

# *The Language of Magic*

Edited by Eleonora Cianci and Nicholas Wolf



## IL SEGNO E LE LETTERE

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*Collana del Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture Moderne  
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# “THE DREAM OF THE MOTHER OF GOD” AND ITS ORAL-WRITTEN PERFORMANCES, WITH EXAMPLES FROM EARLY MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN TRADITION

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## ABSTRACT

Coming from the early modern Christian times, *The Dream of the Mother of God* was, and still is, a text with an ambiguous status. As an apocryph, it was discouraged by the official church(es), together with its ritual manipulation for therapeutic, divinatory, apotropaic, and other human purposes that involve supernatural. On the other hand, it was very popular among believers (including clerics), partly for its inner dramatic images and sensitive potential and partly for the very rituals the church condemned it for. Categorized as a charm from an etic point of view and as a prayer from the emic point of view, *The Dream* gets a third dimension once it entered in contemporary magazines' pages and internet circulation, being reshaped in concordance with new conventions and strategies and with postmodern expectations.

*Keywords:* apocrypha; Mother of God; orality-literacy; power of words; Romanian legends; vernacular religiosity.

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In 1897, working on a “history of [what he considered to be] a Russian popular prayer known as *The Dream of the Mother of God*”, the Polish scholar Julian Jaworski from Lemberg (Lvov) asked his colleague, the ethnographer priest Simion Florea Marian, if the text was known among Romanians, too. Jaworski specified that Polish and Russian people believe

that “those who daily say this prayer, or simple keep it written on the paper, will be absolved of any sins and will be rewarded even during this life”<sup>1</sup>. Marian’s answers confirmed Jaworski’s suspicions: *The Dream* was well spread as a spoken prayer, and its written form was kept as a helpful sacred object as well. In 1904, when he edited the anthology *The Legends of the Mother of God: A Folkloristic Study*, Marian mentioned *The Dream*, also suggesting its possible correspondences with another Romanian wide-spread legend known as *Mother of God in Search of Her Son*<sup>2</sup>.

The encyclopedic philologist Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu already compared different (Romanian, Russian, Ruthenian, Georgian, Hungarian, Serbian, Polish, Italian, Portuguese, and Provençal) manuscripts of *The Dream* in 1878. Hasdeu agreed with Vesselovski’s hypothesis concerning the Western origin of this text, which then gained high circulation among southeast European Christians (except the Greeks, who used it relatively late in comparison with other cultures, namely, at the beginning of the twentieth century in printed editions). Almost one hundred years later, W. Ryan considered *The Dream* “probably a cultural import [in the Russian space] from Polish popular Catholicism”<sup>3</sup>, while other scholars assigned direct or indirect Byzantine sources to this text<sup>4</sup>. It is not my purpose here to expose the origin, the history, and the dynamics of *The Dream* during its manuscript circulation among different cultures and languages, but to ethnologically approach its performative potential. Still, in order to do this, there has to be mentioned that the earlier known written version, together with iconographic representations of the Virgin Mary’s prophetic dream, comes from the fourteenth- to fifteenth-century Italian culture<sup>5</sup>. The first-known Romanian manuscript was written (translated? copied?) around 300 years later, in 1772, by a monk<sup>6</sup>. Nowadays, according to Emanuela Timotin, who dedicated three studies to the Romanian versions of this text, including a rich monograph published in 2011, the Romanian Academy Library manuscripts fund stores fifty-four versions of

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<sup>1</sup> Marian 1991, 173.

<sup>2</sup> In this legend, Jesus’s torments and crucifying are revealed to the Mother of God by different characters she meets on her way. In Romanian folklore, the theme of an old mother in search of her son, who, in fact, has already been murdered, also occurs in the *Miorita* epic song (here the son is a young shepherd). See Marian 2003, 110.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan 2005, 121.

<sup>4</sup> For a review of the theories concerning the origins and diffusion of this apocripha, see Timotin 2011, 211-112, 236-238.

<sup>5</sup> Timotin 2016, 247.

<sup>6</sup> Timotin 2011, 218.



*The Dream*, mostly written between the middle of the eighteenth century and the end of the nineteenth century<sup>7</sup>. This number doesn't reflect the real presence of the text among Romanians, considering that many versions, which have been copied within rural milieus before and after the period mentioned above, remained unknown.

In 1883 Moses Gaster published the concentrated study *The Dream of the Mother of God* in which he underlined the existence, in the Romanian language, of a short and a long version, the latest being considered by Gaster a local development, which circulated from the beginning of the eighteenth century. During times of war in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the popularity of *The Dream* dramatically increased; starting with 1846 it was printed in small-size booklets with an extremely high number of copies (Hasdeu counted 300,000 printed pieces). During World War I, the many publishing houses specializing in popular (cheap) books delivered yearly a new edition of *The Dream*<sup>8</sup>, which was very popular among soldiers. Printed editions have been hand-copied in turn. In these editions, entitled *Talisman* or *The Epistole* (Ro. *Epistolii*), *The Dream* was bound with other apocrypha that were in turn deeply involved in devotional popular practices, namely *The Mother of God's Journey to the Hell / The Apocalypse of the Virgin Mary*, *The Legend of the Sunday* (also known as *The Epistle of Jesus Christ / The Epistle Fallen Down from the Heaven*) and, a little bit later, *The Names of Christ*.

The manuscript published by Moshe Gaster was written in 1784. Here is the English translation of this edition:

The Dream of the pure God birthgiver, when the Virgin felt asleep in the Mountain of Olives, she dreamt a dream through her sleep; **and**<sup>9</sup> there really, meaning visible, there came Lord Is.Hs **and** said to her: Oh, my dearest mother, are you sleeping, **and** couldn't hear through the sleep? **And** when the holy one woke up she answered to Is.Hs **and** said: I felt asleep, **and** then woke up **and** then dreamt of you caught **and** tied to the post **and** crucified to the cross **and** the blood flowing from your holy head turned in a river, **and** I saw your holy body as a debarked wood. Js. Hr replayed **and** said: O, my dear mother, the dream you has dreamt I really will undergo on behalf of the human race. **And** those who writes this holly book **and** carries it with them, will receive mercy from God and from everyone, **and** in the hour of their death, I will show myself **and** will pray together with all the angels in

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<sup>7</sup> Timotin 2011, 215.

<sup>8</sup> Bichigean 1919, 248.

<sup>9</sup> The highlighting of the “and” conjunction belongs to me.

front of my Son for that soul, **and** those who will copy and read it aloud for other people, **and** will keep this holly book by themselves, I will carry to the Kingdom of heaven. Amin!<sup>10</sup>

Further versions enrich the list of promises and effects assigned to *The Dream* usage. They also enrich the prescriptions of how to activate its power, from reading it at least once a day to more complicated time sequencing: “O, My Lord, my Son, / Who will say these holly words, / Three times during the day / and two times during the night, / Neither the fire will burn him, / Nor the Tartars will enslave him / Nor will die of plague” (from an oral variant recorded at the beginning of the twentieth century)<sup>11</sup>.

We deal with a unit that simultaneously is a literary text, an oral folk prayer, an incantation, and a ritual object whose power is activated through its performance. My effort here is to articulate the question of the text’s contiguity with its para-textual manipulations, explicitly expressed either by the ending formulas or by local developments of them.

Turning to the oneiric arena, Mary was the first person who had access to Jesus’s crucifixion event. In terms of Christianity, the legend might be considered a mythical narrative of origins (the foundation of a new era through Jesus Christ’s sacrifice and resurrection) that creates a link between “past and performative present”<sup>12</sup>, and whose performance represents a “transmission of power from a mythic realm articulated in narrative, to the human present”<sup>13</sup>. In other words, each performance of *The Dream* reiterates and actuates the sacred events of the past and creates effects in the present. Furthermore, speaking about a prophetic dream, each performance connects the present with the future, too.

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<sup>10</sup> The Romanian original states: “Visul preacuratei născătoare de Dumnezeu când au adormit ficioara în muntele Măslinilor, au visat prin somnu un vis; și veni către dânsa aeve adică în vedere domnul Is.Hr și iau zăs: O! Maima mea iubită! Au dormi și nu auzi prin somnu? Apoi dacă s’au dișteptat sfânta, au și răspuns lui Is.Hr și au zăs: adormu, fiul meu iubit, și iar m’am dișteptat și t’am visat, prinsu și la stâlp legat, și pre cruce răstignit și despre sfântul tău cap curge sângele și părău făcând și pre sfântul tău trup l’am văzut unu lemnu di coaji juchit. Răspuns Is.Hr și zăsă: O! maica me iubită! Visul ce l’ai visat eu voiu să’l paț pentru norodul ominesc. Și cine o va scriea aciastă sfântă carte și o va purta la dânsul, aciala om va ave milă de la Dumnezău și priimit de la toți oamenii, și la ciasul morții lui, mă voiu arăta sângură și mă voi ruga cu toți îngerii către fiul meu, pentru sufletulacelui om, ci o va scriea și o va citi și altora. Și să o poarti la dânsul aciastă sfântă carte și’l voiu duce într’un împărăția ceriului. Amin!” See Gaster 1883, 369-370.

<sup>11</sup> Pamfile 1914, 108.

<sup>12</sup> Passalis 2011, 48.

<sup>13</sup> Frankfurter 1995, 464, quoted by Passalis 2011, 48.

It is not the simple Gospel plot – here doubled by an uncanonical reiteration – that was supposed to be delivered, but the very structure of an encounter narrative composed of (1) a frame story exposed in dialogic form, and (2) a final part that consists in formalized demands for the delivery of the prayer, instructions on how to do this, and the benefits that come after the demands have been properly complied. In other words, the final part of the text predisposes a functional lecture of the entire story. As part of the prayer’s body, from the perspective of the people who *trust* the legend and *use* the text, both the quality of having premonitory dreams and the conditions of ritual performances that involve *The Dream* are placed under the authority of the Mother of God, the sacred person, the one who once had a prophetic dream. Their incumbent observance marks “the fluid space between the narrative and the performative context”; following the ideas of Haralampos Passalis, we speak about a junctional passage connecting the text with the processes of its reiterations and actuation<sup>14</sup>.

Concurrently, through the verbalization of the performance event (how to read or to say it) and of its effects (why to do it), the very final formulas increase the charming efficiencies of the text: to *say* or to *write* that *The Dream*’s scribe/reader/keeper will be defended and will enter heaven anticipates a future situation of protection and salvation reflected on the scribe/reader itself. This is a reality installed through the supernatural power of the written-oral act, which in turn is incorporated within a ritual complex of gestures. In this regard, the text not only promises rewards, but already materializes them during its very performance and brings the future into the present as well. Secondly, at a cognitive level, anticipation works as a *similia similibus* mechanism, whose term of reference is implicit: even if *The Dream* doesn’t mention the final episode of the story (Jesus’s resurrection and the promise of eternal life), the text’s users mentally restore its integrality, thus attracting Christ’s salvation upon themselves or, on the contrary, causing enemies’ punishment. This is depicted in the versified oral variant<sup>15</sup> below, which circulated among Romanians at the beginning of the twentieth century:

Stone over stone / Mother of God / Was sitting on a stone. / There came Lord Christ.

- Oh, Our mercy Mother, / Are you either sleeping / Or resting?
- Oh, Lord, my Son, / I neither sleep / or rest. / I had a short sleep / And dreamt a great dream: / in which you have been caught by the cruel Jews. /

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<sup>14</sup> Passalis 2011, 49.

<sup>15</sup> For the phenomenon of versificated manuscripts of *The Dream*, see Timotin 2018.

- In *Udeia*<sup>16</sup> / They have tormented you / They tortured you, / With vinegar and gall they fed you; / They dressed you with nettle shirt, / They encircled you with a thorny girdle / And they put / A crown of thorns on your head.
- Oh, Lord, our Mother, / As will they beat me with their hands / Over the face of my chest, / As will I dart them with the fire whip [...], too.
  - Of, Lord, / My Son / Whoever will say / These holy words, / Each day for seven times / And during the night for two times, / Neither the fire will burn, / Or the Tartars will enslave, / Nor will die of the plague.<sup>17</sup>

The threats addressed to those who provoke Jesus's sufferings are aimed, in fact, at any potential evil agents.

## 1. PERFORMING "THE DREAM"

### 1.1. *Writing and saying*

The shepherds carry a small prayer book in their wallet. We say prayers before eating: the Heavenly Lord, the Creed, the Mother of God Epistle.<sup>18</sup>

In eastern Europe, at least up to the end of the nineteenth century, to write represented a special event that required various material supports (paper, leader, tree bark, etc.), utensils and their acquisition, particular conditions of time and space, a certain body posture, and a context of solitude or, on

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<sup>16</sup> Judaea.

<sup>17</sup> Pamfile 1914, 33-34. The variant was recorded in the Muscel region, South Romania. Here is the Romanian original: Piatră peste piatră / Maica Domnului / Jos pe piatră ședea / Domnul Hristos / Pe altă parte venea.

- O, Maica Noastră ce iubești, / Ori dormi / Ori odinești?
- O, Doamne, Fiul meu / Nici dorm, nici odinesc. / Puținel somn însomnai / Și mare vis că visai: / Unde te prinsese câinii de Jidovi, / În *Udeia* / Te căsnia / Te chinuia, / Cu oțet și fiere te-adăpa; / Te-mbrăcase cu cămașă de urzici, / Te-ncinsese cu brâu de mărăcine / Și-ți pusese / Coroană de spini pe cap.
- O, Doamne, Maica noastră, / Cum mă vrea bate cu palmele [sic] / Peste fața obrazului, / Cu biciu de foc din cer / L-oiu săgeta. [...]
- O, Doamne, / Fiu meu / Cine va prea zice / Aste cuvinte sfinte, / Ziua de trei ori / Și noaptea de două ori, / Nici focu nu-l va arde, / Nici *Tatarii* nu-l va robi, / Nici de ciumă nu va muri.

<sup>18</sup> Personal archive. Field information recorded from C.M., female, seventy-six years old, shepherdess, Orthodox Christian confession. Râu Sadului village, Sibiu County, Romania, July 26, 2017.

the contrary, a social context. To copy a text, all the more a religious one, was assigned devotional meanings<sup>19</sup> that required additional gestures (the sign of the cross) and body preparations that configured a ceremonialized, almost ritualized performance of writing.

The general accepted opinion is that, from the very beginning, *The Dream* was composed in literary form, then copied, translated into different languages, copied again, and memorized. As far as I could find, the practices of transcribing *The Dream* directly from memory or of writing it after dictation are not attested (although they cannot be totally denied as a possibility). Therefore, we don't speak about an oral charm transcription, but about a written item that was transmitted through further written versions, which in turn entered oral circulation. Yet the versions written between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries bear the important mark of oral phraseology represented by the predominance of the copulative coordination of sentences<sup>20</sup>, which, even if it does not prove an oral origin of the text, points to a semiliterate profile of the scribes, whose ability in writing was at an elementary level and who did not totally internalized the cognitive mechanisms derived from a long practice of literacy (one that is phraseologically reflected by subordinative reports)<sup>21</sup>. On the other hand, the oral variants I recorded in recent years<sup>22</sup> contain easily recognizable phrasings originated in written forms of *The Dream* (probably as a consequence of people learning it by heart after repeatedly readings<sup>23</sup>) and influenced by the liturgical language dedicated to the Mother of God.

As is well known, oral and interactive performance represents a process in which creation, reception (and perception), and transmission of a formalized (syncretic) structure take place simultaneously, leading to a variant composed on the base of a mental text<sup>24</sup> crystalized during previous performances and adjusted to the ongoing performance. *The Dream's*

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<sup>19</sup> In this regard, the phraseological formalized contexts in which the scribes inserted their name at the end of the text they copied valorize their writing effort in a similar soteriological registers as those configured by the ending promises of *The Dream* (Jiga Iliescu 2007, 384-396).

<sup>20</sup> In the paragraph that translates the Romanian variant published by Moses Gaster I highlighted the conjunction *and* in order to underline this aspect.

<sup>21</sup> Ong 2002, 36-38.

<sup>22</sup> One of them is transcribed and translated below.

<sup>23</sup> To my knowledge, the goal of deliberately learning *The Dream* by heart is not attested.

<sup>24</sup> Honko 1998, 94.

reproduction and transmission (through copying and also through reading or reciting it aloud) events do not integrally fit this pattern of communication precisely because their written hypostases effect a static and reversible model, which theoretically can be identically reproduced by subsequent copies. Still, in the case of the handwritten tradition, we can speak about a specific variability derived both from the techniques of copying and from distinct extra-textual configurations (dimension and consistency of the support, layout, figurative insertions, corrections or supplementary information added by other hands, etc.) that reflect a given attitude of freedom towards the model. The end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century have been characterized by efforts to extend alphabetization; thus we may suppose that more and more hand-copied versions of *The Dream* have been produced (and the printed booklets have been hand-copied at their turn). Unfortunately, ethnographers of those times were not highly interested in such expressions of folk culture and therefore did not collect them systematically<sup>25</sup>. We do not have a substantial corpus of early modern manuscripts of *The Dream* coming from rural and small urban lay milieus, for example, so as to evaluate its presumptive flexibility to insertions of additional narratives (with oral origin?) in the very body of the written artifact, insertions that validate the text's efficiency and power as usually happens in the chain-letters category. This strategy is also attested in the case of *The Legend of the Sunday*<sup>26</sup> apocrypha, whose structure shares with *The Dream* final formulas and demands for delivering the text as a promise for protection and salvation. Based on the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century printed editions, we can assert that the most elastic part of *The Dream* is represented by its final formulas that, besides textual variability, dominantly consist in the extension of the list of the benefits promised by the very text. This also suggests a certain variability of the ritual structures that will orally activate the sacred potential of *The Dream*.

Thus, the role and the power of the writing event are revealed only in connection with the corollary presence of saying and handling the *text*, and vice versa. Here is a fragment of a dialogue I had in 2017 with a priest from a village in Sibiu County, Cindrel Mountain, that underlines the aural quality of the text:

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<sup>25</sup> Concerning the pre-modern manuscripts of *The Dream* and the scribes' interventions in the text, see Timotin 2016.

<sup>26</sup> In this respect, an example is represented by a manuscript of *The Epistle of Jesus Christ (The Legend of the Sunday)* stored in the Archive of the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore (AIEF) in Bucharest; it was written by a soldier in World War I (Jiga Illiescu 2014).

- (I.P.) They have the *Talisman* with them. That small book, aaa, *The Dream of the Mother of God*. And it was of great value for them. And they kept that small book in the pocket of the coat as a protector.
- (L.J.I.) Was it printed or hand-written?
- (I.P.) Before the revolution [1989], people used to write it. Time ago, those who knew to write better, sew few sheets in a notebook. And they read it, and read it until it turned erased. They learned it by heart.
- (L.J.I.) Did they read it in mind or aloud?
- (I.P.) While they are in solitude, they read it aloud. That is how I taught them.
- (L.J.I.) Why?
- (I.P.) I told them: “You may lose the mind. The attention. It may be distracted. So, you must say it a little aloud. Whispering.”<sup>27</sup>

## 1.2. *Saying “The Dream”*

The formalized manners of voicing the text – by reading it in solitude in a low voice, by reading it aloud in front of an audience, or by declaiming it by heart – leads to oral, immaterial hypostases of the written artifact with their own individuality, organic dynamic, and germinative potential. Here is the translated transcription of an oral variant I recorded in 2016 from an old lady; it is based on the so-called long recension of the legend:

- (L.J.I.) Do you remember *The Dream of the Mother of God*?
- (M.G.) Yes!
- (L.J.I.) Would you like to tell it?
- (M.G.) I do! But if I would make a mistake... [she laughs]. There has to be a book here, somewhere, a little book. With *The Dream of Mother of God*. Falling asleep the Holy Virgin in the Eleon Mountain<sup>28</sup>, when she was in the Bethlehem city, there came our Lord Jesus Christ to her, in the vision, and call her and asked her: “My sweetest and beautiful Mother, are you sleeping?” And the holy answers while she woke up a little: “My sweetest and beautiful son, Jesus Christ, I indeed fell asleep, and, look, I saw a terrible dream for You.” And then Our Lord Jesus Christ said: “My sweetest and beautiful, tell, Mother, the dream you saw!” Then the holy answered and said: “Oh, my sweetest and beautiful son, Jesus Christ, I saw Peter in Rome and

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<sup>27</sup> Personal archive. Field information recorded from P.I., priest, seventy-four years old. Gura Râului village, Sibiu County, July 24, 2017; recorded and transcribed by the author.

<sup>28</sup> Mount of Olives.

Pavel in Dalmatia, and I saw you in the city of...mm, Vi..., Viflaiem, betrayed and beaten, and like a peeled wood and on the cross crucified and with gall they fed you and with vinegar they drunk you, with the reed and with the rod they beat your holy head and on your holy head they put a crown of thorns and they spat on your holy face. And one of the soldiers stabbed you on the ribs with the spear, suddenly blood and water came out. Then the sun turned dark, the moon turned red, the iconostasis of the church split from the top to the bottom and a deep darkness covered the entire earth, from the sixth to the ninth hours. I, being with Nicodemus, saw that he gets you off the cross and wrapped you in a clean pall, he put you in the grave and you descended to the hell, crushed the iron latches and shattered the copper hinges, you took out Adam and Eve from the hell.” And then our Lord Jesus Christ said: “My sweet and beautiful and compassionate Mother, you dreamt a true dream, ’cause I will suffer all of these for the humankind. And if someone will write your dream and will have it in the house and will keep it to her/himself and will read it at least once a day, then the devil can’t get close to that house, and I will expel the unclean spirit. And the angel of God will take his rejoice soul in the kingdom of heaven and I will put him to the right of the Father together with all the virtues who pleased God, from everlasting to everlasting, amen.”

(L.J.I.) Who taught you *The Dream*?

(M.G.) My mother, when I was a child. She used to teach me prayers, *The Dream*, Our Lord... while we were walking to the field, or travelling for various purposes.

(L.J.I.) Have you taught anyone *The Dream*?

(M.G.) No, I didn’t. No one is learning it now.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Personal archive. Fieldwork information recorded from M.G., seventy-one years old, female, Orthodox Christian confession, peasant. Pietriș village, Mureș County, July 2016; recorded and transcribed by author. The original Romanian transcription states:

(L.J.I.) Mai știți Visul Maicii Domnului?

(M.G.) Da!

(L.J.I.) Ni-l ziceți și nouă?

(M.G.) Zic. Dacă l-oi greși... [râde]. Da io trebe să am ș-o carte, o cărtică undeva. Cu Visu Maicii Domnului. Adormind Preasfânta Fecioară în muntele Eleonului, când a fost în cetatea Viflaemului, a venit Domnu Nost Isus Gristos la dânsa în vedenie, și-o strigă și o întrebă “Maica Mea prea dulce și prea frumoasă, dormi?” Iar sfânta răspunse, dacă se mai deșteptă: “Fiul meu prea dulce și prea frumos, Isus Cristos, adevarat c-am fost adormit, și, iacăta, strașnic vis am văzut pentru Tine”. Ș-atunșa o zâs Domnu Nostu Isus Gristos “Maica mea, prea dulce și prea frumoasă și prea bună, spune, Maică, visu ce-ai văzut!” Atuncea sfânta răspunse și zice: “O, fiul meu, prea dulce și prea frumos, Isus Gristos, am văzut pe Petru în Roma și pe Pavel în



To reproduce *The Dream* by heart requires the double effort of active memory and mental vigilance. During the fieldwork I conducted between 2016 and 2019 in the central (Sibiu, Mureș, and Hunedoara counties), southern (Vâlcea county) and eastern (Neamț county) areas of Romania, I had occasions to notice how cautious my informants were (especially, but not exclusively, women older than sixty years) not to make any mistake while saying *The Dream* by heart. High oral (concerning both reading and reciting) fidelity toward the written model is evaluated as a precondition for a ritual's effects. For example, the demand for a faithful text reproduction suggests the dangerous power of spoken words if they are not put properly. Within a synecdochic mechanism that organically binds the incantation's "body" with the identity of its performer, to damage the text's integrity gives rise to reader's or teller's losing integrity of mind: "If you leave out something while you read and say the *Epistolia*<sup>30</sup>, then you get mad"<sup>31</sup>.

The gallery of ritual prescriptions related to *The Dream*'s voicing event includes the scenario of activating the power of the written and the spoken words on behalf of a dying person: "For seven evenings, seven girls of 11-12 years old read together *The Dream of the Holy Mother* and genuflect. They read at the table on the moribund's coat. Then the coat is placed in

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Dalmația, iară pe tine te-am văzut în cetatea...ă, Vi.., Viflaiemului, vândut și bătut, și ca on lemn cojit în sus, și pe cruce răsticnit și cu hiere te-o hrănit, și cu oțet te-a adăpat, cu trestia și cu toiagu preste sfântul Tău cap te-a bătut și pe sfântul Tău cap cunună de spini au pus și-n sfântul Tău obraz te-o scuipat. Iar unul dintre ostași cu sulița-n costă te-a împuns, de îndată a ieșit sânje ș-apă. Atuncea soarele s-a ntunecat, luna-n roșată s-a schimbat, catapitiasma bisericii de sus și până jos în două s-a despicat și-ntunec mare s-a făcut peste tot pământul, de la al șasălea cias pân la nouălea cias. Io, find și cu Nicodim, mi s-a părut că te pogoară de pe cruce și-n giulgi curat te-a-nfășurat, în mormânt te-a pus și-n iad te-ai pogorât, zăvoarele cele de fer le-ai zdrobit și țâțanele cele de aramă le-ai sfărâmat, pre Adam și pre Eva i-ai scos afară din iad". Ș-atunci a zis Domnul Nostru Isus Cristos: "Maica Mea cea dulce și prea frumoasă, și prea bună, adevărat ghisi ai văzut, c-astea toate am să le pătesc, pentru niamul omnesc. Și de ța scrie cineva visul tău și în casa sa îl va avea și la sine-l va purta și-l va ceti batăr o dată pe zi. De aceea casă dracul nu se va putea apropia, pe duhul cel necurat îl voi goni. Iar îngerul lui Dumnezeu va lua sufletu lui ducându-se, veselindu-se întru părăția ceriului și-l voi pune di-a driapta Tatălui cu toț direpții care i-a bineplăcut lui Dumnezeu, din viac până în viac, amin".

(L.J.I.) Ați mai învățat pe cineva?

(M.G.) Nu mai învăț nime amu.

<sup>30</sup> Initially, the title *Epistolia* (En. *Epistle*) referred to *The Legend of the Sunday*, also known as *The Epistle Fallen Down from the Heaven* (Ro. *Scrisoarea căzută din cer*).

<sup>31</sup> Ștefănuță 1937, 313.

the patient's bed and left there"<sup>32</sup>. Unfortunately, even if the performative event represents an important key for understanding the reasons, reactions, and attitudes of those people who put *The Dream* into action, there is a "lack of context" regarding the "immediate performance situation"<sup>33</sup>. In the very case quoted above, the description does not mention if a different girl reads each day, if each girl reads a certain passage, if they read aloud all together at the same time, if the moribund is in the same room with them, if the moribund is sleeping or awake, and so on.

*The Dream's* reading, in solitude or in a group, in mind or aloud was assigned with psychopomp values: "While I was transcribing on the paper a *Dream of Mother of God*", Vera Mârzac, forty-five years old, said, "It is good to hold this book on your chest and to read it as often as possible; some use to read it at funerals, too"<sup>34</sup>.

I already mentioned the *Mother of God in Search of Her Son* legend (also known as *The Holy Mother's Prayer*, *The Holy Mother's Story*, *The God's Story*, or *The Counting*). The hypothesis that it had its origin in *The Dream* (as suggested by Simion Florea Marian) was refuted by later scholars<sup>35</sup>. Yet there are many similarities (including those on the level of motifs and images) between the two narratives that are of great importance for our discussion. This common structure largely consists of a section where Jesus's torments are dialogically described, and a final part where the demands for ritual transmission are embedded in the very text; even if the ending formulas are more complicated here, they still promise rewards in the afterlife. Versified variants of this legend are sung as Christmas ritual carols or are recited as divinatory charms<sup>36</sup> used in the same contexts as *The Dream*: "The words of this variant [of the Mother of God's prayer; recorded in western Romania] are recited at the bed of a moribund by someone who knows them by heart. If the reciter stumbles or [makes] mistakes, then it is believed that the patient will die; but if he/she recites fluently, then it is believed that the patient will recover"<sup>37</sup>. At least in western Romania, reading *The Dream* is part of the same performance arena: "She said the *Counting* at the head of the moribund. [...] And she also

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<sup>32</sup> Recorded in 1959 in Vaidei, Hunedoara County. Document stored at the AIEF. Informations fund n. 1964.

<sup>33</sup> Wolf-Knuts 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Ștefănuță 1934, 313.

<sup>35</sup> See Del Conte 2003, 293-294.

<sup>36</sup> The topic is very rich and will be investigated in a distinct study.

<sup>37</sup> Marian 2003, 259.

read *The Dream of the Mother of God*”<sup>38</sup>. In both cases the reader/reciter is entrusted as a medium who delivers the sacred message embedded by the spoken structure. Thus, we can consider the performance situation as a divinatory arena by itself, where the “signs” are delivered that should be decoded by the reader’s audience; a perform-*mancy* event authorized by the prophetic character of the very dream that Mother of God had.

There is a subtle connection between the unceasing (and repetitive) reading process and the dreaming activity, both of which might lead to specific states of mind favorable for communication between realms. The reading Mother of God motif (more precisely, being absorbed in her reading!) occurs in different texts of Romanian folklore (charms, funeral songs, Christmas songs). For example, variants of *The Mother of God in Search of Her Son* depict Mary reading in a ritualized setting in order to see her lost Son, who was crucified: “Holy Mother woke up early in the morning / Washed her face, / Combed her yellow hair, / Worshiped God, / Entered the monastery church / Took the book in her hand / And looked for her Son”; “She was sitting / She wasn’t only sitting, / But reading / A small book, / A large book, / For the entire long summer day / Untill the evening”<sup>39</sup>. Both ritualized processes of ceaseless *reading*, on the one hand, and *dreaming*, on the other hand, deeply involve *The Dream of the Mother of God*: “Some maidens and women [...] keep *The Dream* under their pillow”<sup>40</sup> to mediate their oneiric activity, in divinatory terms. The written artifact is invested with the power of inducing oneirical supernatural encounter experiences, such as the encounter with Mother of God in her psychopomp role<sup>41</sup>: in the first years of the twentieth century it was attested the belief that one “who will read [*The Dream*] and will keep it on heart with faith and pioussness for the lifetime, will see the Holy Virgin Mary in a dream three days before death”<sup>42</sup>.

The requirement of constant and intense reading of *The Dream* is a condition to preserve its beneficial effects, which are otherwise wasted<sup>43</sup>: “Peasant Dănilă Petre, 46 years old, owned an *Epistolie* written in Cyrillic letters about which he tells us that ‘I gave it to a monastery to be read

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<sup>38</sup> Hedesan 2015, 108.

<sup>39</sup> Marian 2003, 121-124.

<sup>40</sup> Hasdeu 1983, 389.

<sup>41</sup> Comparing different versions of *The Dream*, we can notice that the psychopomp role is assigned to the Mother of God, the Archangel Michael, or Jesus Christ.

<sup>42</sup> Bichigean 1919, 251.

<sup>43</sup> Maybe it is not meaningless to notice a similarity with the very status of an icon that, according to the Christian Orthodox view, has to be exposed, to be seen, to be active.

there. We can't keep this letter at home, because it has to be permanently read, and we don't know to read"<sup>44</sup>.

### 1.3. *Having, keeping, touching, "The Dream"*

When the material support of the written *Dream* turns into a ritual object, it is expected to exert apotropaic effects and to mediate liminal situations: to touch the womb of pregnant women in order to deliver without complications<sup>45</sup>; to depose *The Dream*, together with a bottle of holy water (as a mutual enhancement with good sacredness), in the newborn crib for keeping the devil away<sup>46</sup>; to offer *The Dream* (the *Epistle*) as alms<sup>47</sup>, indirectly underlining the belief that its power remains active in the other world; and to keep it the house "in a place of honor", probably the same east wall where the icons are exposed, suggesting its status as a material "image" of the sacred world behind it (a world in which Mary's oneiric vision took place). The force and the importance of *The Dream* as an amulet was narratively expressed by warning legends against not having it, especially in extreme or liminal circumstances: for instance, narratives center on a man on his way back home who meets the devil; later, the man was found far away from his house, almost speechless; a month later he died. "Poor fellow, it was his sin, my father said. This is what happens when you travel without *The Dream of the Mother of God* with you. I have it in my headgear and anything like this happened to me ever!"<sup>48</sup>.

## 2. NEW LIFE OF "THE DREAM OF THE MOTHER OF GOD"

The circumstances and the reasons assigned to *The Dream* performance events are relevant for understanding users' attitudes toward the very written/reading practices, their fears and needs, their religious expectations and views over the sacredness, and, not least, for the dynamic relationship between "religion as prescribed and religion as practiced"<sup>49</sup>. Over time, they changed.

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<sup>44</sup> Nișcani village, Bessarabia. Ștefănuță 1937, 314.

<sup>45</sup> Sevastos (1892) 1990, 158.

<sup>46</sup> Ofrim 2001, 178; Ștefănuță 1991, 192.

<sup>47</sup> Ofrim 2001, 178.

<sup>48</sup> Dragoslav (1925) 1994, 134.

<sup>49</sup> Christian 1981, 178.

Starting with the end of the nineteenth century, and especially in the first decades of the twentieth century (years coincident with war), *The Dream* was copied and read (sometimes on behalf of somebody else) by semiliterate laypeople in printed booklets delivered by lay publishing houses. Among other aspects, this meant that reading the text could be done without priests' mediation and authority. At this time the soteriological ending formulas were replaced by more mundane references against personal enemies, evil spirits, devil attacks, accidents, meteorological hard phenomena, earthquakes, fire, water, and sudden death. At the same time, the formulas guaranteed good luck, curative purposes – e.g., “if it is read to a sick person, he/she will recover all of a sudden”<sup>50</sup> – safe travels, easy giving of birth, etc.

Some printed editions enlarged the original structure of the legend with a prologue that asserts a prestigious divine origin of the very text: “This prayer was found at the holy grave of the Holy Virgin Mary”<sup>51</sup>. We recognize here the narrative framework of another extremely popular apocrypha, namely *The Epistle fallen down from the heaven* (found on Jesus Christ's grave); as the two legends were often bound between the covers of the same booklet or they were even delivered as parts of the same text<sup>52</sup>, sharing similar promises and being involved in similar ritual performances, they influenced each other at the structural level, too. Already at the end of the nineteenth century there appeared counterreactions against the new profile of *The Dream* (but not against the very legend and prayer). For example, the booklet edited in 1888 in Cernăuți by archimandrite Mihai-Miron Călinescu was entitled *The Dream of Mother of God Printed in the Spirit of Real Orthodoxy, Erasing All the Superstitious Addendums*<sup>53</sup>.

Owing to its uncanonical character and to its paratextual usages, the clergy's attitude towards *The Dream* is not currently homogeneous – nor was it in the past, even if its first scribes were rural priests or monks who probably evaluated it as a prayer. Some of them positively appreciate it in the emic term of deep faith, while others are more circumspect and condemn it, in the etic terms of heresy and superstitions. Indeed, the narrated story stays in concordance with the Christian doctrine of Jesus's

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<sup>50</sup> Bichigean 1919, 250.

<sup>51</sup> Bichigean 1919, 252.

<sup>52</sup> In July 2016 I photographed a handwritten prayer notebook owned by a fifty-seven-year-old lady from Ibănești Pădure village, southeast Transylvania. She said that she copied the prayers (in her terms) from other notebooks when she was around twenty-five or twenty-six years old.

<sup>53</sup> Bichigean 1919, 250.

self-sacrifice and individual salvation, while the very prophetic dream and the promises that stipulate heavenly reward to everyone who simply uses the text, as verbalized in the final part of *The Dream*, are not. Concurrently, some influential contemporary confessors, whose spiritual authority shapes vernacular Christian religiosities in Romania, outrightly reprobate it in their sermons and writings (a review of these voices can be read, in Romanian, on the site *CrestinOrtodox.ro*, <https://www.crestinortodox.ro/credinta/visul-maicii-domnului-97527.html><sup>54</sup>). As part of the process of negotiating religiosities, *The Talisman* (its modern title that points more to magic than to religion) can still be bought from monasteries' shops or on the pilgrimage's routes, or from online selling sites. It can be read as PowerPoint presentation or listed to on a YouTube channel as well. But the popularity of its older hypostasis is declining.

In the meantime, *The Dream* entered the repertoire of post(post) modern agents of magic who reshaped the text and its previous tradition of performances in concordance with the expectations of a new category of beneficiaries (labeled as clients, instead of believers) and with the new channels of transmission, especially online spiritual magazines, religious and esoteric blogs, social-network pages created and sustained by parapsychologists, and by "witches" or other new-age groups. For example, in Iulia Guțu-Jilinschi's book *The White Art of Magic Addressed to Women*, translated from Russian to Romanian, *The Dream* is understood to have become part of the magic *instrumentarium*: "All sorcerers know that the prayers [plural in original] called *The Dream of Mother of God* work recovering marvels and that [they] are very useful for resolving most complicated situations. This prayer was found at the holy Grave of the Holy One which

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<sup>54</sup> I give one single example: "Beware of *The Dream of the Mother of God*! In the last years there were offered to us different substitutes of faith by the means of small booklets known as apocrypha, which are condemned by the Church. The most known is the little book *The Dream of the Mother of God*, reprinted many times by different publishing houses, but also by some parishes, being even 'high blessed.' [...] There wasn't any need to announce Mother of God in a dream, because she already [...] knew about the Calvary from Lord's words, when He told to His disciples that 'The Son of the Man must suffer and he... must be killed.' [...] In reality, the apocrypha entice weak souls towards a wrong faith, towards superstition. [...] The certitude you will be saved is a hard temptation that comes from vanity, a temptation sent by the evil one in order to remove human from salvation. The right attitude is the Orthodox attitude, namely the hope, not the certitude" (Archimandrite Arsenie Papacian). The sermon of Arsenie Papacian can be read on many sites, one of them being *Gânduri din Ierusalim*, 2022, <https://www.ganduridinierusalim.com/feriti-va-de-visul-maicii-domnului>. The archimandrite inserts a very short rewording of *The Dream*, thus, his sermons become an indirect channel of *The Dream*'s spreading.

give birth to God and who is the forever Virgin Mary. [...] I offer you this prayer in the original form, which has the best results”<sup>55</sup>. What the author claims to be the “original form” starts with the final part of the medieval legend, while the very Mary’s prophetic dream and the dialogue with her Son is shortened and placed in the end; other virtual variants of this new structure dominantly delivered through “of love” sites almost neglect it:

Everyone who reads this prayer faithfully each day once, and will carry it on him/herself, will be protected against all evils, with the Power of the glorified God and with the help of the Holy Mother of God, and won’t be afraid of drowning in rivers or in the sea, nor will die of a terrible disease, and his/her soul will be comforted and recovered. The pregnant woman who reads it, will deliver easy; the oppressed ones will get justice; the one who fight against enemies and against the unknown evil spirit, will be saved, and at the end of the life, three days before death, will see in the dreams the Holy Mother, the one whose prayers to Lord Christ save us, Amen!<sup>56</sup>

In comparison with the previous prerequisites claimed by the text’s ritual involvement, in which the focus was on the wording acts, which induced a collective dimension to the devotional *Dream*’s reading/reciting aloud, the contemporary blogs pay a special attention to the individual experience of writing:

The 77 Dreams [*sic*] of the Virgin. The text of the prayer should be written with a fountain pen; experts advise to add 3 drops of your own blood in the ink. It should be written on white sheet of high quality paper. If you make a mistake, everything is written again. It is a very laborious business, but it perfectly helps to concentrate on your desire.<sup>57</sup>

The prayer texts are to be written on a blank sheet of paper. The color of the paste should only be black, you need to mix saliva or a drop of blood into the ink. If you make a grammatical or spelling error in the process, start over and write the prayer on a new sheet. It should be written in the light of a church candle. The tainted paper is torn into 4 pieces, ignited by the flame of a candle, and the ashes are blown into the wind. Watch his direction. If the ashes flew up, this is a good sign. Ash, falling down, indicates a wrong attitude to life (need to reconsider their views). If particles of ash flew back

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<sup>55</sup> Guțu-Jilinschi 2009, 2015.

<sup>56</sup> Guțu-Jilinschi 2009, 2015.

<sup>57</sup> “Visele Fecioarei sunt o rugăciune sau nu. Interpretarea și textul rugăciunii ‘Sleep’ al Fericității Fecioare Maria”, *Bazovo* (2021), <https://bazovo.ru/ro/sosudistye-zabolevaniya/sny-bogorodicy-eto-molitva-ili-net-tolkovanie-i-tekst-molitvy-son>.

into the window, perhaps the selected prayer text does not fit, find another one. Prayer “Dream” of the Blessed Virgin Mary, copied in a neat handwriting, must always be with the person. Read it as often as you have time, but not less than forty days, at night, before going to bed. The prayer is made in solitude, in complete silence. Look to the icon, light a candle near it and think diligently about what you ask of the Mother of God. Prayer is uttered in a whisper, but clearly, without hesitation. At the end of the prayer, go to bed: eating, talking to someone or spending time in entertainment (Internet, computer games, TV) is not appropriate.<sup>58</sup>

Even a brief look at the virtual milieu reveals a global (and multilingualistic, since many sites offer the option to shift from a language to another, sometimes with the support of the Google Translate application, as in the paragraph quoted above) hypostases to what we may call *The New Dream*, whose textual strategies, functions, destinations, clients, etc., represents a topic to be explored.

Created and delivered through written means and oral performance as well, *The Dream of the Mother of God* is one of those verbal structures that belong to folklore, literature, and popular practices. Part of early modern Christian vernacular religiosity, it reverberates in our post(post)modern times, reshaping its meanings, status, and channels of transmission in accordance with the new actors who evaluate and use it.

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