerance with the non-humans. They are reckless but also prompted by the urge to search, by dissatisfaction with their own status; they act like seekers for truth, aiming to thoroughly live the excitement of fighting the enemy up to utterly destroying it but they eventually become the victims of their own yearning for supremacy. The challenge to fight is a means to know their own limitations, to turn to account their valour but also to be self-destroyed. That is why, the foe can only be identified and killed. The human hero feels that the non-human foe is a danger for mankind or for the hero’s community. It cannot be tolerated and has to be annihilated. Such heroic stories used to be masterfully sung for hours, days or nights on end. The audience spent days on end listening to the singer’s account of the most valiant hero strong, aggressive, ruthless.

Is it possible to witness something similar in modern times? In the computer’s

era, nobody would ever spend time and energy to listen to sung stories. Stories of any category are now replaced by color images, on TV screens, video cassettes or CD-s. The heroes fighting dragons or Jack Frost are relegated to the world of cartoons, comic strips or science fiction films (in intergalactic journeys, there appear offidian inhabitants of an unknown planet; immortal creatures passing through the time tunnel struggle against the Evil originating from a faraway century). The good ones always win, since they come from the world of fairy tales to that of the present.

Our contemporaries evince a particular propensity to confront beasts of prey and also to discover and reconstruct the most aggressive and outsized animals that ever lived on earth. Such an instance is the dinosaur. Scientists, script-writers, cartoon-producers, designers of fun fairs seem to be extremely fond of dinosaurs. Those gigantic prehistoric animals have invaded the sentimental market. They are now present as toys, fancy ornaments, Halloween costumes. Children are pleased to have their head photographed above huge pasteboard bodies of such giants. One may say that the twentieth century's heritage is the epics of the dinosaurs. Nobody ever saw the real ones. We know only man-made ones of Jurassic Park or the kind and playful structures made of metal and plastic. Today no one thinks that the real dinosaurs – hideous and aggressive – should be hunted like the dragons of the mediaeval epics. They do not give birth to fear – the most normal and human feeling in that situation – because the truth that concerns them is still an unknown story. They have turned into instruments meant to annihilate *fear*, not by heroic confrontation or defeating them, but by disparaging them and by mystification. Pasteboard animals and cartoon images are kind and understanding; they do not attack or kill people, the stylized reproduction of nature results in granting character features to the animal, a component of that nature. The tragic hero disappears and is replaced by a precocious child playing with Dino. Images on the screen are accompanied by a commentator's voice and a musical background with nothing heroic in it. We are urged to love nature and live in harmony with it. Very few contemplate the possibility of a real encounter with the monsters and the *fear* that would overcome us frail and sensitive people, obliged to face those gigantic creatures; hunters and game, nature and culture. In the world of pasteboard creatures and scholarly research of the planet past there is no place for the sung history about the a struggle between man and beast, chanted during a whole night. The sung story has turned into film images, Jurassic Park a.s.o.

A new facet of the confrontation between man and beast is provided by the very well-known story of *Crocodile Hunter*. (Discovery Channel TV International). It is full of realism, even didactic, a kind of course on applied zoology, delivered by the agency of the ever present TV. The main character has benefited from scientific education, an outstanding theoretical documentation and comprehensive applied knowledge, studying the animal kingdom, from ants to bats, from rats to elephants. The Australian Steve Irvin is an erudite professor, commentator, actor and animal caretaker. His wife has got a "crocodile hunt" as wedding present and she accompanies him in his journey through forests, savannahs, whirling rivers, over waterfalls and precipices. His aim is to meet animals in exceptional conditions. The *Discovery*

film points out that this real hero survives from the most unexpected encounters with monsters living in our time, but those encounters are not haphazard. They are planned by centers that provide the ecological control of the planet, in order to save animals, not to kill them. That hero does not resort to arrows or swords. He uses networks as traps, harmless tranquilizers that cause lions and elephants to sleep, or crocodiles and anacondas to be motionless. Steve's world seems to be a world of harmony; not only does he save animals instead of killing them, he also provides them a most appropriate area for life and reproduction, since he is well aware of their biological requirements.

The hero-knight of the heroic epic and his descendants have bravely and firmly fought against the real or apparent danger that threatened their families and they reduced the number of beasts of prey. The modern hero of the scientific screen mounts a crocodile – possibly humiliating it –, grabs the tail of a venomous snake to ensure its protection and repopulate the planet with almost extinct species. The hero's attitude to the killer-beast knows ups and downs, like a sine curve.

The fighting hero had used all his skill and equipment to kill the monster, starting with arrows and sword up to projectiles with depleted uranium. Another well-known character from the Anglo-Saxon world has a common name – Steve –, wears shorts and hobnailed boots, bears a stick or a net (like Roman gladiators), or is even bare-handed. He catches the monster which puts up resistance, since it feels attacked and the information stored in its ancestral memory is aggression and not love. It does not know that the man loves wild animals and will bring it to a place with optimum living conditions. The animal is to be sacrificed only if it is too ill and may endanger others. Steve's image makes us think that man has eventually turned into the master of the biological world in the planet; he is a kind of god, creator and granter of good and justice. To acquire power, his ancestors, the knights, had to kill several generations of monstrous prey foes. Even today, if you are not Steve, the hero of *Discovery* or *Animal planet*, you should be well armed, when entering the prohibited realm of the master-beast. Which is the educational role of this filmed epic (with a great many episodes)? I think that it is not only meant to provide didactic information and to arouse love for the surrounding nature. There is something more, a kind of deep-going commandment in the heroic epos – to educate fear. Nobody knows whether Steve is afraid or not. He is a fine performer, acting aloof the confrontation between man and beast, smiling, praising his opponent, looking at it with tolerance and sometimes with respect. The epos hero is always frowning; even if he revels in a pub, surrounded by relatives and friends or by foes, he is gloomy and dark-looking. To kill a monster, one should be "loaded" with aggressiveness and strength. To save it, one should understand it. There are two ways of educating one's fear. One is centered on self-defence – man is a frail being who has to contrive murderous weapons to face the enemy's assets. The other emphasizes the higher understanding of a master who may grant life or death and may decide within an institutionalized system. He is the representative of the human civil institution which decides what is to be protected in nature and what not. He does it because he is afraid that his dominion over nature may destroy it, since his ancestor was the armed

fighting knight, that gave death We shall not deal with the education of fight in TV viewers, who learn how to look at the dangerous enemy and how to behave before making the decision of killing it. The modern hero of the audio-visual productions related with a new psychological attitude tries to find the reason of his actions but more like an individual who has to be persuaded that the social rules are correct.

Well, is Steve, the hero, afraid of something? We don't know. We are not aware whether he dissembles his feelings too well, or employs excellent trick pictures, or is a genuine armless knight hero, generous and full of love for his foe. No matter which is true, he is an example. And the status assigned to him makes him a tragic hero, whose end is not yet known.

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