

Vasile Alecsandri's Peasants. The Peasant's Image in Vasile Alecsandri's Work

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Abstract: *Vasile Alecsandri's Peasants. The Peasant's Image in Vasile Alecsandri's Work.* I am trying to present in this paper the image of the Romanian peasant as it appears in the work of a representative writer of the 19th century: Vasile Alecsandri. Or, happily for us, the peasant is an important character in Alecsandri's writings. I excluded the plays from this research. In other words I have studied correspondence, poetry and prose. The multishape image of the peasant can be structured in few independent topics. Thus, I have identified the topics of the oppressed peasant, the hero peasant, the picturesque peasant, the real peasant (in correspondence) and finally the good peasant. In Vasile Alecsandri's work the dominant dimension of the peasant's image is a positive one. We are here in the paradigm of the identity peasant, that as we know now is not unique in the 19th century.

Keywords: literature, 19th century, peasant, image of peasant, history

Rezumat: *Țăranii lui Vasile Alecsandri. Imaginea țăranului în opera lui Vasile Alecsandri.* În lucrarea de față am încercat să surprindem imaginea țăranului român așa cum apare ea în opera unui scriitor reprezentativ din secolul al XIX-lea: Vasile Alecsandri. Or, din fericire pentru noi, țăranul este un personaj important în toate scrierile lui Vasile Alecsandri. Am exclus din această cercetare dramaturgia. Cu alte cuvinte am lucrat pe corespondență, poezie și proză. Imaginea multiformă a țăranului poate fi structurată în câteva teme de sine stătătoare. Am identificat astfel tema țăranului chinuit, a țăranului erou, a celui pitoresc, a celui real (din corespondență) și, în final, țăranul cel bun. În opera lui Vasile Alecsandri dimensiunea dominantă a imaginii țăranului este una pozitivă. În marea majoritate a situațiilor țăranul este un personaj pozitiv. Suntem aici în paradigma țăranului identitar, care, acum știm, nu este unică în secolul al XIX-lea.

Cuvinte-cheie: literatură, secolul al XIX-lea, țăran, imaginea țăranului, istorie

First of all we should define what we are about to analyze in the present research: we will describe the manner in which the peasant is presented in a collective sense, but also as an individual, in Vasile Alecsandri's

works¹. These works of Alecsandri include those with a public audience – prose, poetry, drama – as well as those with a private one, his personal correspondence.

What is the aim of this research and why is it important, a skeptical person might ask. For a better understanding of the impact of the ideological role of the peasant, I propose a short incursion into contemporary Romania. Today, the peasant is an ubiquitous character: we find him beautifully dressed in in-door ethnographic museums, and in his modest house with sculpted pillars and woven cloths in the open air museums. He is present in the almost endless multitude of folkloric festivals and on TV channels dedicated to the same phenomena. Research institutes in the larger cities investigate his high spirituality molded in the genius of folk literature; we even find him in works that are ostensibly dedicated to him. In these ways, ever present, the ghost of the good peasant still haunts Romanian society; he permeates it so intensely that in the face of devastating modernization, the vice-prime-minister of the new government proposes to save as much as possible the soul of native peasant civilization².

The ideological status of the peasant in contemporary society, however, does not come from nowhere, but from the historical sources. We have found it described in different paradigms – sometimes a negative one, as in a book, recently published, concerned with the peasant's image in the medical discourse along the 19th century³. The peasant in nineteenth-century Romania is a character of first importance, as a simple review of the writings of the intellectual elite starting with 1830 demonstrates. Peasantry is not only “the only real class”⁴ as Titu Maiorescu describes it in 1868, the one that by its own work assures the preservation of the symbolic “wheat sack” that Stefan Zeletin puts at the foundation of modern Romania as the basis of a national identity. The entire national ideology of the 19th century is impregnated by peasantry. The peasant and peasantry as social group are thus also an admirable object “good to think of,” as Levi-Strauss would say, and the intellectuals of the 19th century were not shy in treating him likewise, as

¹ I have excluded from this research for reasons of economy, the analysis of the peasant's image, in Vasile Alecsandri drama.

² Vice-prime-minister Vasile Dîncu: *Integration in UE gave a mortal stroke to Romanian peasant*, in „Revista 22”, seen on website December 7th, 2015.

³ Constantin Bărbulescu, *România medicilor. Medici, țărani și igienă rurală în România de la 1860 la 1910*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2015.

⁴ Titu Maiorescu, *În contra direcției de astăzi în cultura română*, in Titu Maiorescu, „Opere”, vol. I, Ed. Minerva, București, 1978, p. 151.

we are doing today. In conclusion, for a better understanding of the extraordinarily important role of the peasant in today's Romania, we must go back a few centuries and watch as this image was born and was shaped by the ideology that created it.

After studying the image of the peasant in the medical discourse of the 19th century, my wish was to expand the area of research to the same image in other categories of discourses. In other words, I knew it was important to study not only what physicians said about the peasants but also what literary or political people said about the same peasant. Because the negative image thrust upon the peasant by the medical discourse was contested during that time by a different, more positive one, which serves as the basis of today's representations upon the same peasant.

The peasant in nineteenth-century literature is a fabulous topic. Vasile Alecsandri, Mihai Eminescu, and even I.L. Caragiale, through short stories, made of the peasant an important character in their writings. And these writers are only a few of the noted authors during this period that engaged in such literary endeavors. Of all these writers of the 19th century, I chose, randomly, one of them – Vasile Alecsandri – to test the field, so to speak. As you will see further on, it was a happy choice: his work is impregnated by peasantry.

Before starting, I think it is useful as an introduction to make a short presentation of Alecsandri's biographical data. Vasile Alecsandri was most likely born in 1821⁵. His father, "a smart and diligent small boyar" as G. Bogdan-Duică⁶ characterizes him, was born in 1792; he climbed step by step up the social hierarchy, first under fanariot kings (when he reached boyar rank three –*medelnicer*) but also during the Organic Regulations period, when he continued his climb. He eventually reached the difficult rank of boyars first class in 1840, when he becomes *postelnic*⁷; significantly, he accomplished this not through marriage, as usually happened. Instead, Alecsandri's father seemed to marry out of love with a girl of a boyar but without a dowry – Elena Cozoni, the daughter of *pitar* Dumitrache in Târgu-Ocna⁸. He succeeded the performance of this social progress by making himself useful to the

⁵ G.C. Nicolescu, *Viața lui Vasile Alecsandri*, ediția a III-a, Ed. Eminescu, București, 1975, pp. 10-11.

⁶ G. Bogdan-Duică, *Vasile Alecsandri. Povestirea unei vieți*, Ed. Cultura Națională, București, 1936, p. 5.

⁷ Elena Rădulescu-Pogoneanu, *Viața lui Alecsandri*, Ed. Scrisul Românesc, Craiova, 1940, pp. 13-15.

⁸ G.C. Nicolescu, *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

potents of the day as a clerk of the treasury, position that he had after the events of 1821. He eventually reached his highest rank in 1852, as a lessee – together with Teodor Balș – of the cereals' export through Galați harbor⁹. One thing is sure – his rapid social uplift was accompanied by a similar accumulation of a fortune. At the end of his life, in 1854, Vasile Alecsandri's father was the happy owner of a few estates: Mirceștii, Borzeștii și Pătrășcanii, Moimeștii and a final one which in fact was the largest, with a surface of 11.444 hectares – Folteștii. Houses in Iași, Galați and others added up¹⁰ to a considerable fortune.

Alecsandri as a child grew up at the boyar's court in Mircești, a time he would later remember at the death of his childhood friend, the gypsy Vasile Porojan. He attended Cuenim pension in Iasi and in the end of 1834, departed for studies in France. Young Alecsandri passed the baccalaureate in letters in France and then went on to university. He tried medicine first, but found it unsuitable: he simply could not stand dissections. Law followed without success. He considered engineering but for that he needed a baccalaureate in sciences that he likely would never pass.¹¹ It is certain that in the end Vasile Alecsandri did not succeed in returning from France with a university diploma, but with a passion for literature. One way or another, in France he discovered his vocation. He started writing rhymes, first in French, and later, after coming back in the country, in Romanian. By 1842 he started to compose rhymes and became, willy-nilly, a drama author. He published his first poetry in *Doine* cycle in 1843 and more of them in „Propășirea”, the following year.

When one follows as I do, a certain topic in the work of a writer, you have to make an essential methodological choice from the start: the results will be presented either chronologically as you identify them or thematically, if the topic allows such an operation. My option here is the thematic presentation because the peasant image in Vasile Alecsandri's work is well structured, with clearly identified sub-topics. Each of them constitutes a distinct topic of this present work.

⁹ Elena Rădulescu-Pogoneanu, *Op. cit.*, pp. 14-16.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 17, 27.

¹¹ G.C. Nicolescu, *Op. cit.*, pp. 23-29.

The oppressed peasant

In contrast to other colleagues of his ideological generation – the revolutionary *pashoptists*¹², if we keep Paul Cornea's terminology¹³ – such as Nicolae Bălcescu, Al. G. Golescu, Ion Ionescu de la Brad, under Vasile Alecsandri's plum, the pains of peasantry find just a pale echo. Certainly there is a fundamental difference between Vasile Alecsandri and Dinicu Golescu, for example, who illustrates best in Romanian literature of the first half of 19th century the topic of the oppressed peasant. The poet Alecsandri, we will see, is a great admirer of the peasants, but does not resonate fundamentally with their social situation: he is not a social reformer. Still, in a text from 1872 Alecsandri weeps in such images as the peasant condition during the Organic Regulations period. In the *Introduction* he refers to the works of his friend Costache Negruzzi, who made the famous fresco of the Organic Regulations society, from king to peasant. The description of the peasantry condition is worthy of Dinicu Golescu's plum: "Finally the people were lost in the shadow, in desertion, in ignorance!... the people subdued to the boyars, the people on whose head they were all masters, all: *vătavi*, lessees, landowners, servants, *cenușeri*, *țârcovnici*, *revizori*, *sameși*, *ispravnici*, judges, directors, ministries, king, sultan and emperor!...the people subjected to *beilicuri*, to poll taxes, to send the lads to army, whipped, smoking in prisons, exposed to all cruel caprices of the fate, to all moral and physical miseries, obeyed to all, either natives or foreigners, sunk into poverty, abased, terrified from childhood till death and unprotected by law not even against crimes!"¹⁴(1872)¹⁵. Regarding such crimes, we find in the next two pages that it is not just a figure of speech: „the torture of the peasants and gypsies was a daily routine and was such an absolute prerogative of the landowners, that if the unfortunate victims that died in torture would wake up from their graves, we would be frightened by that cloud of sinister ghosts that remained unavenged”(1872)¹⁶. Despite

¹² In Romanian the term is *pașoptist* resulted from the words *patru*(4) and *opt*(8), signifying a short for 48, meaning a participant in the Revolution in 1848.

¹³ Paul Cornea, *Originile romantismului românesc. Spiritul public, mișcarea ideilor și literatura între 1780-1840*, Ed. Cartea Românească, București, 2008, pp. 375-380.

¹⁴ Vasile Alecsandri, *Constantin Negruzzi. Introducere la scrierile lui*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. IV: „Proză”, Editura Minerva, București, 1974, p. 355

¹⁵ For an easier time with footnotes, after each quote from Alecsandri's writings or the other authors quoted, we will mention in brackets the year of drawing or publication of the text, whenever it is possible to do so.

¹⁶ Vasile Alecsandri, *Op. cit.*, pp. 356-357.

what I have said above, this text shows a compassion in the line with most writings on peasant conditions in the 19th century.

But, as I said, Vasile Alecsandri was not a social reformer, as was Mihail Kogălniceanu, a colleague of his generation and a one-time friend. The latter was fundamentally a fighter for the peasantry's rights, which affected his writings from the start. In one text, an extremely hilarious one that proves what Romanian literature lost by the total political engagement of Kogălniceanu, the author makes fun of all and everything; but the peasantry is simply spared. After 1844, however, Mihail Kogălniceanu could not simply make harmless jokes on the peasantry's behalf; he is structurally against it: "Peasants, that is land workers, cannot serve my type: their life is so vile compared to ours, their character is so natural, my compassion for them is so great and fair, that I would feel it as an infamy the smallest joke I could make upon some people upon which resides all the tasks, besides the useful ones, and who feeds us the lazy and idlers of the cities" (1844)¹⁷.

In contrast, the pure and the simple Vasile Alecsandri could not empathize with the contemporary peasantry's condition. He could speak in memorable texts about the sorrows of the old peasants but not at all about the sorrows of his contemporary peasants.

Nevertheless, I should not be unfair to Alecsandri: in his youth in 1848, he drew programmatic documents for the revolution in Moldavia such as *Protestație în numele Moldovei, a omenirii și a lui Dumnezeu* [*Protest in the name of Moldavia, humankind and God*] published in seclusion in Brasov, where he describes the peasantry condition under Mihail Sturza ruling:

"Because the villagers reached the highest level of meanness due to the careless of most landowners and especially through the measures of oppression of Mihail Sturza government, as it is proven by the money taxation they are subjected to, as payment for the soldiers, payment for servants, payment for the villages boxes, for the village newspaper, for seals etc. (all these over the taxation decided by the Regulation); - as it is proven through the numerous *beilicuri* they are forced to do at any time, both for the landowners as also for the ruling, that is: stone, wood and crude naphta carrying for the sidewalks in Iași, or from the county fairs; lime carrying, stone and lumber for the private walling of the landlords in fairs and estates; the unmeasured working to the boyar, to the roads,

¹⁷ Mihail Kogălniceanu, *Fiziologia provincialului în Iași*, in Mihail Kogălniceanu, „Opere”, vol. I: „Beletristica, studii literare, culturale și sociale”, Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, București, 1974, p. 70.

to the bridges etc., all these under the whips of the servants, that they keep with their money; as it is proven by the known oppressions of some leasees especially through the tortures that even *beizade* Grigori Sturza does to the inhabitants of the estates taken in lease by him; tortures that thrilled the whole country, but that the king of Moldavia allowed as a good and caring father of the... people; in one word, as it is proven in the complains of this helpless and hopeless people, right complains, that spread all over country and civilised Europe: - The Community that knows the peasants as good brothers of the same blood and name, wishing to cease their sufferances, demands: <<*The soon embetterment of the status of villagers, both in their relations to the landlords and with the ruling, as also the stop of all beilicuri known as payment and others*>>¹⁸.

We notice that the Moldavian revolutionaries ask only the „embetterment of the peasants status” and not the apportionment of land. A little later, in Cernăuți, their position would become more radical, this time taking into account the apportionment of land for the peasants; Vasile Alecsandri, to his honor, adhered to this position. It is a very good choice because decades later, following the staging of some dramas where he expressed doubts regarding the liberals’ social reforms, he could defend himself from their accusations precisely with that signature: “they went so far in accusing the author to be retrograde and contrary to the reforms needed for Romanian prosperity such as: *peasant apportionment of land, communes organization etc.*”. “These accusations have made me laugh even more because in 1848, in Cernăuți, I was one of those who subscribed to the engagement to *give land to the peasants*, as one who being a landlord, I had the means to fulfill the thought”¹⁹. But, as we all know, the simple signature on a piece of paper can mean nothing in the end.

The peasant hero

The peasant hero appears in the works of Vasile Alecsandri only in the „tough” moments of the national history lived by the poet: 1848 and 1877-1878. The armed peasants on the Cantacuzino estates in 1848, which Alecsandri wanted to be on their way to Iași to support the Revolution, are caught in their potential heroic hypostasis in an image that touched the poet and that he remembered in later years in his famous

¹⁸ Vasile Alecsandri, *Protestație în numele Moldovei, a omenirei și a lui Dumnezeu*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. IV: „Proză”, Editura Minerva, București, 1974, pp. 542-543.

¹⁹ Vasile Alecsandri, *Prefață*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. V: „Teatru”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1977, p. 30.

autobiographical letter to Ubicini: "I saw here at night that admirable scene I told you once at your place: peasants holding their guns in one hand and lit candles in the other one during Easter and leaning forward a box full of gun powder on the risk of blowing up."²⁰ This moment is evoked in 1869 in the text *An episode from 1848*, when, significantly, he describes the reaction of indifference of the peasants towards the revolutionary events in Iași, including the persecutions that the revolutionary boyars are subjected to by Mihail Sturza, as also the basis of a "sad truth": "that the social distance between the privileged class and the people developed in the heart of the people an absolute indifference regarding boyars and the abuses of civil servants made Romanians stigmatize with an insulting name of parvenus all those who were not from their rank"²¹.

As I have mentioned, in 1848 the armed peasants were only potential heroes but in 1877 they transformed into real heroes, a metamorphosis regarded with some surprise and great delight by the poet: "What an amazing thing, isn't it?! Simple peasants taken from the plough to become heroes at once!"²². The heroization of the peasant is done in the cycle of poems "Our soldiers," where Alecsandri builds memorable characters for the national ideology of the epoch. Probably the most famous is *Peneș Curcanul*, the only survivor of the group of ten foot soldiers left from Vaslui from the battle in Bulgaria. The ten are all peasants („from the field, from home, from the plough/ we left last summer"), led by the sergeant, *Mătrăgună* and including *Cobuz*, the shepherd, *Ținteș*, *Bran*, *Vlad*, *Burcel*, *Șoimu*, and the brothers *Călini*, all heroes from Plevna. The poem is but a remembrance through *Peneș* of the heroic death of each of them²³. Together with *Peneș*, Vasile Alecsandri creates other peasant heroes: the sergeant in the poem has the same title as the brothers *Jderi*²⁴. All of them, peasant heroes in the War for Independence, are Moldavian, and go to battle with an undisimulated enthusiasm; they are fearless, fight bravely, and are wounded. In this

²⁰ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. VIII: „Corespondență (1834-1860)", Ed. Minerva, București, 1981, p. 262.

²¹ Vasile Alecsandri, *Un episod din anul 1848*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere", vol. IV: „Proză", Editura Minerva, București, 1974, p. 309.

²² Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. X: „Corespondență (1871-1881)", Ed. Minerva, București, 1985, p. 348.

²³ Vasile Alecsandri, *Peneș Curcanul*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere", vol. II: „Poezii", Editura pentru literatură, București, 1966, pp. 167-173.

²⁴ Vasile Alecsandri, *Sergentul și Frații Jderi*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere", vol. II: „Poezii", Editura pentru literatură, București, 1966, pp. 174-175; 178-181.

circumstance their only thought is to be revived and to return from the front. Most often, they are simply killed in battles, dreaming of victory and country.

Strong characters the hero-peasants are; they are the ones that dreamed of Romania's greatness and gave their lives in the War from 1877-1878. They do not know fear or cowardness: even the peasant women from the poem „Românca de la Grivița” go on quietly in making polenta under enemy fire²⁵. The cowards are somewhere else: they are the ingrate leaders („people with bare hearts/tied by the country's wheel with serpent twists/ you who stayed away from the fire and pain/ how you turned back the children to the breast of the poor country?” or liberals condemned in the poem „Eroii de la Plevna”²⁶ written no doubt after the press accounts of the poor state of Romanian soldiers returned from Bulgaria. Alecsandri would not publish during his life the poem mentioned above.

There is another version of heroism, the so-called the social one, where the peasants themselves excelled, but also the folk poetry so dear to the poet. And here we have to focus on the justitiary peasant, the revolutionary haiduk. Vasile Alecsandri right from the start of his literary career was interested in this aspect: from the first cycle of poems - „Doine” (1842-1852) he drew the portrait of the justitiary haiduk in the famous „Strunga” and „Cântic haiducesc”. Even in „Hora” the young peasant that seems a sort of haiduk, bursts out in the end: „I'm sick of heavy taxations/ and of plough and hoe/of parvenus, of whips/and of the wide hoe”. It can easily be seen that such characters have the entire compassion of the poet. A letter to Ion Ghica from 1842 supports this claim; in the correspondence, he describes the latest events in Moldavia. Among them, he makes the assertion that „from some time, the peasants like to play the masters, even towards the masters; that is they got that their numbers make the force and that a boyar can receive with the same grace the club strokes that someone would give to him. We already have many examples since your departure that clearly prove a great fund of judgement in the *peasant* class”. Kogălniceanu's uncle (Ion), who already got a good lesson during the revolt of the peasants during Russian occupation, was again arranged with many clubbings, too little refreshing. Conachi was left with wonder of witnessing such a festivity,

²⁵ Vasile Alecsandri, *Românca de la Grivița*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. II: „Poezii”, Editura pentru literatură, București, 1966, p. 302.

²⁶ Vasile Alecsandri, *Eroii de la Plevna*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. II: „Poezii”, Editura pentru literatură, București, 1966, pp. 270-273.

and a certain Cantacuzino who just arrived from Lemberg (the brother of knez Ticit-sasiul), took a beating in Fălticeni fair worthy of the title he had.

Further on, a French count, travelling for pleasure, departed from Galați with some very strong impressions. „Finally my dear, the government, worried by these facts and others, gave order that the counties in Upper Moldavia be disarmed. All that they found from peasants were guns, knives even iron forks, which were taken in the name of public order... here it is on this occasion the reflection of a man from the people who was taken a gun: <<Let them take our guns>> he said, << so what? We are left the famous *club* and that is taking fire easier and when it does, it lasts longer>>, - historical - say it my dear that it is wonderful! He spoke like an old Roman”²⁷. When he was writing these lines, Alecsandri was 21; he was a young son of a boyar, a poet fascinated by peasant poetry and fully contrary to the state of regimented things. His personal revolt converged very well with the peasant one and here is the origin of such a positive image of the revolutionary haiduk.

Later, in a study of folk poetry, Alecsandri remarked with obvious pleasure the atmosphere of the talks with the Bukovinean Al. Hurmuzachi, invigorated by a warm patriotism. The essential component of such a type of patriotism was exactly the glorification of the great deeds of the arms of the past and of the present, in the form they existed: „in those hours of patriotic urge, any historical deed of the ancestors was raising in our imagination to huge proportions; any brave deed of a Romanian of present days, be him a wood thief, was inspiring a secret pride”²⁸. And the peasant poetry confessed the same „secret pride” for the justiciary thief because the haiduk by excellence is a revolutionary man against parvenus, as all the pashoptists, and not a character greedy for money and wealth: „money taken from the belt of the rich man goes into the hand of the poor”²⁹. The definitive edition in 1866 of the “The Folk Poems of Romanians” consists of many of such haiduk's ballads: „Mihu copilul”; „Codreanul”; „Vidra”; „Bujor”; „Jianul” or „Tunsul” on whose occasion the author finds it appropriate to sketch for the unknowing public the image of few famous haiduks.

²⁷ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. VIII: „Corespondență (1834-1860)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1981, p. 35.

²⁸ Vasile Alecsandri, *România și poezia lor*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. IV: „Proză”, Editura Minerva, București, 1974, p. 107.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 113.

In conclusion, if for the pashoptists the heroization of the peasant is done especially in its social version (the heroization of haiduk), the true heroization takes place on the occasion of the first armed conflict where the peasant citizen transforms into the soldier – the war for independence in 1877-1878. The next stage, logical one of peasant heroization, will be the WWI.

The picturesque peasant

The picturesque peasant, together with the hero one, is the other facet of the positive peasant image in Vasile Alecsandri's poems. He appears especially in the poems of the cycle „Pasteluri”, (1862 – 1870s) but we also find him in the following cycle of „Ostașii noștri”. In this variant the village and its inhabitants are idealized. The village flows in a calm, merry atmosphere as in poem entitled „Easter”: “On Easter in the merry village the whitened houses/ shine under those piles of golden canes”; somewhere „in the valley” a swing gathers „lads and maids that laugh with joy”; the dance stretches on „the meadow”³⁰: everything seems perfect in the most perfect of worlds!

If we try to systematize the images that compose the picturesque peasant we cannot but remark that Alecsandri centers thematically his attention on work scenes. Besides this is the description of feminine figures: they are all young, beautiful, seductive: „Young Rodica” with „her white, round shoulders” enchants the „young sowers”³¹ and the „Little Romanian Girl” in „The Well” with her „red lips” stirs the traveller's eroticism, which we identify with the author himself³². The eroticism is ever present: at Easter the swing bears “Pairs hugging sweetly”, at mowing a pair „one lad and and a maid/ give furtively a kiss next to the straws” until the mower discovers at the end of the poem „by a melilot” a true love nest: „he sees the grass in disorder/ << What is is to be?...A predator cub?... O! Wonder!>> He says/ And, smiling he leans and picks... an earring!”³³ All the works in the field described in the mentioned cycle are performed in an atmosphere of general joy – „the

³⁰ Vasile Alecsandri, *Paștele*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. I: „Poezii”, Editura pentru Literatură, București, 1966, p. 333.

³¹ Vasile Alecsandri, *Rodica*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. I: „Poezii”, Editura pentru Literatură, București, 1966, p. 336.

³² Vasile Alecsandri, *Fântâna*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. I: „Poezii”, Editura pentru Literatură, București, 1966, p. 347.

³³ Vasile Alecsandri, *Cositul*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. I: „Poezii”, Editura pentru Literatură, București, 1966, p. 349.

mowers merrily stay in line"; „the sowers merry go forward”³⁴; at ploughing the „joyous servants work”³⁵. Where were the oppressed peasants of the other times? Or those put down by the killing alcohol of master Moisi? Not at work to the great master it seems. But let us not exaggerate with the wickedness - the poetical vision of the cycle is a serene one, of glorifying youth, eroticism, work of the land and nature; it is simply another way of recombining the reality of the poet and the world around him.

The poem “Shepherds and Plowers,” in the cycle “Our soldiers,” offers the same picturesque scene, but in a collective dimension; the poet tries to catch the peasant dimension of the Romanians left for the war of independence, all shepherds or plowers. Here there is not a shadow of eroticism, which would be totally out of line, but only a warm moral idealization the shepherds “Living a smooth life in the secret nature/ with the Romanian shepherd’s alp horn in their hands, with the whistle at their lips.” They seem to be ideal beings, clean souls at the essence of the era. And the plowers, “with their calm face, their eyes so alive,”³⁶ seem the most candid beings in the world. The poem is polemical and seems to have been written as a response to the negative, ironical, malicious image that the others painted of the peasant, or so the poet thinks. We are here at an open conflict between the two images of the peasant. Alecsandri builds an ideal image, profoundly positive, with a humanity in the peasant that he strongly believed in at that moment. It was a blasphemy to mock the peasant soldier in 1877!

The real peasant

Under the title of “real peasant” we gather the testimonies of the poet regarding the real peasants that he had contact with: the peasants in Mircești; the peasants on his estates; or simply peasants that he had come across or interacted with. From the start we notice that the great boyar, who became after 1864 the great landowner, Vasile Alecsandri does not write much about the real peasant and does not write in the same tonality as in prose or poetry. The real peasant appears always in correspondence and resembles much to that which the physicians describe in the same epoch. There are two life circumstances when the

³⁴ Vasile Alecsandri, *Sămănătorii*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. I: „Poezii”, Editura pentru Literatură, București, 1966, p. 335.

³⁵ Vasile Alecsandri, *Plugurile*, în Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. I: „Poezii”, Editura pentru Literatură, București, 1966, p. 334.

³⁶ Vasile Alecsandri, *Păstorii și plugarii*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. II: „Poezii”, Editura pentru Literatură, București, 1966, pp. 176-177.

real peasant comes out: the church fire in Mircești in summer 1864 and the trial of the inhabitants in Pătrășcani occasioned by the famous agrarian law in the same year. Let us deal with them in order.

The church fire is described memorably in a letter to Maiorescu where he asks for support in getting the books necessary for the new church built with the support of the village teacher in the place of the old one. We must let him tell us: "In Mircești village there is an old church, made of oak and adorned with arabesques, very beautiful, made by an unknown sculptor along the beams. That modest temple, lost in the field and surrounded by graves was having a priest that among other gifts he had also the drunkenness one. One Sunday, some years ago, the holy man, wishing to change that glass for the jug and leave the altar to go to the pub, he did the mass in rush and ran to master Moisi forgetting to blow out the candles in the church. It was great wind that day; the wind blowing through a spoiled window, fluttered the curtain and pushed it against a candle. The curtain set on fire and burned the church!... The centenary temple burnt in a minute from top to bottom and raised to the sky like the smoke of a giant censer. Everything that was inside, icons, clothes, sacral things, books were turned to ashes... but no metal was found among ruins because some gypsies of the B. Type had made *des fouilles* on account of master Moise. Following that sinister act, Mircești village remained without church and priest, because the first one disappeared to retreat on a pious world, and the second retreated without worries in the woods of Vaslui, next to Sionești. Eversince the poor inhabitants had no church and consecrated to the pub in all the days red marked in the calendar. Drunkenness develops in the village quickly and in huge proportions and master Moisi turns fat like the golden calf. Mortality followed the same progress with misery so that Mircești village one of the richest in Roman county before, turned today in a crowd of vilain earth housees and crippled people, poisoned by the corosive influence of vitriol"³⁷(1875).

What could I add? Here is where the absence of a church and a priest can lead! Could Vasile Alecsandri believe that the church bans the devil of drunkenness or are we having a rhetorical artifice in a letter requesting a favor for Mircești village? I believe in the second variant. Anyway, the attitude of the peasants in Mircești during the fire scandalized him as it appears in a letter to Costache Negri: "during the fire, all Traian descendants that live on my estate, assisted the show

³⁷ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. X: „Corespondență (1871-1881)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1985, pp. 191-192.

without trouble and without helping in anyway. They even made jokes of a very little Orthodox taste"³⁸.

As any great responsible landowner, the material state of the peasants on his estates and of the peasants in general worried him: in 1881, a rainy and difficult year for agriculture, he worried for the peasants that "did not do the work, what will they eat till the next year? Are they afraid of starvation?"³⁹. After July 1866 he was also worried "because of cholera, famine and tomorrow patriots"⁴⁰. But he is not interested only in the material state of rural population, but also in the moral one and again alcoholism is indicated: in January 1866 he remarked that "for the people ... drunkenness reached a scary level."⁴¹ This took place in Moldavia, the one considered by the medical discourse in the past decades of the 19th century as perfectly and fully alcoholized⁴². But let us not deceive ourselves, Vasile Alecsandri is interested in and finally takes care of the well-being of the peasants on his estates, not from pure humanitarian reasons, which must not be excluded, but for the simple reason that the peasant was, as Mihail Kogălniceanu said, "the only factor, the only income of the boyar"⁴³. To exploit wisely the estate meant to take care of the good status of your work force: peasants and cows. It is an elementary condition of getting profit, and the great landowners in Moldavia are perfectly conscious of this. Besides, the condition of the landowner is admirable described by Vasile Alecsandri with great humor in a letter to Mihail Obedenaru: "Mr. Aurelian wrote somewhere two phrases destined to be legendary: 1. <<our climate is perfectly good. 2. Our land is perfectly fertile!>> Based on these two fallacious axiomas and lacking the lessee, I took the plough to exploit myself the estate. Here is now the third year I convince myself of the rich fantasy that Mr. Aurelian has and of the truth of a new axiom: The landowner doing agriculture is a perfectly naive being. He

³⁸ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. IX: „Corespondență (1861-1870)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1982, p. 218.

³⁹ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. X: „Corespondență (1871-1881)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1985, p. 718.

⁴⁰ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. IX: „Corespondență (1861-1870)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1982, pp. 267-268.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 246.

⁴² Constantin Bărbulescu, *Op. cit.*, pp. 160-185.

⁴³ Mihail Kogălniceanu, *Dezrobirea țiganilor, ștergerea privilegiilor boierești, emanciparea țăranilor. Discurs rostit în Academia Română*, în Mihail Kogălniceanu, „Opere”, vol. II: „Scrieri istorice”, Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, București, 1976, p. 618.

compromises his fortune and alienates his independence; flattering himself with the idea that he has a thesaurus in the land, and with the hope of future harvests, the poor man he is always in short of money because everything he earns he buries under the plough and then: wait, horse, to graze green grass!"⁴⁴(1881). At least this is the poet's impression at the end of the eighth decade and the beginning of the ninth.

The next event that reveals the real peasant is the conflict that opposes him to the peasants in Pătrășcani at the application of the agrarian law in 1864. Like any great landowner, Vasile Alecsandri was not thrilled by agrarian reform, despite the declarations of good will that he made such as "I accept it as a means to elevate the peasant class"⁴⁵. In fact, by the abrupt way the agrarian law was imposed, it was perceived as a true catastrophe for the great landowners that he considers as the victims of the law. His concrete situation in the relations with the lessees and the peasants draws him to such conclusions:" As far as I am concerned, despite my lessee in Mircești is forced by contract to hold my estate till April 1865, I had to make a reduction of 500 *galbeni* (coins) upon the lease for the next year. As about the other estate of mine I should give a capital of at least 2000 *galbeni*, to buy machines of all sorts to replace the peasants arms. But where would I take all this money? From the Jews? Always the Jews!! One would say that the law was made to enrich the usurers; because the government did not prevent the difficulties coming from the law and did not found a bank before this. Finally, may it rest in peace! May the ruin of one class, that of the landowners and lessees lead to the use of the peasant one"⁴⁶(1864). In these conditions where he estimates considerable losses and forced investments there is no wonder that Alecsandri does not focus on the agrarian reform in his writings: it is one of the great reforms of the 19th century that does not inspire him on the literary ground. This fact did not pass unnoticed: Iacob Negruzzi that loves and esteems him as a person ""with small faults and great qualities"⁴⁷, does not forgive him for that⁴⁸; nor did Garabet Ibrăileanu (1909)⁴⁹.

⁴⁴ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. X: „Corespondență (1871-1881)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1985, p. 733.

⁴⁵ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. IX: „Corespondență (1861-1870)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1982, p. 220.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 220-221.

⁴⁷ Iacob Negruzzi, *Amintiri din „Junimea”*, Editura Minerva, București, 1970, p. 99.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

⁴⁹ Garabet Ibrăileanu, *Spiritul critic în cultura românească*, in Garabet Ibrăileanu, „Opere”, vol. I, Ed. Minerva, București, 1974, pp. 88-89.

But let us come back to the problem of the trial with the inhabitants of Pătrășcani estate. In the summer of 1866 Vasile Alecsandri complained that his "vassals" in Pătrășcani "have found a way to take the whole of my arable land"⁵⁰; in other words, they did not comply with the division made through the agrarian reform. This division, the poet says, was advantaging them obviously, and in the case of a new delimitation, "I will let aside the generous feelings that foolishly guided me at the first division and I will not let to the peasants but the two thirds of my estate, because this is from category *moșii stânte*. This way, instead of 551 *fălci*⁵¹, the peasants will have to share only 400. A new delimitation would force me to measure first all the estates with wood or brambles to take them out of the property and in this case the rest of the estate will represent only an unsatisfactory proportion for the mass of my old vassals. Even more their land and mine will be so messed up that nothing will be understandable. Giving them their share around their villages I thought I made them a service, putting them at shelter from the lessees' abuse that will profit from the passing of their cattle to fine them etc., or because these miserable pushed by some revolted stubborn to do the contrary they would deserve to have their complaint rejected, for their own good"⁵². These stubborn miserables would continue the process for a long time, until February 1869, when, as predicted, they would lose. Three years of long and expensive trials for the peasant community in Pătrășcani would end by the betrayal of their representatives - Nedelcu and Vasile Grădinariul - who, in the end, tried to obtain only some personal advantages on the cost of those who they were representing: "they came to propose to me to sell me the rights of their clients in exchange for a land concession for their own use."⁵³ The trial was lost by the peasants and we know only the version of the great writer and landowner Vasile Alecsandri; the peasant version, lost somewhere in the files of the Justice Ministry, will be lost probably forever. I cannot but wonder still: Why so much virulence/obstinence from the peasants if it was such an advantageous division for them?

From the position of his status as great Moldavian landowner, Vasile Alecsandri was behaving paternalistically with the peasants on his estates and thus maintained relations in two ways with them. In 1874

⁵⁰ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. IX: „Corespondență (1861-1870)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1982, p. 268.

⁵¹ *Fălci* means 1 ½ hectare.

⁵² Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. IX: „Corespondență (1861-1870)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1982, p. 268.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 378.

when his daughter Maria was brought from Paris by her father⁵⁴ to spend the summer in Mircești, several peasants offered to the young girl "the most beautiful birds in their barn," which, multiplying the next year, "messed up the garden."⁵⁵ When in the definitive edition of "Romanian Folk Poetry" in 1866 he explains the term "colaci", we find that in that time it became synonym with "plocon" and "the people living in the countryside have the custom to go to the landowners with *colaci* at holidays, but those *colaci* are represented by eggs, chicken, honey, fruits and lambs"⁵⁶. Does the poet receive such gifts at holidays? No doubt that he did; we know it from Mihai Lungu in Mircești, who in 1906 told the philologists interviewing him that they went to him with *colaci* at Christmas⁵⁷. And in his turn, the landowner returned the gifts from the peasants through punctual services - as he does for the vineyard keeper in Bucium, that he hires in 1871 legally, this way "protecting him by the police"⁵⁸, thus of being recruited - or through services in favor of the community, such as the building of the communal school in Mircești at the end of the sixth decade and the beginning of the seventh. Vasile Alecsandri seems to be the prototype of the enlightened Moldavian boyar that takes good care of the inhabitants of his estates, so regretted by the peasants in the complaints around the revolt in 1907.

The Peasant - The Romanian - The People

To understand the meaning of Alecsandri's writing, it is necessary to unpack the conceptual luggage the poet operates with. In certain situations Alecsandri thinks of himself as a "peasant": in a letter in 1861 to Costache Negri, he identifies himself as "peasant from the Danube"⁵⁹ just as three years before, the Romanians as national body could be treated as "peasants from the Danube"⁶⁰, this time in a text written to a

⁵⁴ G.C. Nicolescu, *Op. cit.*, p. 472.

⁵⁵ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. X: „Corespondență (1871-1881)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1985, p. 225.

⁵⁶ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. III: „Poezii”, Editura pentru Literatură, București, 1966, p. 118.

⁵⁷ I.-A. Candrea, Ov. Densusianu, Th. D. Sperantia, *Graiul nostru. Texte din toate părțile locuite de români*, vol. I, Atelierele Grafice Socec & Co, București, 1906, p. 475.

⁵⁸ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. X: „Corespondență (1871-1881)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1985, p. 14.

⁵⁹ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. IX: „Corespondență (1861-1870)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1982, p. 71.

⁶⁰ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. VIII: „Corespondență (1834-1860)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1981, p. 351.

stranger. It is obvious that in this case we have an identification of geographical and social nature. Later, after the retreat at Mircești, and when the warm season meant for any great landowner responsible, agricultural preoccupations, Alecsandri defines himself, with irony, „peasant” with the meaning of land worker⁶¹.

But how is he describing or categorizing the peasants during this time? And especially what relationship exists between the few terms he uses – *peasant*, *people*, *Romanian* – that appear in certain situations to be in perfect synonymy? In other words: is the peasant the equivalent of the *people* and of *the Romanian*? So it seems, if we think that he uses often in his letters expressions taken from folk language that he characterizes either as folk saying: “*easy to say pie!* A folk saying says so”⁶²(1878), or as peasant expression: “The Romanian does not die one-two, not even nine, because he has seven lives and is the son of devil as the peasants say”⁶³ (1878). If you are not fully convinced, let us take a look to a more than one decade earlier – the notes to the volume in 1866, “The Folk Poetry of Romanians” that offer plenty of examples. Even from the notes that makes explicit the text opening the volume – Miorița – we find out that: „the Romanian loves poetical images”⁶⁴. In a few pages we are informed that „the people believes in the power of magic”⁶⁵ etc.

The peasant, however, is missing in these words! We notice the concern of the author to dismiss this term: the peasant women are miraculously transformed to be „the Romanian women”⁶⁶ and the peasant into „the Romanian”. Still, even Alecsandri makes mistakes: at page 265 we find out that the text „the Sister of the Contrabandist” was picked up from „a young peasant women”!⁶⁷ Why is he clearly avoiding the use of the term peasant, when he is not shy in using it in correspondence? We think that the reason is the public and quasi-official character of the work: he dedicates „the Folk Poems” to queen Elena Cuza and the royalties to the asylum „Elena Doamna,” founded by her. It is also possible that the terms *people* and that of *peasant* even more were

⁶¹ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. IX: „Corespondență (1861-1870)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1982, pp. 243, 251.

⁶² Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. X: „Corespondență (1871-1881)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1985, p. 390.

⁶³*Ibidem*, p. 430.

⁶⁴ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. III: „Poezii”, Editura pentru Literatură, București, 1966, p. 19.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 217.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 265.

preserving in the seventh decade that semantic balance between *plebs* și *nation*, highlighted by Paul Cornea for the moment 1848⁶⁸. In other words, the term *peasant* continued to designate extremely precise the social category subordinated from the social, cultural and economic point of views, and retained in such a context a pejorative nuance, that it has today as well when *people* and *Romanian* with the meaning of *nation*: that is, all Romanians, whose concept encloses the non-peasants. It is obvious that for Alecsandri, at least in 1866, *the Romanian* is the same with *the peasant*.

The Folk Language

Vasile Alecsandri lived during the greatest and most rapid linguistic transformation in the space that eventually became Romania. He lived all his life in this true Babel tower and he was active in the battle for the formation of a Romanian language, the one that was imposed definitively at the end of his life and that we are using today. He is known to have rejected the Latinist exaggeration of the Transylvanians and he was a partisan in the building of the Romanian language starting from the spoken language, the language of the people. In 1864, in a letter to G. Boteanu he exposed his creed: „Romanians have an original and harmonious language that sits hidden outside cities, our duty is to find it and cultivate it carefully so that we could express our ideas and feelings in a pleasant way and understandable for the whole Romania”⁶⁹. Alecsandri was a great admirer of the expresivity of folk language – one of the things he loved about the peasant is the language: “ who talked with the field worker(...) and did not find pleasure in listening to his language adorned with original figures? For example: he wants to tell about a good man? He says: he is good like the mother’s breast”⁷⁰. Undoubtedly, the spoken language was a perfect instrument that needed to be enriched. All his life he fought for building such an instrument, essential for him as man of letters. His testimonies in correspondence and other writings proves it. When he enumerates the obstacles an author finds in the 1850s, one of them is precisely the language “that it is still in

⁶⁸ Paul Cornea, *Cuvântul „popor” în epoca pașoptistă: sinonimii, polisemiii și conotații. Între semantica istorică și semiotica mentalului colectiv*, in Paul Cornea, „Regula jocului. Versantul colectiv al literaturii: concepte, convenții, modele”, Ed. Eminescu, București, 1980, p. 243.

⁶⁹ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. IX: „Corespondență (1861-1870)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1982, p. 211.

⁷⁰ Vasile Alecsandri, *Românii și poezia lor*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. IV: „Proză”, Editura Minerva, București, 1974, pp. 109-110.

diapers" (1852)⁷¹. He would bemoan after the Union the perpetuation of the linguistical systems (seen as old now) that in a not very far past found justifications - they were instruments in the panoply of national emancipation: "in 1848 and few years before, there was a need to reject the notes in Petersburg, that ascribed to us a Slavic origin; then any weapon was good: history, geography, ethnography, folk poetry, old customs, especially the language, the language purified from slavonisms, and the spelling so Latinized, so messed up... all were used successfully to probe that we are Latin, and we descend from Traian. And the world, finally, believed us" (1871)⁷². With Maiorescu and Junimea's support his position regarding the language would be triumphant. Even today, his prose is monumental. To me, personally, before this research I was unfamiliar with his work; Vasile Alecsandri's prose was an extraordinary discovery. He enters the gallery of the great men of „ the beginning of the road" as happily expresses Paul Cornea⁷³, in full rights next to Mihail Kogălniceanu or Alecu Russo.

The Folk Literature

Today it is almost a truism to assert that Vasile Alecsandri is the initiator of folk research in our country. Almost any folk literature research is done in the public spirit of Vasile Alecsandri's name. Under a dual aspect--of the gathering of folk material and the usage of folklore--an inspirational source for national literary creation emerged. For this latter meaning the poet put in practice brilliantly the program of "Literary Dacia". His first poems, the cycle "Doine", that he started writing in 1842, had a pure peasant influence and made a sensation in their day. Let us remember Costache Negruzzi's reaction, told by his son Iacob, upon the illuminating moment of the first audition: "I heard many times my father saying that one evening finding himself in Mrs. Sturza's salon, who called herself a countess, together with Alecsandri and other young fellows returned recently from abroad the word about our national literature came upon. Mrs. Sturza, a very intelligent woman, encouraged then Alecsandri to read some poems that she has heard he had written those days, so as my father would hear them, and the young poet recited

⁷¹ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. VIII: „Corespondență (1834-1860)", Ed. Minerva, București, 1981, p. 192.

⁷² Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. X: „Corespondență (1871-1881)", Ed. Minerva, București, 1985, p. 42.

⁷³ Paul Cornea, *Oamenii începutului de drum*, in Paul Cornea, „Oamenii începutului de drum. Studii și cercetări asupra epocii pașoptiste", Ed. Cartea Românească, București, 1974, pp. 26-29.

his first ballads: *Baba Cloanța, Strunga, Andrei Popa...* My father was delighted. Returned home late at night he could hardly sleep as he was excited and walked through the house for hours declaiming the poems he just had heard"⁷⁴. Obviously this impression propagated in the liberal boyar environment, the former collaborators at "Literary Dacia" and the future participants in the 1848 Revolution. On the other side, the publishing of a few poems from this cycle in a "calendar in 1843, provoked many critics. In great salons they were called cottage poems,"⁷⁵ the poems being obviously contaminated by the low social prestige of the inspirational source.

The question to be asked is: why was Vasile Alecsandri publishing folk literature? And obviously, why was he using it as inspiration for his poetry? The answer can be found in his texts. First, we remember the fragment in the letter to Ubcini, quoted above, that the folk creation has the merit to demonstrate the Latinity of Romanians, and it is an instrument in the fight for a non-Slavic and illustrious origin. Here we are in the same paradigm as in Samuil Micu, who in *Short Knowledge of Romanians History*, uses the ethnographic argument to prove Romanians' Latinity⁷⁶. When Alecsandri gathers folk literature, this fact was becoming a known fact. Secondly, let us remember Mihail Kogălniceanu's assertion in *Introduction* for "Literary Dacia" that "our customs are quite picturesque and poetical" enough to be a literary topic with full norm⁷⁷. And Kogălniceanu was the first to stress the aesthetic value of folk poetry⁷⁸. But it is clear that for Vasile Alecsandri folk literature reveals "the character of this people" (1852)⁷⁹, that they are "those expensive gems of the Romanian genius treasure" (1862)⁸⁰ – gems of a priceless beauty and gentleness. In 1868, on this segment, the programme of Literary Dacia did not conquer all the spirits; at least this is what Alecsandri tells with indignation in a letter to Alexandru

⁷⁴ Iacob Negruzzi, *Op. cit.*, pp. 87-88.

⁷⁵ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. VIII: „Corespondență (1834-1860)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1981, p. 256.

⁷⁶ Samuil Micu, *Scurtă cunoștință a istorii românilor*, introducere și îngrijirea ediției de Cornel Cîmpeanu, Ed. Științifică, București, 1963, pp. 82-88.

⁷⁷ Mihail Kogălniceanu, *Introducere [la „Dacia Literară”]*, in Mihail Kogălniceanu, „Opere”, vol. I: „Beletristică, studii literare, culturale și sociale”, Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, București, 1974, p. 223.

⁷⁸ Paul Cornea, *Originile romantismului românesc. Spiritul public, mișcarea ideilor și literatura între 1780-1840*, Ed. Cartea Românească, București, 2008, p. 444.

⁷⁹ Vasile Alecsandri, *Poezia populară*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. III: „Poezii”, Editura pentru Literatură, București, 1966, p. 15.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

Hurmuzachi:” When the hell will we understand that a literature to be truly national literature must take its source from the people’s genius and not from the spoiled word fabrics of Cipariu and Compani!”⁸¹. And in 1868, in the journal of the same Al. Hurmuzachi, Vasile Alecsandri puts another brick to the foundation of the folk literature as basis of the national genius, sending for publication Alecu Russo’s manuscript upon *Folk Poetry*. Russo’s opinions are fully concordant with Alecsandri’s: he thinks too that „Romanianism genius” is not to be found in the creation of elites; he will find it „randomly”, „one day”, in a fair where „suddenly I am in a different world. I see people and clothes that I did not see in towns; I hear a language, harmonious and picturesque and so strange to books jargon. And from the doubt if Romanians are a nation or a modern cosmopolite colony, a kind of French-Italian-Greek Algeria, I start to see the truth”. And the one that leads him on the path of truth is a peasant: „He enters in a leaves hut, takes an instrument that he calls *lăută* and start singing. People surround him and listen to him lovingly, because he plays old ballads!... My eyes open; an entire nationality reveals in the talk, the clothes, the ancient type, in the songs of those people(...) Later the player trying to lead me to ecstasy, starts Miorița ballad”. Finally Russo is convinced by „Romanian nationality, Romanian genius, of the true Romanian literature”⁸².

Russo and Alecsandri are marked by memorable meetings with remarkable narrators such as that „shepherd called Udrea, at the sheepfold on Ceahlău mountain” that reveals Miorița. The scene must be mentioned:”that shepherd played the Romanianshepherds’ alp horn with an extraordinary power that the mountains echoed. He played the flute many shepherd’s songs and especially Doina with such a compassionate expression that would bring tears in the eyes of the listeners. In 1842 in a beautiful summer evening climbing to the sheepfold in Ceahlău, where I have heard Udrea’s Romanian shepherds’ alp horn, I saw one of the most beautiful show of nature, lighted by the rays of sunset; and when the night brought stars in the sky I stayed with Udrea and other shepherds around the fire and listened to the songs till morning.”⁸³. As any modern ethnologist, Vasile Alecsandri has the chance of the wonderful meeting because he searched for it.

⁸¹ Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. IX: „Corespondență (1861-1870)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1982, p. 352.

⁸² Alexandru Russo, *Scrieri*, Institutul de arte Grafice Carol Göbl S-sor I. St. Rasidescu, București, 1908, pp. 192-194.

⁸³ Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. III: „Poezii”, Editura pentru Literatură, București, 1966, p. 76.

We must not imagine that the discovery of folklore is an event of the fifth decade of 19th century: on the contrary, and Paul Cornea bring arguments convincingly: the discovery of the aesthetic value of folklore and its use as object of literary inspiration was delayed precisely for its omnipresence, because it „saturates our entire old culture”⁸⁴. Thus, not not knowing such cultural richness prevents its valorification. Our pashoptists live in an universe impregnated with folklore – Alecsandri rightfully wondered in 1849: ” Which one of us has not been rocked with the *Lullaby* and with stories full of bad characters that chase the Beautiful prince, with one jaw in the sky and the other in the ground? Who was not terrified at the names of ghosts, spirits, old hags, that get out at night from the graves and cellars to scare the bad children?”⁸⁵. And Alecu Russo and Costache Negruzzi and Mihail Kogălniceanu, cannot contradict, we know it from their works. Then, under the circumstances when folklore – with goods or bads – was there, in the life of everybody, it needed a profound change of mentality to propel it to the first stage of literary life. Or such a change of mentality has as an object, the peasant as an essential part of the national body.

A new idea of nation – its components and the strategic ways of strengthening the national body – led to that re-evaluation of the peasant status and implicitly his creation. Paul Cornea asserted decades ago that the new attitude towards the peasant surpassed the simple compassion for the oppressed being, and coincided with the emergence of romanticism and the appearance of the democratic reflexes in national ideology⁸⁶.

Alecsandri's writing illustrates very well this stage. In his work, as we have seen, the theme of the oppressed peasant is weakly represented and the metamorphosis of the oppressed peasant into the magistral representative of the „people genius” is powerfully marked. Eventually the emergence of folklore in cultural space is but a consequence of the transformations of national ideology from the mid-nineteenth century that supported a new vision upon the peasant.

⁸⁴ Paul Cornea, *Originile romantismului românesc. Spiritul public, mișcarea ideilor și literatura între 1780-1840*, Ed. Cartea Românească, București, 2008, p. 440.

⁸⁵ Vasile Alecsandri, *Românii și poezia lor*, in Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. IV: „Proză”, Editura Minerva, București, 1974, p. 109.

⁸⁶ Paul Cornea, *Originile romantismului românesc. Spiritul public, mișcarea ideilor și literatura între 1780-1840*, Ed. Cartea Românească, București, 2008, p. 440.

The good peasant

The question still remains for the present research: what kind of characters are Vasile Alecsandri's peasants? Do their qualities shadow their faults? As we expect from the poet, as a fine observer of people and things, is the big picture of the peasant a kaleidoscope of micro-images, some negative some positive? The negative we highlighted above. Now we will talk about the positive ones.

Peasants in Mircești are like all people: some times sinners that mock at the church fire; later transforming into „good men” that help the boyar by saving his assets from the flood: “these people work with all their heart to salvation of the goods and so dismiss the rumors spread all over Europe upon the state of morality of our people”(1888)⁸⁷. Peasants in their simplicity know that the simple village church is one thing and the assets of the boyar who helps you make a living is another. Despite the mentioned conflicts with the peasants in Pătrășcani, it appears that the image of the boyar Vasile Alecsandri is positive to the peasants on his estates. At the beginning of the 20th century researches of linguistics and ethnography show this image. Sixteen years after the poet's death Mihai Lungu frames him in the category of boyar loved by peasants, „good boyars”: „we didn't have boyar as good as him nor will we”⁸⁸. Mihai Iacob Trifaș, eighty years old (in 1906) thinks also that he „was a good boyar, master Alisăndri was good. He called us in his yard and watched us. He was an honest boyar, nice. He did not beat anyone, he talked to everybody”⁸⁹.

One of the qualities much appreciated by peasant is the caring of the boyar towards his workers, and here Vasile Alecsandri excelled: „He was compassionate. He sent brandy in the field to his workers. And when it was hot he told people to go in the shadow till the weather is good to work again”⁹⁰. We are so far from Dr. Lupu's descriptions upon the food of the peasant working to a landowner!⁹¹ From the few testimonies of the peasants it looks like Vasile Alecsandri was the ideal type of Moldavian boyar, who administered alone his estates, with a benevolent attitude towards peasants. It is that perfect symbiosis, always described and almost never found, between the patriarchal landowner and the diligent and grateful peasant.

⁸⁷ V. Alecsandri, *Scrisori, însemnări*, Editura pentru Literatură, București, 1964, p. 24.

⁸⁸ I.-A. Candrea, *Ov. Densusianu*, Th. D. Sperantia, *Op. cit.*, p. 475.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 479.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 275.

⁹¹ Constantin Bărbulescu, *Op. cit.*, p. 143.

It is certain that after 1860 Vasile Alecsandri started to appreciate more than ever the rural life; he started to understand profoundly Romania's modernity so drowned and blurred by that huge rural mass that is its demographic, economic basis but also an essential spiritual resource. In a letter to Pantazi Ghica, he leaves us the impression that he understood everything: "If you would have the time to live for a whole summer the life in the countryside. Getting out suddenly from the noise of Bucharest, you would be surprised by the feeble echoes the noises of this city leave beyond its borders. There a multitude of dwarf cyclops think they make such noise with their political little hammers, still all their noise is suppressed by the simple rocking of an empty wagon crossing the fields. Here is the truly truth upon the country (1866)⁹². Until today historians have not reached Vasile Alecsandri's wisdom.

Despite this sincere adaptation to rural life and the loving declaration to „our fields” and for the „patriarchal simplicity of our peasants” that he prefers a million times to Paris (1867)⁹³ he accepted in 1885 I. C. Brătianu's offer to be the chief of Romanian legation in France and spent his last years of his life in Paris.

Anyhow, we have from Alecsandri, one of the most beautiful pages in 19th century literature dedicated to the peasant, it is true in his quality of Romanian:

„I am very fond of the Romanian and I know to cherish the qualities nature endowed him. I love to watch and listen to him, because he is simple and beautiful, because he is clean, wise, merry and poetic in his speech. I like his patriarchal customs, his fantastic beliefs, his old dances, his costume that in Rome can be seen on Traian's column, his pathetic songs and especially his harmonious poems! I have great hopes for this people whose goodness is printed in many proverbs, some wiser than others; whose imagining is painted in its poetical stories and brilliant like the oriental ones; whose satirical spirit proves in many anecdotes upon the nations it was related to; whose good and giving heart show itself in the hospitality inherited from its ancestors; whose genius brights so vivid in its poetry done honoring the great deeds” (1849)⁹⁴.

⁹² Vasile Alecsandri, *Opere*, vol. IX: „Corespondență (1861-1870)”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1982, p. 267.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, p. 287.

⁹⁴ Vasile Alecsandri, *Românii și poezia lor*, în Vasile Alecsandri, „Opere”, vol. IV: „Proză”, text ales și stabilit, note și variante de Georgeta Rădulescu-Dulgheru, Editura Minerva, București, 1974, pp. 108-109.

Who would have thought that after such true *ode dedicated to Romanian peasant* in three decades the same peasant could transform in the degenerate of dr. C. I. Istrati?⁹⁵ Who could imagine that C.I. Istrati and Vasile Alecsandri are contemporary, even from intellectually and socially different generations?

⁹⁵ Constantin Bărbulescu, *Op. cit.*, pp. 218-277.