

THE SUMMARY OF THE PHD THESIS

There is no doubt that humans, throughout all times, have sought to develop a comprehensive view with which they could scrutinize the world in its smallest and most hidden details. It is against human nature not to seek answers, for a life lived among known elements (or at least those defined and described in some way) is much safer and more stable than an existence led amid endless sequences of questions. Homo intellectus, therefore, seeks to explain the world, driven by curiosity, but deep within his being, he needs answers and meaningful explanations that can provide the strength necessary to overcome life's tragedies. If man is a being in search of answers, then, without a doubt, death and the afterlife have represented and continue to represent the greatest existential mystery that will concern every individual at some point. The routine of universal human life is occasionally interrupted by the death of a loved one, and such moments become opportune and conducive to introspection and ontological questions. Just as steam leaves water without diminishing its essence, but—although almost imperceptibly—reduces its substance, or like a leaf that leaves the tree's crown in summer does not empty the tree, but creates a certain void (usually noticeable only on the branch it inhabited), so too does a person who leaves the community they were part of create an existential hiatus, which is most strongly felt within the family—the basic nucleus of society—as well as in the well-knit micro-universe of the village.

In the present study, titled *DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE: AN ETHNO-FOLKLORIC PERSPECTIVE*, our general objective is to create a comprehensive portrayal of how the people of the archaic world of the Romanian village (as representatives of the indigenous popular consciousness) have tried and continue to try to grasp, with their understanding, what is commonly referred to as "the great passage." We also aim to capture in detail the ways in which these people, with their mythico-ritualistic thinking, relate to death and what lies beyond it.

The motivation behind choosing this topic is largely due to a personal passion for understanding the world through the unaltered eyes of the peasants of yesterday (and, to the extent that it has been preserved) and today. This is a world that we suspect serves as a repository for ancient wisdom and knowledge, more or less well preserved. This passion is further complemented by a religious, psychological, cultural, and philosophical interest related to the transition to the eternal. A considerable influence on the decision to research this subject comes from the writings of C.G. Jung on the existence of a collective unconscious and archetypes, as well as the fascination I have developed regarding how ancient pre-Christian beliefs are perpetuated through generations. Even though these beliefs often undergo substantial modifications and become part of a conglomerate of beliefs materialized in religious syncretism, they manifest very vocally in the diversity of known ethnographic material.

The methods we have employed include consulting specialized literature, hermeneutic analysis of the texts themselves, observation and interpretation of customs and ritual complexes, synthesis, analysis, case studies, as well as intercultural comparative methods.

In order to successfully achieve the general objective, we have paid particular attention to structuring the ideas within the work. As we aimed to create the most accurate image of how the Romanian peasant perceives, understands, and deals with the great transition and the afterlife, as mentioned previously, we subjected an extensive body of folkloric material to hermeneutic dissection, paying special attention to its diversity. Since we believe that in its most sublime authenticity, popular consciousness is expressed through a complex of cultural testimonies supported by three main pillars (epic folk literature, lyrical folk literature, and, last but not least, rooted customs and rituals), we have created separate chapters for each of these pillars. The Romanian of the archaic world expressed and passed on his beliefs, convictions, and experiences about the world through stories, songs, and traditions he perpetuated. The following outlines the structure of the thesis, with its constituent units that provide an organized space for analysis and include specific objectives.

The first chapter (*THE GREAT TRANSITION: A SYNTHETIC APPROACH*) — somewhat adhering to the tradition of scientific works — constitutes, at the same time, the purely theoretical part of the thesis. It provides a brief theoretical foundation for the practical aspects analyzed in the subsequent chapters. Composed of four subchapters (*Transition and the State of the Afterlife - Philosophical Perspectives; The Boundary Between Worlds and the Promise of Religion;*

Psychological Approaches and Aspects of the Phenomenon of Death; Death and the Mystery Beyond in the Mirror of Culture), this chapter offers a theoretical exploration of how death is understood across four diverse fields (philosophy, religion, psychology, culture), whose conceptual tools are employed in the following sections of the thesis.

The second chapter of the study (*THE META-PHYSICAL WORLD IN THE FABRIC OF POPULAR EPIC*) is also the first chapter of the work in which we will analyze the epic dimension of folk literature. Since the epic contains a series of specific aspects, we believe that a separate treatment of it from lyrical literature is highly beneficial. As the main representatives of the literary genre, we have chosen two distinct types (which, for various reasons, we consider to be the most representative): the fairy tale and the ballad. While the fairy tale, due to its prose structure, is ideal for observing the alteration of detailed elements across regions and centuries, the ballad — with its verse organization — demonstrates a much greater formal stability, which we believe is evident in the versions we analyze. Each type is allocated distinct subchapters (*The Fairy Tale, a Palimpsest of the Human Spirit* and *The Ballad or the Story of Popular Consciousness in Verse*), in which both the defining and descriptive horizons, as well as the actual works belonging to these types, receive ample interpretative space. Throughout history, humanity has been a homo narrans, encompassing both their own life and that of their fellow villagers in stories. Building on this reality, we hope to uncover testimonies that provide a clear image of how archaic communities viewed death and, in particular, how they chose to manifest themselves in its presence.

In the third chapter of the thesis (entitled *THE LYRICISM OF SEPARATION: LAMENTATIONS AND OTHER FUNERAL SONGS*), we focus on the lyrical dimension of Romanian folk literature. Similar to the previous chapter, we dedicate a space for analyzing works belonging to two related, yet distinct, genres. Both genres exist solely within the funeral context: lamentations (a genre whose structures we examine under the hermeneutic microscope in the subchapter *A World Revealed Through the Lamentations' Tears*) and ritual songs (a genre, long included among lamentations, which authentically expresses the mentality marked by myth and is treated in the subchapter *Ritual Songs Accompanying the Passage*). While their organization in verse ensures a formal consistency across the centuries, providing an opportunity for an authentic and genuine exploration of the past of popular mentality, their funeral nature concentrates the themes of death and the afterlife within the verses they present.

Chapter four (*THE GREAT PASSAGE IN THE ECHO OF TRADITION*) undoubtedly has the most extensive scope, which can be explained by the extremely high number of beliefs that have generated deeply rooted ritualistic behaviors. This chapter, we anticipate, provides the most extensive insights into the archaic mentality confronted with death. In the first part, we aim to create a framework of definitions concerning key concepts (symbol, rite, ritual, myth, custom, etc.), while the subsequent subchapters follow the natural chronological progression of death and focus on the analysis of customs (*From Omens to the Onset of Death; From the Onset of Death to Burial; The Soul – Between Forgetfulness and Remembrance*). The final two subchapters (*Trans-sepulchral Entities and Unnatural Returns in the Collective Mind; Popular Thought's Incursions Beyond the Grave*) address the existence of metaphysical entities related to death from the repository of popular beliefs, as well as the images of the afterlife that the Romanian peasant constructs from the religious crucible inherited through the vicissitudes of centuries.

The final chapter (entitled *LINGUISTIC AND INTERCULTURAL ASPECTS*) somewhat diverges in content from the previous chapters. This chapter features a hybrid structure in which, through two distinct subchapters—both of considerable relevance to the treatment of the topic—we attempt to better understand popular wisdom at the zenith of life.

In the first subchapter (entitled *The Great Passage in the Transgenerational Mirror of Language*), we aim to review the most representative linguistic testimonies (words, but especially expressions) in which past generations have concealed their beliefs and attitudes towards death and the unseen world beyond the grave. We believe that this linguistic approach is quite natural given that language (alongside customs) is the most loyal repository of realities that have already faded from the present scene. Even more intriguing is the functioning of expressions: combinations of words that always reflect something beyond and more than the individual lexical elements they comprise. Semantic mutations have occurred over time, but through etymological analysis, new doors can be opened to the thinking that governed entire communities and continues to influence the collective unconscious even today.

The second subchapter is a comparative study that aims to confront key elements from Hungarian and Romanian folklore (especially from Transylvania). The goal is to map both the areas that exhibit common aspects of belief and ritual attitudes, as well as those that characterize each ethnic group in relation to one another. We also pay attention to situations where geographic proximity has led to interethnic cultural-linguistic borrowings, as much as possible.

Our research, titled *Death and the Afterlife: An Ethno-Folkloric Perspective*, is a hybrid work (both through the use of multiple research methods and tools drawn from various humanities disciplines, and through the complexity of the folkloric and extra-folkloric material utilized). Its aim is to achieve a better understanding of the Romanian popular mentality concerning the implications of leaving this world and the potential existence that continues beyond the silence of the grave.

In the first chapter, dedicated to theoretical grounding, we have gathered well-known perspectives on death and the afterlife from four interconnected but independent humanities fields. We considered philosophy, religion, psychology, and culture as the four humanities domains whose tools and understandings of the world we employed in our research. From philosophy, we analyzed Vladimir Jankélévitch's *Treatise on Death*, explored the concept of Dasein in Martin Heidegger's seminal work *Being and Time*, and reflected on the ideas about death and the subsequent world from Miguel de Unamuno's influential work *The Tragic Sense of Life*. In the chapter dedicated to religion, we reviewed the most significant beliefs of Christianity (primarily Orthodoxy, but also touching upon Catholicism and traditional Protestantism in the major debates) regarding the state of the soul after the separation from the body. Notable authors we referenced in this section include Saint Maximus the Confessor and the French Orthodox theologian Jean-Claude Larchet. The psychology section presented works that study the psychological state of individuals approaching their own death or dealing with the loss of a loved one. We incorporated ideas about the collective unconscious and archetypal forms from Jung, as well as thoughts related to the therapeutic power of finding meaning in life from Viktor Frankl, the founder of logotherapy, throughout the body of the work. In the final and most concise subsection, we conducted an overview of the cultural domain, aiming to highlight the relevance of death as reflected in most cultures, as well as anticipate the entrenched ritual behaviors that contribute to the formation of national cultures, which are discussed elsewhere in the thesis.

In the second chapter, dedicated to the epic genre of popular literature, we conducted a rigorous hermeneutic analysis of the principal Romanian folk tales and ballads in which the motif of death (whether literal or symbolic) is present. Among the many analyzed tales, we highlight the most representative ones: *Youth Without Age and Life Without Death* (*Tinerețe fără bătrânețe și viață fără de moarte*), *The Stone Man* (*Omul de piatră*), the Dobrogean story titled *The Water Queen* (*Crăiasa apelor*) or *The Fairy of the Flower Shore* (*Zâna de pe țărmul florilor*). Each tale

subjected to hermeneutic analysis provided us with new insights, facilitating our understanding of the popular soul.

In the subsection dedicated to the ballad genre, we selected a substantial number of works (including historical ballads), among which two stand out as particularly significant for this study: the classic representative of Romanian myth of transhumanity, *The Little Sheep (Miorița)*, with its multiple variants), and *Lenore (or The Ballad of the Brother Strigoi)*, known in Romanian literature primarily as *Voica* or *Voichița*. The verse form of the ballads ensures greater stability over time, which facilitated our diachronic research on the subject. The numerous variants of *The Little Sheep (Miorița)*, each with unique characteristics that alter the epic thread in an individualized manner, drew our attention to the influence of each rural community on works of national or even international circulation, as every village constitutes its own universe, leaving its mark on popular works. *Voica*, the Romanian variant of the internationally circulated ballad, belongs to the Balkan branch of the work, presenting the funerary and metaphysical events of the ballad in the style of Balkan Europe.

In the third chapter, we succeeded in bringing to the surface the beliefs that give rise to lyrical genres existing solely within the funeral context. *Bocete* (wailing laments) and ritual songs (a genre whose existence and development owe much to the folklorist Constantin Brăiloiu) are forms in which the beliefs, convictions, and emotions of the Romanian peasant are concentrated. This underlying substance is activated each time a member of the archaic community leaves this world. To create as complete a picture as possible of how lyrical singing (or wailing) allows the human soul to express its deepest fears and pains on one hand, and its most vivid hopes on the other, we opted to review and interpret *bocete* based on the type of kinship of the deceased (e.g., young girl, young man, mother, old man, etc.), as we observed differences in the intensity of the expressed emotions depending on the degree of kinship and the age of the deceased. In analyzing funeral songs—considered repositories of beliefs long erased from people’s consciousness—we chose to subject variants of the two most representative works of the genre to hermeneutic analysis: *The Dawn Song (Cântecul Zorilor)* and *The Song of the Fir Tree (Cântecul bradului)*. *The Dawn Song (Cântecul Zorilor)* represents, among other things, a transmundane guidance of the soul into the realm of ancestors.

In the fourth chapter, titled *The Great Passing in the Echo of Tradition*, we aimed to capture and explain both the religious beliefs of Romanian peasants and the behaviors these beliefs

generate, which have persisted for centuries. It is important to state from the outset that these beliefs are not purely Orthodox Christian. Indeed, the person of the archaic world does not possess a dogmatic mindset; he has not studied or read in detail the specifics of Orthodox Christian faith. Everything he knows about Christianity is based on hearsay, and he has only heard the information deemed necessary for salvation from the village priest—the only accredited source of Christian teaching. In such conditions (to which has been added the church's refusal or disinterest in removing non-Christian elements from faith), the pre-Christian, pagan substratum has surpassed the influences of centuries of Christianity and has almost always given rise to syncretic beliefs of a Christian-pagan nature. The archaic person seeks answers, solutions, and, above all, healing. If he feels that ecclesiastical authority or Christian teachings are not sufficient, he does not hesitate to consider using teachings and practices of other origins. We have consistently witnessed this reality throughout the myriad traditions and customs performed from the moment signs of impending death appear and even until after the completion of the forty days following a person's death.

At the same time, in this chapter, we analyzed the beliefs and attitudes of people toward the metaphysical entities related to the funeral context of the afterlife. From the beliefs and behaviors regarding the strigoi (both living and dead) and the iele (mythical creatures), we could infer the existence of a powerful core of fear. This often gives rise to ritualistic acts that may seem quite savage to the eyes of a civilized reader but serve a purely apotropaic role (such as driving a stake into the heart of a corpse deemed responsible for strange phenomena). Interestingly, popular imagination distinguishes between two major types of metaphysical entities: malevolent ones (such as the iele and strigoi) and benevolent ones (such as the moșii and strămoșii—ancestors), indicating that the collective unconscious of archaic populations is capable of producing positive feelings towards these entities from the other world. In the final subchapter, we studied the traditional collective imagination as preserved in the beliefs and rituals of the people. We observed that, in most ethnographic testimonies, the archaic world holds a clear dichotomous view of the afterlife: the deceased is either awaited by the perfect bliss of paradise or by the eternal damnation of hellfire. Another conclusion drawn from the analyses is the gradual penetration into the realm beyond the crypt. The onset of death does not coincide with the immediate transportation of the soul to one of the two mentioned spaces but represents a prolonged process (typically lasting forty

days, though this number may vary) during which the soul must traverse certain stages (often referred to as "customs" or "tolls") to ultimately integrate into the realm of ancestors.

The fifth chapter of the work provided space for a linguistic study through which we managed to capture those deeply ingrained beliefs, emotions, and attitudes (regarding the subject in question) that are embedded in the collective unconscious and projected onto the transgenerational screen of language. The selected expressions were meticulously analyzed using the hermeneutic tools employed, shedding light on realities that, without studying the mechanics of language, would have remained in obscurity. Although expressions related to death, devils, or God do not often penetrate the conscious realms of the psychic apparatus, they manifest strongly in the unconscious space, the ideal place for the emergence of instincts such as fear, anger, hope, or even love.

The second subchapter of Linguistic and Intercultural Aspects, which is also the final subchapter of the thesis, is dedicated to a comparative intercultural study that juxtaposes the cardinal traits of Hungarian archaic mentality with the main elements of Romanian popular thinking. Through the analysis of Hungarian traditions, beliefs, and popular literature, we can assert that, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the two mentalities exhibit significant similarities. This can be explained by both the geographical-cultural proximity (nations situated in Central-Eastern Europe) and the presence of intercultural exchanges (due to cohabitation in Transylvania, Banat, and Maramureș), as well as the shared Christian faith. The observed differences are considerably fewer and are attributed not to language or ethnic specificity, but almost exclusively to confessional tradition. The Western Christian spirituality among Hungarians (with Roman-Catholic and Protestant variants) and the Eastern (Orthodox or Greek-Catholic) spirituality among Romanians have largely influenced the development of these two cultures.

We believe that through the conducted study, we have achieved both the specific objectives proposed and the general goal of the thesis. This research brings innovation primarily through its hybrid, interdisciplinary nature, by successfully integrating multiple humanistic fields, diverse research methods, folklore in all its relevant layers, and extra-folkloric aspects within a single study and theme. Without claiming to provide an exhaustive approach—an impossibility given the nature and complexity of the subject—we consider that the thesis *Death and the Afterlife: An Ethno-Folkloric Perspective* meets all the criteria for a rigorous and multidimensional study. It is a relevant topic for those engaged in the vast field of ethnology, as well as for specialists in

sociology, psychology, and, not least, for every individual who sees in popular mentality the traces of an ancient world whose treasures have not yet all been brought to light and await further exploration.