



The Myths of Romanian Spirituality

By Mircea Eliade

In any culture there is always a central myth that is revealed and present in all its great creations. The spiritual life of the Romanians has been dominated by two myths, which express with accomplished spontaneity their spiritual vision of the universe and the existential value. The first one is the legend of *Master Manole*, who, according to the tradition, raised the superb cathedral at Curtea-de-Arges. According to the legend, everything Manole and his skilled workers built during the day would disappear during the night. In order to stand, the edifice needed to have a soul, and this could only be achieved by sacrificing a human being. When Manole and his builders understood the cause of the caducity of their work, they decided to build alive the first person who would approach the place where they were working. The next day, early in the morning, Manole caught glimpse of his wife who was carrying their infant **in her body** and was hurrying to bring him some food. Then Manole prayed God to start a storm so that his wife should take the back track. But the torrential rain God started listening to his prayer could not turn the foredoomed wife from her way. And so Master Manole himself was forced to build his wife and son in, in order to keep his oath and be able to built up that magnificent church, which from that moment onwards did not collapse any more.

This legend is not solely a creation of the Romanian people. It can be found in all the countries of Southeast Europe. Essentially, the legend is the mythical and epic formula of one of the most popular rituals in the world, namely the "construction rituals", which are based on the belief that, in order to last, any construction has to be "animated" through the immolation of a being, whether a human being or an animal. Nevertheless, the legend of Master Manole is, according to folklorists, the most complete, the most beautiful and the richest in spiritual significances. Here the folk poetic inspiration has created a masterly work that may be compared with the most beautiful creations of world folk poetry. What counts is the fact that the Romanians have chosen this mythical theme and have given it a matchless artistic and moral expression. And they have chosen it because the Romanian soul identifies itself in the myth of the supreme sacrifice, which makes a work made by man's hands, whether a cathedral, a homeland or a hut, enduring. They have sung in numberless lines the sacrifice of Master Manole, because they knew that in this way they were narrating their own historical life, their permanent sacrifice. The Romanians' option for this particular legend is significant in itself. They would not have used their entire poetic genius and all spiritual resources to remake a myth if this had not revealed the reverberation the myth had in the collective consciousness.

But even more than in the legend of Master Manole, the Romanians identify themselves in a splendid folk poem called *Miorita* (The Ewe Lamb), that can be found everywhere in numberless variants. It is called a "folk poem" but, as happens with all great creations of the genius of a people, it takes affinity with religion, morals and



methaphysics. It is the simple and sincere *story* of a shepherd who, though warned by an ewe lamb against the imminent danger of being killed by two of his companions, who were envying him for his sheep, does not run away but accepts death. This serene attitude in front of death, this way of seeing death as a mystical marriage to the Whole has acquired matchless accents in *Miorița*. We are faced with an original vision of life and death - the latter being seen as a bride promised to the entire world - that is expressed in an excellent lyrical form rather than philosophical terms.

A culture, like an individual, is revealed to us not only through the way it approaches life, but also through its attitude towards death. The value attributed to death has considerable importance for the understanding of a culture or an individual.

Miorița is one of the folk creations that helps one best understand the attitude of the Romanian soul in front of death. This is not seen as a vanishing in nothingness, nor as larval pseudo-existence in the underground hell and even less so as a tormenting existence between the sky and the earth; instead, it is seen as a mystical marriage by which man is reintegrated in nature. Death is not a diminution of the human being; on the contrary, it is an increase, from the methaphysical point of view, of course. Man should not run away from death and even less so should he lament upon its arrival; death is a fact of cosmic size that has to be accepted with equanimity and even with joy, because due to it the individual frees himself from his limits. This is not a lyrical species of pantheism, although nature participates in this act of reintegration, because nature is not identified with God, but is seen as a creation of God. Through death the soul is reintegrated in the big cosmic family, which is, as a whole, the work of the Creator.

This vision of death is enhanced and rounded off by many other Romanian folk creations. The same conception is present in the poems of Mihai Eminescu, one of the greatest writers of the 19th century. It is also present in the entire folklore of the Romanian people, as well as in its funeral rites. It is perhaps a conception inherited from its Geto-Dacian ancestors, or perhaps an original approach of Christianity which, let us not forget, has attributed a positive value to death. Fact is that the Romanians attribute to death a significance in harmony with their Christian conception about existence, which, as we have seen, is based on the belief in a cosmic order established by God and the conviction that, throughout centuries, good will triumph over evil.

These two myths - that of *Master Manole* and that of *Miorița* - are the more so interesting as, generally, the Romanians cannot be considered as "mystical". They are a religious people, but also a humane, natural, vigorous and optimistic people that rejects the frenzy and exaltation implied by the idea of "mysticism". Common sense is a dominant form of its spiritual life.