

THE INITIATORY MECHANISMS OF THE CRISIS IN THE ROMANIAN FAIRY TALE

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Abstract: This study explores the way in which the crisis is represented at the level of the fairy tale narrative, the methods used to reconstruct the image of the hero and the society in which it was triggered, reconnecting them with their deep inner plane. The crisis becomes the engine of the hero's transformation and initiation, an essential stage of his initiatory path, which will reconfigure his existence, reordering and regenerating, at the same time, the community it impacts. Starting from the premise that the fairy tale is also a polyphonic narrative framework, the analysis will highlight the dynamics staged with the emergence of the moment of crisis, which cannot remain individual, also affecting the hero's community. In terms of strategy, self-confidence, intelligence, courage, humanity, perseverance and wisdom are indispensable attributes for the hero who wants to resolve the crisis and go through the initiation process by confronting the opposing forces. Living between worlds, on the edge, the hero learns the art of communicating in adverse situations, in the face of powerful and dangerous opponents, learning the role of words and silence, transforming inconveniences into resources and creating lasting friendships that will support him unconditionally. In this way, the fairy tale remains a living and valuable document of communication capable of transforming crisis into a form of individual and cultural evolution and regeneration.

Keywords: *crisis, Romanian folk tale, Initiation process, transformation, function.*

The Romanian fairy tale represents a fundamental landmark of identity and traditional cultural imagination, which legitimizes a certain rhetoric of tension and crisis, offering the strategies and solutions of a collectivity. In the context of restructuring, the recovery of the original functions of the fairy tale is articulated—of behavioral modeling by transmitting moral norms and of symbolic initiation—, which become instruments for reflection on the experiences described. In the fairy tale, the crisis represents a major break in level, a strong imbalance or a fundamental lack in a certain plane of the hero's community—familial, social, individual or state power—, with immediate impact on the narrative architecture of the text. As the diegetic tension manifests itself more and more deeply, the hero's departure becomes more desired and urgent, more determined and accepted. Such a crisis is not an ephemeral and easily resolved aspect in the immediate plane, but forces a distant journey, in which the trials are inevitable, necessary and of great force. In this sense, constant permutations and metamorphoses of the hero appear, especially in order to reconfigure the old known existence, remedying or eliminating

the lack, the derogation, the incoherence, the chaos. Each action of the hero will become a premise for another, creating a true path of self-development, first and foremost, and then of those who believe in him and rally around him along his journey. The dynamism of the narrative will also indicate transgressions of limits, proposing solutions to order the physical world at first, to continue with profound psycho-emotional and spiritual restructurings until its establishment into a new order of the world.

Initiation in the fairy tale signifies the complex and unique process through which a hero goes through, in an assumed, conscious and responsible way, fulfilling or not, at the same time, a mission received from the outside, from the micro-community universe (the local community, the family, a certain character), at the beginning or during the work. The physical path in the initiatory journey thus intertwines with the inner one, creating deeply shaping experiences for the hero. The innocent and ignorant neophyte will gradually transform, with each completed test, maturing into a being capable of leading, loving, and fulfilling himself.

From the perspective of the initiation narrative, the crisis in the fairy tale highlights a catalyst to create the premises for the hero's evolution as a natural beneficial consequence of following a path of formation from ignorance to knowledge, from passivity to action, respecting ancestral moral and spiritual principles. The difficulty and nature of the tests generally require a male character, the qualities required and verified belonging, rather, to the power and strength of a man, so that a female homonym is less present in the popular typology, but, when it appears, it proves to be just as capable and courageous to fulfill the given mission, generally due to a hostile external context. Usually, the heroine is constrained by the lack of a brother, accepting the role and identity of this absent character in order to save her father and the kingdom from the punishment of the foreign emperor, inflexible in his request.

The male initiation belongs predominantly to physical adventure, the reckless search for dangerous experiences, through which the hero can manifest and consume immense energy, being able to fight for days, almost uninterruptedly, without external help, with a strong, resistant, cunning and experienced male opponent. The girl's journey, however, is nuanced and less physical, experiencing passively-actively, more than the man, the trials that demand more of her feminine qualities—patience, compassion, gentleness, empathy, the ability to heal, intuition, creativity, communication, cooperation, diligence, devotion, the spirit of sacrifice—and, when necessary, discipline, courage, perseverance, self-control—masculine coordinates required by her new identity before the world. Also, the girl transvestite as a man will develop, throughout the trials, inner traits that will prepare her for her final, definitive transformation, when the gender will be in tune with her new personality, becoming the expression of the deeds and qualities proven during the initiatory journey

from feminine to masculine, maturing in a new physical, moral, mental, spiritual form. In this case, power and recognition accompany the status that she has accepted with full, total responsibility, even if certain actions were determined by feminine impulses and desires (forbidden objects, because they determine trials, but which the girl takes with her, eluding the warning of the mentor horse).

While the masculine emphasizes the ability to face danger through physical strength, bravery, physical and mental resistance, being able to more easily manage their fears and insecurities, the feminine resorts to the diplomacy of power to adapt externally to protect their inner vulnerability, in accordance with the subtleties of the souls of other actors, harmonizing emotion and sensitivity with reason, calmness and the ability to give (themselves) with the availability and courage necessary to accomplish their mission. The motivations of the two heroes are different and are consubstantial to their genetic nature: the hero wants to save a loved one, reorder a world, achieve fame and validation, resolve a crisis, and the heroine feels responsible for an external requirement, balancing and resolving it through her ability to dedicate herself completely, willingly, without resentment, with delicacy and with an energy that supports, enlivens and protects.

In the Romanian fairy tale, the crisis is a collection of motivations, choices, factors, decisions and emotions, having a double meaning: generator of personal and collective suffering, while stimulating, favoring and supporting the premises for the initiation of a specific hero, predestined for an exemplary destiny. Mircea Eliade emphasized, in his work *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, that such a chosen character is often accompanied, from birth, by symbolic signs—a star (on the forehead), the appearance of a magical light, the birth of animals with him, who will prove to be his protectors, the mother's premonitory dreams—reflecting the intervention of the transcendent in the world and legitimizing his heroic or spiritual mission. Also, Romulus Vulcănescu's *Romanian Mythology* reinforces the idea of the hero's birth in accordance with signs of the cyclical regeneration of nature and the cosmos—the revival of nature, the flowering of trees, the flow of waters, the joyful song of birds, the rising of the sun—, accompanied by mythical and sacred meanings, through which the hero is presented as a being destined to restore the balance of the world disturbed by the forces of Evil, according to Vladimir Propp's typological model from *The Morphology of the Fairy Tale*. In this sense, birth is not only a biological event, but becomes a moment of initiation and symbolic renewal of the world. In the vision of the Romanian philosopher Lucian Blaga, in the volume *Trilogy of Culture*, the act of birth and beginnings is revealing, as it concentrates in itself a certain tension between the mysterious hidden, camouflaged in the unknown and in a probability that can be actualized, and what can be perceived, identified, discovered and known.

Mircea Eliade's perspective, from *The Sacred and the Profane*, completes the symbolic meaning of the hero's birth through the metaphor of hierophany—a manifestation of the sacred that will reorganize the chaos in the profane world. The hero, by his simple coming into the world, reactivates the principle of creation and restores the lost order along with the fundamental landmarks of existence. In the fairy tale *The Fisherman's Son*, from Simion Florea Marian's collection, a fabulous fish, caught with difficulty by a fisherman, asks him to perform a magical ritual in his garden—with the help of flowers (roses), for two days and two nights, followed by his sacrifice and burial—, following which, he will be reborn humanized and prepared for his new telluric mission.

The birth of the hero in the Romanian fairy tale is a sacred act, with symbolic and cosmogonic significance. It marks the beginning of the initiatory path, confers the status of the chosen one and prefigures the mission of restoring world order. The signs that accompany the birth and the subsequent ruptures build the image of a doomed hero, whose beginnings encompass in themselves a hierophany and a symbolic renewal of the universe.

Joseph Campbell noted, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, that the central character of the work is forced to leave, sometimes even being banished, under the sign of a curse or a covenant, from the familiar, protective, secure and permissive family space, into a topos of the unknown, of uncertainty, of major confrontations, with fatal potential, from the necessity of his subsequent transformation through a difficult and dangerous personal or community mission.

The crisis becomes a representation of a tension that begins with a stage preceding the initiatory journey, an external but necessary one, preparing the hero and the community, in a subtle, gradual and insidious way. This initial moment rarely appears in the fairy tale narrative, because it contains the source of the actions of the negative characters, which will subsequently trigger the hero's reactions, because their purpose and logic matter less or not at all during the development of the diegesis. Therefore, the decision of the kites to steal the golden apples, from the fairy tale *Prâslea the Strong and the golden apples*, from the collection of Petre Ispirescu, is not explained, losing its relevance as long as the youngest child wants to act beyond this inner impulse of the opposing forces.

For the central character of the work, the precritical stage matters, in which the action of stealing is carried out. Although briefly presented, in general, it is indispensable to generate the motivation for the plot to begin, respectively the initiatory path. Seemingly paradoxical, the strength of this stage determines the quality and value of the route the hero will take, the liminality he will go through, the way he will manage to pass tests and face the characters who oppose him. The confrontation is, in essence, thaumaturgic for oneself and for the community, because it has the possibility of repairing, in this way, the events of the past that could not be

resolved in time, causing pain, damage and even generational suffering. The initial sacrifice of a fish, from the fairy tale *The Fisherman's Son*, triggers the departure of the fisherman's two sons, at the initiative of the rose-fish man, who will support the youngest in resolving the crisis that has occurred in the city, which has been subdued for many years, due to the ritual of sacrificing virgins by the true master of the place, the 12-headed dragon, while the emperor remains a marginalized person in his own world.

The actual development stage of the crisis corresponds to the hero's journey, who sets out to remedy and restore, in a superior way, the state of his community and his own at the same time, by going through three major polyphonic levels within the initiation scenario: emotional, discursive and strategic.

Emotionally, the hero faces, during trials and complicated and problematic moments (passages through dangerous labyrinthine paths, difficult battles with powerful opponents, punitive restrictions, the loneliness of the road, the uncertainty of the unknown beyond his home world), various states, from empathy, trust, enthusiasm, optimism and curiosity to disillusionment, anger, despair, sadness, longing, confusion, guilt, the desire to give up, in a cycle that repeats itself from time to time, especially if the text contains a larger and more varied number of trials and stops. Encouragements come from both the human and animal levels, being a consequence of his character and good and wise deeds, even when he has not yet proven them, due to an anticipatory faith and unconditional support, which will prove correct and, perhaps, ameliorative. What is certain, however, is that the hero will confirm the expectations of his mentors, aides and those who believed in his potential.

Regarding the voice of the discursive narrative, several essential moments are observed that are found especially in the fantastic fairy tale: premise (initial motivation determined by an external or internal aspect), hesitation (between two choices), opposition (between Good and Evil; between two characters), conditioning (to give, listen or obey in order to receive or be helped), action (struggle, the approach to solve, understanding and mature awareness of one's journey), consequence (reward, learning the lesson, punishing the negative character, the end of the work).

From a strategic point of view, the narrator felt the need to personalize the text, so that we do not find, even at the level of variant, fairy tales with the same evidence, differing also at the level of proposed solutions. The hero's encounters—physical, mental, emotional, spiritual—test him and teach him about truth, morality, order, respect, the nature and purpose of power, leading him towards a superior form of character, in accordance with the principles, values, customs and traditions of our people.

In the fairy tale *The Son-in-Law of the Red Emperor*, from the collection of Simion Florea Marian, the youngest son is informed late

about the actions of the false hero (the gypsy at the palace) since he does not belong to this kingdom, but he has time to remedy the situation (the girl's marriage) thanks to the evidence (the handkerchief with the walnuts—a witness to the truth), handed over through a mediator (a needy old woman), a credible intermediary (for the girl), who can be received and who will respect the hero's conditions (the emperor's coming to the old woman's poor house). Also, the youngest hero will have to make another journey to find his wife stolen by The Bald Man, because he transgressed the royal's edict. Therefore, the son-in-law cannot become a leader until he shows obedience and attention in every situation, detaching himself from pride and partial knowledge, needing the experience provoked by The Bald Man, under the mentorship of the old man in the green glade (whose sight he will restore) and with the help of the three dragons and his new fabulous horse, with seven legs.

The figure of the antihero is one of the hypostases in the fairy tale that arouses particular interest through the rupture it expresses at the level of discourse and diegesis strategy. He is not the model of a human being in a deep existential crisis, which alienates him and detaches him from attachments, feelings or emotions, but represents another kind of hero, not always with negative valences, found in all types of fairy tales: the fool (smart), the village fool (the helpless naive, humble, but obedient and hardworking, marginalized by the world in which he lives), the lazy, the greedy, the coward, the traitor, the impostor, the false hero. While the first two represent the hero, because they will manage to prove that they can pass the tests or overcome the obstacles of life, the latter are part of the definite category of more or less versed, experienced opponents. The youngest in *The Trickster Fool*, a fairy tale collected by the Bukovina scholar Simion Florea Marian, is fearless and passes the test of guarding the old witch's wild horses alone, masking his magical abilities in front of his family, who disregarded him and constantly subjected him to corporal punishment, unable to discern between appearance and essence, between true laziness and lack of desire for household duties, maintaining the image of a helpless and inept man. However, outside the family space, the one considered stupid reveals his resources and skills, defeating the true negative antiheroes in the fairy tale (the dragon, the foreign emperor) and becoming the leader of the world that has experienced the crisis of values and the mask—encountered, moreover, in many popular texts, under various forms and evidence. For example, in the same work, after the girl's marriage, the emperor isolates the new young couple in a space much inferior to the state (the cabin), but he will win the subsequent wars thanks to the intervention of the unwanted son-in-law, camouflaged under ritual clothing, with cosmic, unearthly insignia and powers, superior to the world subject to superficiality and derision.

In the last stage, the postcrisis, with the resolution of the external crisis, the hero transforms internally and evolves, demonstrating qualities

and character traits verified throughout his initiatory journey: humanity, kindness, patience, honesty, love, trust, intelligence, respect, friendship, loyalty, inner readiness to act, perseverance, courage, firmness, determination, pride, modesty. The punishment of the negative character (generally, by total physical exclusion from this world) and the reward of the hero (by material and social reward, sometimes also by spiritual recognition—the evolution of the Self) is achieved, in the fairy tale, on the basis of ancient community codes, of solutions confirmed and legislated over time. Therefore, on the advice of all the people in the kingdom, in the fairy tale *The Son-in-Law of the Red Emperor*, from the previously mentioned collection, the transfer of power and authority is made from father-in-law to son-in-law, the youngest son ruling alongside a beautiful and suitable wife, which consecrates the end of the family, social and institutional crisis. Now, the hero has become the archetype of the order that subdued the chaos, of the power that has regenerated and, with it, of the royal microcosm, which will be reinvigorated thanks to the new pair of emperors—young, beautiful, loyal, fearless, persevering and reckless.

Sometimes, the wedding does not involve the leadership of the new realm, the character being able to choose to return to his native space with his wife, because the purpose of the fairy tale was not the choice of another master, but the evolution of the hero by going through trials that also determined a solution to a problem-situation in the external framework, for which the hero was rewarded at both social and familial levels. The fisherman's son, from the fairy tale of the same name, prefers the kingdom from which he left even if his social status is inferior (fisherman) to the one he could access due to marriage (emperor), returning to the topos of his family, continuing the family tradition and the totemic connection with the aquatic plane.

The conflict led to regeneration, and the memory of the crisis will remain imprinted in the community's experience, excluding traumas, since the fairy tale, like myth, is the expression that excludes anxiety, the impossible, atrocious and prolonged suffering. On the contrary, in the popular text, the human being always finds solutions and reasons to sublimate the anguished cry in less painful forms, like the mother in the opera *George the Brave*, collected by Petre Ispirescu, who, although she endures a deprivation of freedom for 24 years, in an extremely harsh regime for a woman (a quarter of a loaf of bread a day and a cup of water), is strengthened by the love of the mother who does not give up on life, waiting for the moment of liberation and truth. That is why, in the fairy tale, we cannot talk about failure, but only about failure, the hero learning from each setback and disappointment, by confronting physical limits, the limits of his desires and knowledge.

In Paul Ricoeur's vision, the text responds to the human need for a story, for translation into a world of discourse that connects you with the foundation of the micro- and macrocosm. The human being in the fairy

tale communicates about himself through the relationship with an Otherness, with an exterior capable of reflecting him or opposing him and, at the same time, contributing to his shaping in an evolutionary sense or confirming his intangible status. First of all, telling a story represents an assumed act of the popular narrator to reveal the secrets of a world descending from myth into a real of the fabulous imaginary, with the interpenetration of planes. The space-time chronotope is placed, from the beginning, under the sign of a distant, autonomous and singular universe, with its own conditioning, laws and customs, which has developed personalized skills of resilience, well-being, communication, relationships, thinking, creativity.

The characters are adapted to the environment and type of fairy tale, illustrating, symbolically and conceptually, a character or a typology, which can receive multiple classifications, depending on age (there are all stages of the human being, from the unborn to the one on his deathbed), social and economic status (simple people or with a certain function: craftsman; advisor, nobleman, emperor), the archetype he represents (hero, antihero, villain; orphan, wise man, creator, leader), his role in the action (positive, negative; beneficiary, donor, adjuvant, opponent; individual, collective; witness, observer, active participant; main, mediator, spectator), scenic movement (fixed, mobile), the age of the characters and their consecration (from the classics Făt-Frumos and Ileana Cosânzeana to the monk, military and worker; prototype, generic, personalized), the degree of presence in the action (absent, episodic, permanent, background). This diverse category of characters highlights the narrator's rich imagination and his aesthetic-literary awareness of individualizing them according to the needs imposed by the plot, the purpose of the fairy tale, the audience he addressed, the geographical, social, political and religious particularities of the area he represented. Thus, the crisis is governed by laws specific to each fairy tale, without completely overlapping in any popular text.

In conclusion, the fairy tale inherently contains an initiatory structure preserved from myth—the foundation that accompanied it for a long period of time—, historically and culturally unconditional, expressing an ancient and archetypal behavior and mentality, carrying messages that transcend biological time and the chronology of a limited and ephemeral life, bringing the joy of reactualizing the process of evolution and maturation in a more accessible form, at the level of the fabulous imaginary, through a simple, archaic, but profound and relevant language. Being a privileged and special space of symbolic communication, the fairy tale is built on the basis of an identity discourse preserved in the collective memory, as it is also a source of social cohesion, contributing to the transmission of models of negotiation and remodeling of order. The crisis is a necessary and current element in the fairy tale, being resolved by models of humanity—curious, daring and worthy heroes, who transform

failure into a new step in their long journey through the mysteries of the world and, simultaneously, of their soul, fighting with symbols of Evil, disorder and the monstrous. Overcoming the effects of the crisis, the heroes calm down and recreate order in a regenerated and revalidated world.

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