

## ***The Romanian Ethnological Terminology in the Works of B. P. Hasdeu***

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### **Abstract**

Hasdeu's polyvalent contribution to the bases of Romanian ethnology is decisive as he has set up the national ethnological tradition and the reference point for all the following ethnological contributions. A list of the ethnological terms used in Hasdeu's works reflects at the same time the pioneering ways of the founder of the Romanian ethnology (he doubles terms or uses terminological variants for the same object, sometimes he fails to clarify the meaning of some concepts that he introduces) and his exceptional erudition proved by the impressive number of data that he assimilates and analyses in order to build original theories. Hasdeu uses and imposes a series of specialized terms such as *variant, type, prototype, archetype* (with subdivisions like *subtype, subvariant, subarchetype*), trying to define and refine the object that was called *popular literature* or *folklore* in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Keywords:** *B.P. Hasdeu, Ethnology, Terminology, Folklore, Philology, Popular Literature.*

Hasdeu's interest in the Romanian folk culture is partly explained by the fatherly influence of Alexandru Hîjdeu who involved his son in accomplishing great projects of restoring the history of the old Romanian nobility as the family of the future scholar Hasdeu had noble origins and the spirit of the boyars *forced to live among foreigners along many generations and to use the cult of the ancestors as a last shield against national uprooting* [Oprişan 1990:9]. *Responsive to the suggestions regarding folk*

creation that he found in the manuscripts of his father and grandfather [Oprișan 1990:107], B.P. Hasdeu collected folk texts as a teenager (1851-1852) from the village Zamcioji beside the Nistru river, a village close to the estate of the boyar Vasile Cristea, Hasdeu's host during a school holiday. The fragments *Zeița Mumă* (*The Mother Goddess*) and *Zeița Dochia și babele de piatră* (*The Goddess Dochia and the stone old women*), written in the years 1851-1853 [Oprișan 1990:110] are Hasdeu's first folkloristic attempts, anticipating his further ideas about the Dacian element in the Romanian culture. These ideas would lead to polemics with the adepts of the theory regarding the pure Roman origin of the Romanian people.

At the end of his scientific activity, Hasdeu's polyvalent contribution to the bases of Romanian ethnology proved decisive. He set up the ethnological tradition and the reference point for all the following ethnological contributions. Hasdeu supported the legitimacy of the interest in the folk literature, arts and customs (or, in his terms: *language, aesthetics* and *ethics*) in the community of humanities, at the University, Academy and in the written media, stressing mainly the clarifications that folklore studies bring to the sciences of linguistics and history but also to the literary comparative studies and the classical philology. Hasdeu was concerned with the scientific status of the *Comparative philology*, seen as the philological study of the folk culture and he circumscribed the field, by defining the object and methods of Comparative philology, by giving a special attention to the terminological distinctions and nuances and by adjusting the international ethnological language of the time (well known to him) to fit Romanian.

A list of the ethnological terms used in Hasdeu's works reflects at the same time the pioneering ways of the founder of the Romanian ethnology (he doubles terms or uses terminological variants for the same object, sometimes he fails to clarify the meaning of some concepts that he introduces) and his exceptional erudition proved by the impressive number of data that he assimilates and analyses in order to build original theories. Hasdeu launches scientific hypotheses, aware of the fact that ethnology (that he regarded as a science of the origins) is by its very nature a field of hypotheses more than one of demonstrations. The manner he approaches the object of research, appealing to a self-made combination of analysis and intuition, creates a model of interpretation that is obvious in the works of the most important representatives of the ethnological school of Bucharest: Ovid Densusianu, Dumitru Caracostea, Ovidiu Bârlea. Like their master in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these scholars have to face the lack of documents (in the primary sense of "written act" assigned to "document") within the

predominantly oral universe of folk culture. Hasdeu would write in 1867: *Vast and confuse like any primordial entity, folk literature cannot be dissected into such special and determined branches as the classes and subclasses of an academic literature are. On the contrary, one of the most distinctive and universal marks of true folk literature is the mixture of content and form, poetry amalgamated with prose, history blended with fable, the most transcendent ideal mingling with the most trivial reality, the empirical elements of all sciences. Finally, folk literature is a chaotic encyclopedia that enables a philosopher observer to assess what a nation knows and believes* [Hasdeu 1979 (1867): 26]. The scholar varies sometimes the phrase “popular literature”, using also “literature of the folk” (*literatură poporană*) [1872 – INTRODUCERE (INTRODUCTION) to P. Ispirescu, *Legende și basmele românilor. Ghicitori și proverbur* (*Legends and Fairy Tales of Romanians. Riddles and Proverbs*), and enriches later the meaning of *popular literature* by explaining the folkloric character of chap books in the study *Ochire asupra cărților poporane* (*A Look into Chap Books*) (in *Cuvente den bătrâni* (*Words of Yore*), tome II. *Cărțile poporane ale românilor în secolul XVI în legătură cu literatura poporană cea nescrisă* (*Chap books of the Romanians in the 16<sup>th</sup> century related to the not-written folk literature*). Comparative philology study, Bucharest, 1879). In the study mentioned above, Hasdeu sets the distinction between not-written and written folk literature, clarifying that the not-written folk literature *is born and lives in a not-written way (...)* *If the written reproduction gets to spread within the folk then it becomes, only in this crystallized form, written folk literature or, more precisely, chap book* [1979:68]. The author has a clear awareness of the difference between *popular* and *folk* (in Romanian: *popular* and *poporan*), adopting the German ethnological terminology of the time. *Folk* means *what belongs to the folk*. *Popular* means *what folk love*. [1979:75]. Later, D. Caracostea tries to update the distinction *popular / folk*, but the term *popular* is finally generally adopted, under French influence, as Ovidiu Bârlea thinks [Bârlea 1974:174].

Hasdeu investigates *popular literature* in his further lectures on ethnopsychology delivered at the University of Bucharest (and printed in the review „Șezătoarea” (“Spinning party”) XXXIII, 1925, no. 7-9, pp. 101-112; no. 10-12, pp. 116-125) and in his *Course in Comparative Philology 1893-1894* (known as it was noted by the student Eugeniu Dinescu). In these later works, he notices that *rudiments of mores and literature can be detected in the folk language* [1979:131]. *The literature and art of a people*, along with its *mores* make the object of

*ethnopsychology* (*Volkerpsychologie*) while *linguistics* deals with *the language of a people* [1979:132]. According to Vico, one forerunner of ethnopsychology, this science investigates *the common nature of all peoples* [1979:134-136] and indeed, ethnology is a science of the genealogy of peoples in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his university lectures, Hasdeu specifies which the components of ethnopsychology are: *popular literature, arts or aesthetics and the customs, all these expressing alike the national thought*. The three components are closely interrelated, as we find both *ethics* and *aesthetics* in literature [1979:141]. Later, Hasdeu would proclaim that *Comparative philology is the natural history of man* [1979:213] and he would exclaim: *Language and literature! Here is the natural history of man as human being!* [1979:214]. When the object of popular literature is discussed, the deep understanding of the nature of the folkloric material is remarkable in Hasdeu's work. For example, we quote his explanation for the mechanism that generates the folkloric canon: *A sample of thought becomes folk art when, by word of mouth, it has modified and balanced itself such as to correspond perfectly to the nature of the folk. That way, a weak piece is not maintained in folk literature; a good one or one that can get better by continuous adjusting is maintained until it can rise to the level of the folk genius. It is the people who take the choice; it is not for comparative philology to make a selection but to refer to folk literature as given* [1979(1876):335-336].

Writing the foreword to the dictionary *Etymologicum Magnum Romaniae* on the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 1885, Hasdeu replaces the term *popular literature* by *folklore*, defined as *the intimate beliefs of the folk, their customs and habits, their moments of grief or joy* and later as *all the forms by which the spirit of one people manifests itself: customs, ideas about themselves and about the others, the not-written literature, thousands of characteristic features with roots in the heart and buds in the speech* [apud Bârlea 1974:173].

Describing the folkloric categories and subcategories – as they are named today – Hasdeu uses and imposes a series of specialized terms such as *variant*, *type*, *prototype*, *archetype* (with subdivisions like *subtype*, *subvariant*, *subarchetype*). Ovidiu Bârlea considers that the term *variant* is firstly used in Hasdeu's work with the meaning conveyed by the Romanian folklorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Hasdeu formulates, *variants* (in Romanian “*varianturi*”; or *variations* in his dictionary article on *fairy tale*) *are, both in folk literature and in linguistics, specimens that differ as form, accidents or secondary points but are identical as far as all the elements of content are*

concerned. Speaking about *type*, the scholar perceives it as a combination of motives, very close to the ethnological meaning of the term (*folkloric sum of variants*) while the *archetype* or *prototype* is a primary form that generates *the circulating variants*. That primary form can be restricted to the national patrimony or it can be universal, as the Finnish School regards it [Bârlea 1974:175-176].

Understanding by *classification* a *methodological facility that approximately represents the nature of a thing*, Hasdeu suggests grouping popular literature into *genres* and *species*. Initially (1867), he detects three *genres* (*poetical, narrative and aphoristic*) only to propose later another classification according to the criterion of the age of the participants in the act of oral performance. He sets out *species* inside each genre and describes them briefly (for example, the *colindă* is *une chanson ambulante* [1979(1892-3):259-260]) or in detail, as it is the case for the *doină* (folk lyric song), *strigătură* (humorous extempore verse chanted usually during a folk dance) or the fairy tale.

*Short as a bursting out feeling, the doină is feeling of any kind: sadness and joy, love and hate, enthusiasm and desperation, peace and war* (1882). *It expresses all the nuances of feeling, beginning with grief and ending with joy* [1979(1892-3):237]. The “*strigătură*” is a piece of improvisation *made up on the spot, without previous thinking and under the impression of dancing*. The improvisation can be of three kinds: 1) total or integral *when the dancer improvises a whole song*; 2) partial, *when the dancer remembers an already known strigătură made up by somebody else and he modifies it so as to adjust well to the situation he wants to stress*; 3) *adapting when the performer adjusts an older piece so well that nobody can deny its originality (...) when he applies it so skillfully that you would think he is a writer fitting a proverb into his work*.

The definition of the *fairy tale* implies the obligatory presence of the *supernatural* on one side (*The supernatural is an essential element of the fairy tale* [1979(1893):156]) and, on the other side, the listeners’ confidence in the truth of the story (to the peasant, the fairy tale *is far from a lie...*[1979(1893):153]), as Hasdeu considers that the content of the fairy tale is generated by dream reality which excludes the equivalence of fairy tale to deluding fiction. The scholar operates refined distinctions between fairy tale (with certified truth value in the beginning) and *basnă* (invention, yarn), suggesting the general term *story* to define folk narratives *with nothing miraculous or supernatural* in their content [1979(1893)155]. At the same time, Hasdeu introduces the term *deceu* (approx: *the why*) = A

*fairy tale meant to give the solution to a problem, close to the riddle by its interrogative form but belonging to the fairy tale class by content, poetics and supernatural elements* [1979(1893):204-209]. The *deceu* can not be equated to the legend; it is more similar to the fairy tale with *numerical riddles*. Although this term has not survived in time, the *deceu* helps Hasdeu to explain the formation of mythology: *When the proper fairy tale and its child, the deceu, reach a significant degree of development within a relatively advanced society, their elements fusion and they are systematized into a complex body called mythology. Mythology contains two unconscious quarters that come directly or indirectly from the proper fairy tale, one conscious quarter determined by the biased nature of the deceu and another conscious quarter resulted out of the later logical work of assembling the system. Because of the unconscious half which eludes the logical control, all mythologies are alike and they are distinct only in the conscious half, that makes them similar to the nature of academic literature* [1979(1893):209].

Comparing Hasdeu's conception about the study of folk culture to the scientific tendencies in the field in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, we find out that the Romanian scholar is affiliated to the positivism with its fascination for biological classifications and he is especially close of the German school that studies folk culture with an accent upon natural languages, aiming at the discovery of the mysterious ancient languages. Hasdeu shares Max Müller's idea that folk narratives develop out of primitive myths and that the *real natural life of the language* is an essential object of study. The relating of folk literature to the academic literature is common in Hasdeu's and Friedrich Diez's works. He takes the term *ethnopsychology* from Steinthal and the distinction *popular/ folk* from Góres. The use of the term *archetype* reminds us of the Finnish School of Julius Krohn, who published his work on the genesis of *Kalevala* in 1884. Hasdeu's concern for documenting national history by use of folk culture data and the questionnaires that he elaborates relate his work to the theories of Giuseppe Pitré and his *Library of folk traditions*. The manner of connecting the study of language and that of folk life brings the Romanian scholar close to the *philological ethnology* of the British anthropologists in the school of Edward Tylor or to J. G. Frazer's *ethnology* that would be part of the linguistic anthropology according to present terminology [Cocchiara (1971)2004:222-322]. Besides Müller, Hasdeu also quotes W. and J. Grimm, Th. Benfey, Mannhardt, Tylor, Veselovski and others. [Datcu 2006:455]. We can sustain that *against the background of his*

*unusually extensive readings at that time, as he had approached all the main branches of humanities, Hasdeu could set the milestones of the Romanian scientific folklore studies, founding thus all the theoretical and methodological principles of the young science* [Bârlea, in Hasdeu 1979:9]. His manner of *studying folklore in close relation to language would be adopted later by Densusianu, setting up a school in Romanian folklore studies* [Datcu 2006:454]. At the same time, Hasdeu's interdisciplinary perspective upon oral tradition is not limited to folk literature only, as the terms he chooses (*folklore, ethnopsychology, folk thought*) demonstrate unambiguously the scientific openness towards the comparative philology as an investigation of language, literature and customs, meant to set out both the relation between peoples and the specificity of each people. It appears obvious that Hasdeu's tentative territory is actually what we name today *ethnology* – the science of folk culture in its complexity.

A critical perspective upon the ethnological terminology in Hasdeu's work enlightens first the validity of his theoretical edifice, its enduring solidity in many fundamental points. Part of the concepts that he has introduced (*folklore, written folk literature, aphoristic genre, initial, median and final formulae* in the fairy tale and others) and has explained in his characteristically inspired style stays relevant to the understanding of the ethnological object. Other concepts which are anachronisms (*ethnopsychology*) or too specific (the *deceu*) are nevertheless illustrative as they reflect the problematic of folk culture investigations along the stage of setting up scientific ethnology. Even the errors of Hasdeu, like the classification of folk categories according to biological criteria, touch actual ethnological issues, such as the interference between text and context that enables the human factor to occupy a place in the taxonomic equation, as folklore creator or receiver. Along time, the gaps in Hasdeu's discourse have born fruit, generating new ethnological terms and hypotheses and those *who want to get initiated into folklore have the duty to study his work attentively, errors and all, as he is the first pillar of the science, the trunk out of which all the branches emerge* [Bârlea in Hasdeu 1979:18]. Beyond his role of founding father of Romanian ethnology, Hasdeu stays for the present day scholars as a model of intellectual mobility, a genuine erudite whose terminological oscillations show him engaged in the battle of capturing meaning into expression while believing passionately that his true mission is to give shape to the holistic science of the beginnings.

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