

FICTION, HISTORICIZATION, AND THE FOLKLORIC AUTOCHTONIZATION OF A LITERARY CHARACTER

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ABSTRACT

As one of the most dynamic contemporary phenomenon, cultural and environmental tourism is shaped at the articulation of space, narratives and heritage, all joined in indigenous brands. The article focuses on a case of folklorization of a novel feminine character, namely Vitoria Lipan, famous in Romanian national literature. Settled in a real topography, the novel is augmented by oral narratives, artifacts and toponyms, which lead to Vitoria Lipan's appropriation as a local legendary figure. In searching of her missing husband, she follows an itinerary whose referential is rooted both in literature and in the concrete environment. Consequently, Vitoria Lipan is assigned as source of local prestige that qualify the region as a touristic destination. The goal of the article is to identify the mechanisms involved in this process.

Keywords: literary fiction and oral legends, local memory, space, literary tourism.

In the summer of 2014, while conducting fieldwork in a Western Carpathian area, the Stânișoarei Mountains, Romania, I was interested in the issue of creating and transmitting memory through narratives, social and ritual practices, artifacts, itineraries associated to the process of shaping the real and imaginary local landscapes. One of my questions concerning topography and toponyms, spontaneously (and surprisingly for me at that moment) triggered an interesting dialogue between my two interlocutors, T.S.¹, French language teacher, and P.A.², arts teacher at local gymnasium. We were in Broșteni village, Neamț county:

[L.J.I.: Do you know if Bâta Nedeei peak is close to the former border between Moldavia and Austria-Hungarian Empire?]

T.S.: *Yes. In older times, they straddled horses over ice bridges or went alongside the rivers. There weren't any road in those times. Only over Păltiniș.*

P.A. [addressing T.S]: *It's not exactly like that. At the moment when Vitoria Lipan left Măgura Tarcăului, together with Gheorghiiță, they thought like that: if they would travel by sleigh... it was early spring and the snow might melt soon. If they took the carriage, they couldn't travel as long as the snow were still covering the earth. So they took their horses. And after they entered the Dornelor Basine and found out that Nechifor bought sheeps, sold [sheeps] and so on, there is described the*

¹ Male, 60 years old.

² Female, 58 years old.

*other route. Because they reach Suha and Sabaşa following the shepherds' route. They don't walk over here anymore! They go on the other side. They cross over the mountain, the one you asked about. You said "nedeea". But its name is The Long Mountain, as mr. professor T.S. said"*³.

Probably the name Vitoria Lipan doesn't mean anything special for the foreign readers of this article. But for any Romanian who studied Mihail Sadoveanu's novel *Baltagul* (The Hatchet⁴) in high school, and who also might have seen the movie with the same name, Vitoria Lipan has the resonance of a strong literary character, an emblematic woman who made a journey in order to find out why his husband (Nechifor), a transhumant shepherd, didn't arrive at home early in the spring. Together with her son, Gheorghită, and the dog Ursu, Vitoria Lipan, follows his husband's steps and finally finds out that he was murdered by his envious comrades. Vitoria and Gheorghită also found the remains of Nechifor. With abilities of a fine psychologist and detective, she urged the killers to confess where and how they committed the crime. In the end, the lay justice was re-established. Vitoria organized the funeral rituals on behalf of her husband, hence the sacred laws were, at their turn, observed. The stake of these ceremonies is of great importance because, according to Romanian tradition, the deceased has to undertake a journey to the world beyond and the fulfillment of this mythical journey depends on the proper observance of funeral rituals: otherwise the deceased won't be integrated into the realm of dead, the soul remains restless and might turn to a revenant.

Vitoria Lipan is one of the avatars of the archetypal woman (mother, wife, sister) in searching for her missing son/daughter, husband, brother.

Due to the fact that the novel displaces elements of real topography and toponyms to the fictional register, the dialogue quoted above didn't represent the single occasion I had to notice that events and characters of the novel spontaneously occur in the local people discourses. Here are only two examples: speaking about rafts, MD mentioned that:

*They carried the rafts to the Siret river, to the Danube river, as well. Through Sabaşa, the river which is mentioned in the novel... Have you seen Vitoria Lipan's route.*⁵

³ Here is the Romanian original:

T Ş: *Mergeai cu cai sau pe poduri de gheaţă. Sau pe marginea pârâului. Nu era drum atuncea. Drum era numai peste Păltiniş.*

P A: *În momentul în care Victoria Lipan o plecat din Măgura Tarcăului cu Gheorghită, ei s-au gândit așa: dacă-și iau sania..., era spre primăvară și risca să se dezghețe. Dacă își luau căruța, nu puteau să circule cât era zăpadă încă. Și după ce o ajuns în Bazinul Dornelor și-o aflat că Nechifor cumpăraseră oi, vânduse și așa mai departe, este prezentat traseul celălalt. Pentru că ei ajung la Suha și la Sabaşa, pe drumul oierilor! Nu mai merg pe aici! Merg pe partea cealaltă. Trec peste muntele lor, de care ați zis dumneavoastră. Dumneavoastră ați zis "nedea". Dar este Muntele Lung care, așa cum a zis domnul profesor T. Ş. este un fel de Muntele Găina al zonei.*

T Ş: *Nu Muntele Lung! Chiar Bâtca Nedeei.*

P A: *Bâtca Nedeei.*

⁴ The novel, which was firstly published in 1930, has been translated in 21 languages.

⁵ Female, 70 years old, Borca, Neamţ County.

This church has been made in the times of king Carol the First (...). In the same period he made with Italians workers the paved road that you can see even today and that leads to Obcinele Stânișoarei, where the Italians' Cross, which later was mentioned by Sadoveanu in the novel „Baltagul”, has been settled (...). Vitoria Lipan passed by there⁶.

There are many voyages covering one and the same space, depending not only on the topography and its maps, but also on who and why and when go through the roads. Despite its apparently fixed route, any journey displayed in a real space – in the case discussed here, the Stanisoara Mountains – has a fluid and multileveled character, the fictional itinerary followed by Vitoria Lipas is the unique invariable element within a net of roads that extend over different ontological registers – literary and extra-literary, real and mythic – which interfere.

Part of the process of shaping local prestige and of turning the area in a literary touristic destination⁷, there is to mention that a map of Vitoria Lipan's route is easily accessible on the internet⁸. Resting on the novel's plot, this first level of imagining the space and its landmarks predisposes it to narrativization in terms of “*here* is the place where a certain event (described in the book) took place”, a process that assigned to the literary fiction the role of toponymic almost legendary explanation.

Residents of the region read this map with different eyes than foreign travelers. The intersections of the routes inside the book with those outside it, is doubled by the process of creating oral and topographic completions to the written text. They both predispose to setting the fictional narrative within the real geographical frames, which lead to local contextualization and materialization of the livresque structure: at the interferences between orality and literacy, the literary text gets a topographic component deeply involved in the process of creating oral *versions* of it. In these regards, my interest here goes to the exploration of the spatial dimension of Vitoria Lipan's narrative file.

VITORIA LIPAN'S AUTOCHTONIZATION AND AUTHENTICATION AS A REAL LOCAL FIGURE

Some of the coordinates on which this process is articulated might be identified such as:

1. The concrete itinerary and toponymic elements, together with the vivification of the fictional road by traveling on the real road at its turn marked by artifacts that lead to events described in the novel, are involved in the process of putting the fictional journey within the frames of the genuine context: Vitoria

⁶ Here is Romanian original: *Și biserica actuală îi făcută în timpul lui Carol I (...). Și atunci a făcut și un drum pietruit, l-a făcut cu italieni, se vede și acuma; și duce la Obcinele Stânișoarei, unde este Crucea Talienilor, care-i amintită mai târziu de Sadoveanu în Baltagul. Vitoria Lipan a trecut pe acolo.* N.C., male, 62 years old, Borca, Neamț County.

⁷ It is to mention that each year local schools organize excursion called *In the wake of Vitoria Lipan*. Similar trips, which re-iterate her path are proposed to tourists.

⁸ With a simple Google search we can find ten sites providing the map. Here is one of them: <https://www.google.ro/search?q=drumul+vitoriei+lipan+pe+harta+romaniei>.

Lipan's wander turns relevant for local topography. Speaking about the names of places in legends, Terry Gunnell asserted that "Over and above the way in which they serve as a means of making legends sound genuine, immediate and relevant to their local listeners, place names in legends also function locally as a form of hidden language or symbol, presenting associations which are bound to remain somewhat alien to later readers who are unaware of the living, implicit repertoire of the local landscape that surrounded the performance. Like the storytellers, all place names mentioned in a local legend storytelling session come accompanied by their own baggage of associations that need no explanation for the insider"⁹.

If for other readers of the novel all geographical names mentioned in the text don't mentally activate any allusion to *real* spatial indicators, for the local ones, who might have their own memories attached to those places, topographic and affective correspondences are evoked and, consequently, the intrinsic and imaginary dimension of the book is augmented. In this regard, it is not meaningless that, even if the very spot where Vitoria Lipan found the bones of Nechifor thrown by his murderers in a ravine (the end of the 12th chapter) is not explicitly named in the novel, indigenous population, based on deeply expertise of the zone and on its comparison with the novel's plot, *recognize* it: "Were the corpse of Nechifor Lipas was supposedly found, there is a bridge named *At Jovani*", on the same Italians' Road where Vitoria walked. We can identify here a negotiation of authority over both real and fictional territory between the inhabitants (who concretely knows the ground) and the other receivers of the novel (who can only imagine the *reality* that is not known empirically), and, not least, with the auctorial prestige. By means of supplementary localization of the literary text, the inevitable *blind spots* of the fictional space are brought to the light and the discontinuous space turns to continuity.

More than that, near the bridge assigned as the murder spot, at the edge of the forest, there was erected¹⁰ a cross road with the name of Nechifor Lipan written on a red board¹¹, as if a *real* man died there, even if the years of birth and death aren't mentioned, as used in the case of cenotaphs. Through this artifact, which embedded the memory of a fictional episode and transfers it to a historical register, Giovanni's bridge and the cross qualified themselves as *lieux de mémoire* coined by Pierre Nora as a "significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community"¹².

2. The pre-existence, in the repertoire of local (and, I might say, even universal) memories, of a narrative pattern that iterates similar events as the one in the novel, creates a certain familiarity with the novelistic plot and make the imagined history plausible. Either in real or in fictional realities Nechifor Lipan

⁹ Gunnell, 2006: 17.

¹⁰ The source of the initiative of marking the spot with a cross remains obscure to me.

¹¹ An image of this fabricated cenotaph can be seen here: <https://mesagerulneamt.ro/2019/09/turism-altfel-in-neamt-cabana-stegioara-locul-unde-poti-intelegespiritul-vitoriei-lipan>.

¹² Nora 1996: XVII.

wasn't the single shepherd murdered by his invidious comrades, and Vitoria Lipan was not the single woman looking for her missing husband. Here is the story of another terrible situation that also happened in transhumant shepherds' milieu and Carpathian mountainous environment, as I recorded in 2010: "A young boy from Polovragi was coming [over the mountain] from Poiana Sibiului. After years of hardworking, he acquired a beautiful horse and around forty, fifty sheep. And, at the top of the mountain, in Turcinu, two men from Polovragi, his previous comrades, stood in his way, killed him and killed his horse and sheep. His family was waiting for him, and then they set out in search of him. The murderers couldn't die before confessing their crime"¹³.

For Romanian audience, familiarized with the famous folk ballad *Miorița* (*The Lamb*), telling the story of a shepherd murdered by his comrades and searched by his wandering mother, the affective empathy towards stories like the one of Nechifor Lipan or of the young boy from Polovragi, is enriched. *Miorița* is taught at school as an emblem of national identity, and it actually inspired the novel *The Hatchet*, whose *motto* is a ballad's line.

3. The novel contains sequences that expose ample ritual scenarios taken from the local folk tradition (e.g. a baptism ceremony, a wedding ceremony and, not least, Nechifor's funerals¹⁴), thus the fiction's veracity is augmented.

On the same note, Vitoria Lipan's preparations for the journey are both practical and ritual, the second component being in consonance with a repertoire of vernacular religious practices well attested around the country and in the area assigned to the novel plot, too. In other words, Vitoria behaves like any woman whose journey is placed under divine auspices: before departing, she firstly goes to the priest, then prays to Mother of God, observes black fast on twelve Friday with the hope that her wish for Nechifor returning home will be fulfilled, goes to a local monastery and prays again and, finally, she confesses and get the priest's blessing.

In extra-fictional context, Vitoria's preparations might work as an exemplar model for travelers who follow her route and, in this respect, reading the novel (at least in order to establish the itinerary) should be included among their preparations for the journey.

4. The screening of *The Hatchet* (produced in 1969¹⁵) picturizes the novel and literally made visible on the screen these rituals, together with landscapes, local apparel, architecture, ethnographic properties, etc., which re-create the profile of the traditional local rural life. Their reconstitution are based on the novel descriptions and, to a much greater extent, on data provided by ethnological literature¹⁶ re-interpreted in concordance with the film's director view over the novel and over the genuine reality, as well. We deal with a process of creating a

¹³ Personal field recording; V.F., male, 64 years old, former shepherd; Baia de Fier, Gorj county, 18 July 2010.

¹⁴ As an auctorial strategy, all three major passages that ritually mark human life are described in the novel.

¹⁵ Romanian-Italian coproduction directed by Mircea Mureșan.

¹⁶ The credit of the movie makes no references to an ethnologist consultant.

“second life”¹⁷ of the rituals which, thus reshaped, re-entered the collective memory and influenced it.

In addition to the novel, the movie inserts a sequence in which a ritual ceremonial song is performed as part of the funeral scenery. It is not a lamentation, but a structure called *verș* in Romanian terminology, whose lyrics versified the life story of the deceased. According to the tradition, it is interpreted during the burial ceremonies (so the movie changed the consecrated time coordinates) and it is especially attested in Transylvania and (to a lesser extent) in North Moldavia. But, despite its realistic component, *The Hatchet* is not an ethnographic documentary, hence the *verș*'s performance construction and its inclusion in the movie obeyed other reasons than to respect genuine contexts, and has consequences in terms of veracity: telling (once again) the story of Nechifor's death and rewording Vitoria's quest, it mentions the toponim landmarks of her route. Miming a funeral ritual, this rehearsal works as an oral memory and hence potentiates the integration of the livresque narrative and its characters within the local pre-existent structures of thinking and behavior. I agree with Călin Stănculescu's assertion: “If Sadoveanu [the novelist] demystified the ballad [The Lamb], then Mircea Mureșan chose the right way, that is the realism that, even if it is not necessarily ethnographic, it is still close to the evoked customs and the places in order to convincingly translate a novel, too much speculated in a ritual direction”¹⁸.

Step by step, being herself legendized, hence credited as an exemplary local woman, from a written fiction Vitoria Lipan turns to a character of oral toponymic legends.

HISTORY AND NARRATIVE SPACE

The above described mechanisms through which Vitoria Lipan's quest is validated as a real journey have in common the fact that the literary fiction is approached and internalized in the same frames as a local legend is understood, hence the story is ascribed as true (in concordance with the convention of this folk narrative genre). During subsequent oral creation and transmission operations, it is also subjected and exposed to transformations in terms of indigenization, localization and different strategies that increase and prove its veracity. Once engaged in the process of folkloric variation, the written story enters the corpus of the stories telling Vitoria Lipan quest in search of her husband. It becomes one of its versions, and not vice-versa. In other words, it seems to be assumed by local people as if in the beginning there was Vitoria Lipan's journey, and not *The Hatchet* novel. In this regard, we won't speak about a simple localization of a bookish narrative, but about a specific subcategory of toponymic legends whose meanings claim the gesture of traveling in order to be disclosed: they are the

¹⁷ The concept of ‘second life’ of folklore was launched by Lauri Honko; ‘first life’ refers to a folklore item in its genuine context, while ‘second life’ is defined as “recycling of material in an environment that differs from its original cultural context” after having been documented and preserved in archives (Honko, 2013: 48).

¹⁸ Stănculescu, 2011: 118.

legends that “need to be viewed first and foremost in terms of immediate spatial environment that produced and maintained them”¹⁹.

On the other hand, an oral narrative is not only built from words, but also from gestures, images, flavors, colors, etc., directly known by the story-teller and by his/her audiences, mutually involved in interactive communication that has to happen in a precise spatial frame defined by John Miles Foley as performance arena. It “designates the place where the event of performance takes place, where words are invested with their special power. I favor this spatial metaphor, together with its geographical and ritualistic overtones, because it implies a recurrent forum dedicated to a specific kind of activity, a defined and defining site in which enactment can occur again and again without devolution into a repetitive, solely chronological series (...). For events that are not repeated but re-created, the performance arena describes the place one goes to perform them and the place the audience goes to experience them”²⁰. As regards the very case discussed in this article, *telling* the global, entire story of Vitoria Lipan’s quest, requires both a performance arena that covers the space of the journey and a corporal experience that makes the journey possible.

Listening to a narrative that links different toponymic points, or listening to any local history that can be topographically contextualized, activate mental associations between the places mentioned in the narrative and other places that are part of the same landscape, but subjects for distinct stories. It is relevant that, speaking about The Italians’ Road as the road followed by Vitoria Lipan, the two interlocutors quoted at the very beginning of the article, brought in attention new landmarks as part of local memory shared by indigenous inhabitants, but not by the strangers: *to know* all their names and past works as a sign of appurtenance to local community and to its symbolic territory.

P.A. *And when they arrived near Goia* [a peak in the Sabaşa Valley that entered Vitoria’s itinerary]... [addressing to T.Ş.] *By the way of Goia: last summer I was there with the pupils and marked the touristic route.*

T.Ş. *You have been to....*

P.A. *To the runic stones! Yes.*

T.Ş. *And?*

P.A. *The stones are still there. People say that there was someone who put dynamite under the bigger stone and broke it in three parts. But the written fragments still exist [...].*

T.Ş. *That’s what they said, indeed. And under the Italians’ Cross, too. This is why it was broken down. But when Vitoria was there, the original, stone cross was still standing.*

[L.J.I. *How do indigeous people name these stones?*]

P.A. *The written stones. And the one who dynamited them thought that there are some treasures under them.*

T.Ş. *Well, this is what people said, that there is a treasure from the time of Petru Rareş²¹ under them.*

P.A. *There are similar symbols and runic stones in Şaru Dornei, too.*

¹⁹ Gunnell, 2006: 16.

²⁰ Foley, 1995: 47.

²¹ Petru Rareş was the prince of Moldavia between 1527-1538, 1541-1546.

The written stones aren't mentioned in the novel, but when Vitoria Lipan walked through Sabaşa Valley, close to Goia peak, she possibly might have seen them, too. Anyhow, such associations arose in the mind of indigenous people, as my two interlocutors are. In this way, she is much more perceived as being *one of them*, one of the inhabitants who share common knowledge over space and movement.

More than a landscape with its topographic unicity, space is defined by its named places "linked by paths, movements and narratives"²², which, at their turn, confer unicity to it.

For a traveler who concretely follows The Italian's Road, alone or guided by a local storyteller, fragments from Vitoria Lipan's fictional journey will be put together with other events that happened on the same route.

The performance arena of the journey's *full story* becomes an expanded, fluid, dynamic space, in the most concrete sense of the word, because telling the story gets an additional kinetic component, namely moving on the road. The road itself incorporates all the stories related to it, stories which are activated on certain strong spots, whose visible or invisible, individual and collective, verbal or material marks encapsulate the time-space junction in definite places and in the net that interconnects the places, as well. In this way, either the cross erected in the memory of the fictional Nechifor Lipan, or the other artifacts that mark up the Italian Road may be understood in similar terms as Alan Bensa pointed: "Pour que le lieu garde vraiment trace du passé, il doit faire la liaison entre une matière immémoriale et la localité singulière à laquelle il est identifié"²³.

In the end, the story of Vitoria Lipan, the woman who, once, passed by *here*, became a fragment of local history, thus entered to process of constructing local identity whose prestige is granted by the national popularity of the novel.

CONCLUSION

Vitoria Lipan's fictional quest, along with its oral versions, are intertextually integrated within a discourse that combine verbal, gestural, and kinetic expressions, memories and legends, which all together create the entire, cumulative, narrative of the journey, a story whose end won't be drawn as long as there will be people following the route, hence attaching their own memories to it.

As a "critical element", the entire narrative get mythical values and is instrumentalized in shaping and branding the local profile of the region as a literary touristic destination, which differentiate it from the others²⁴ not only because the plot of the novel is settled here, and because *The Hatchet* is assigned as mirroring a "coherent facet" and "a cultural image of a place"²⁵, but also because of its predisposition to folklorization. It is not meaningless that nowadays the Italian's Road is also named the Vitoria Lipan's Road.

²² Tilley, 1994: 34.

²³ Bensa, 2001: 4.

²⁴ J.R. Pérez-Aranda, M. Guerreiro, J. Men des, 2015: 67.

²⁵ Kuswarini, Masdiana, Fierenziana, Hasyim, 2022.

The article dealt with a particular case, but for sure it is not the unique example of appropriation national literature as part of local heritage, and my efforts went to identify how space and oral legends are involved in this process.

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