

SOME NOTES ON SYMBOLISM OF TREES IN ROMANIAN AND SLAVIC CULTURES

NOTE DESPRE SIMBOLISMUL COPACILOR ÎN CULTURILE ROMÂNĂ ȘI SLAVĂ

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Abstract

This paper focuses on symbolism of trees in Romanian and Slavic cultures following different aspects of this motif in the folk traditions of the both cultures. An ancient symbol of cosmology consisting mainly of its horizontal and vertical dimensions as a cosmic cross was recovered in the target cultures in some images shared by the two ethnic groups. Because inherited is a term with its own etymological problems, the symbolism of trees is followed in a comparative approach in Romanian and at least two Slavic culture by underlining the common notes in the system of semiotic representations. Belonging to a continental or insular cosmologic model the main arbres playing the role of axis mundi are apple, fir and sycamore occuring on the top of the mountains or in the middle of the islands. Various aspects of folklore and religion resonate in the imaginative design and symbolism of trees.

Rezumat

Această lucrare se axează pe simbolismul copacilor in culturile română urmărind diferite aspecte ale acestui motiv al tradițiilor folclorice ale ambelor culturi. Un vechi simbol al cosmologiei fiind format în principiu din dimensiunile sale orizontale și verticale o cruce cosmică fiind recuperată de la culturile țintă din unele imagini împărtășite de către cele două grupuri etnice. Deoarece termenul moștenit prezintă propriile probleme etimologice, simbolismul copacilor este urmat într-o abordare comparativă în română și cel puțin două culturi slave prin sublinierea notelor comune în sistemul reprezentărilor semiotice. Aparținând unui model cosmologic continental sau insular principalii compaci care joacă rolul de axis mundi sunt mărul, bradul și smochinul care ocupă un loc pe vârful munților sau în mijlocul insulelor. Aspecte variate de folclor și religie rezonază în modelul imaginar și simbolismul copacilor.

Key words: *tree, symbolism, Romanian, Slavic, cultural interferences*

Cuvinte cheie: *copac, simbolism, Română, Slavă, interferențe culturale*

Cultural context

Despite of their controversial aspects and obscure character the Romanians and the Slavs have experienced cultural contacts over centuries while living in same locality, exchanging and enriching images and symbols which circulated in both directions within the processes of acculturation and assimilation. In this cultural context of 'co-territoriality' (SHEVLOV 1964:159), they shared numerous beliefs and customs originating in paleo-Balkan mythological stock (Thracian and Illyrian), reinforced and re-symbolized by Christianity and Bogomilism. The both ethnic groups have retained archetypal significations in their beliefs, customs, rites of passage visible in different genres like carols, customs, incantations, legends, divinatory and magical

practices whose rich symbolism can be found in numerous phrases and words. Ethnos, folklore and language turned out to be the most reliable and richest sources for the reconstruction of prehistoric forms of human culture which have developed in South-Eastern Europe through oral traditions. All these cultural categories belonging to folk heritage mirror in cross-border and regional identities and comparable traditions revealing similar conceptions on life, parallel customs and analogous practices, rites and rituals.

Integrated in cosmologies as modalities to figure causality, imagine the space and represent the time, some motives of folk origins should be analyzed in comparative cultural and ethnolinguistic context (PAPAHAGI 1927:26, TOLSTOJ 1995:33) using data from folklore genres for tracking the images, meanings and symbols of Indo-European and Slavic origins that left traces of Romanian culture either in cosmology, mythology, pre-historic roots of traditions, rites or linguistics.

Trees from animist vision to cosmic symbols

The world or cosmic tree is one of the universal ideas, typical for the mythological consciousness, inherent in different traditions as far back as the Bronze Age and a leading theme in folklore, 'one of the seminal elements in configuring the view on the world in the traditional culture' (TOLSTOJ 1995: 70). With the imposition of Christianity this image gradually lost its semantic meaning and is understood in the Christian version as becoming a symbol of cosmogony, divided into good and bad, while as a spindle of the cosmos, it is simultaneously related to heaven by its crown and top or hell through the roots which go underground and can host demons. The cosmic tree image and all its variants like the tree of life, tree of knowledge, tree of heaven, are preserved as poetic images in the traditions of different nations from the old and the new world. It also appears in the folklore, folk art and the ritual practices of the Romanians and the Slavs.

Most often encountered species in Romanian and Slavic folklore, functioning as cosmic trees as well, are apple, fir, oak, sycamore and willow. They are imagined as bridges between worlds, symbols of everlasting youth, the spindle of the world and parts of them are used in customary ritual practices as magic objects. Reflecting a space of folklore and mythological interferences, today Romanian cultural territories combine Balkan, Western and Eastern Slavic significations of trees, but also developed an original poetics of fir. On the tree, usually, birds (nightingale, falcon, and eagle) and bees stay, and its roots are the residence of dragons; its branches bear fruits like apples, jewels and sometimes swings.

The main iconographic type depicts the tree with branches up to the heavens, roots in the ground or sea, growing on the islands in the middles of the sea. Growing on the mountains 'at the intersection of earth and sky, where the fairies and gods live' (GHERBRANT, CHEVALIER 2009:321) and men aspire to the heaven or on an isle in the middle of the sea, the cosmic tree has in Romanian tradition depictions found at the intersection of some Slavic cultures.

A sacred place preserved in the traditions of the Romanians, Bulgarians and Ukrainians throughout their folk cosmogony is the isle in the middle of the sea, corresponding to a mythical temple and the trees like the sycamore links the underground, the earth and the sky and supports the earth and the sky. Its roots stay in hell and the top in heaven.

A Bulgarian folk song pictures an unnamed tree growing in the middle of the sea: 'A tree grew high/ its roots are in the blue sea/its top is in the blue sky /its leaves are gold coins/its bloom are small pearls/ On every branch a nightingale.' (SNU-7:329)¹

The world tree embodies the cosmos and holds the balance of the universe: its roots are in the ground, its top in the sky, and the trunk connects the sky and the earth. Through Medieval apocryphal literature, although Christianised, the carols and legends preserve this myth as an element which holds the universe together in an organicist view on cosmos. Following the Biblical

¹ Bulgarian original text: *Израсло ѝ дърво високо. / Корени му в сине море,/ вършец му бе в сине небе;/ листи му са жълтици,/ цветецът му дребен маргарец./ На секо клонче славейче*

image, folk and medieval tradition reveal other variants to the cross tree, the tree of knowledge or the tree of heaven with apples and a coiling snake in the roots. The world tree in its cosmic function is typical for the Indo-European traditions, but it was also preserved in Romanian and Slavic poetical representations (KULIKOV 2001:77, VULCĂNESCU 1987:513).

An animistic principle common for cosmogony resonates in the image of trees being in motion or hurrying up at the beginning of the world in some legends on flora preserved in both cultures (Brill 1994:7) together with an anthropomorphic likeness consisting of similarities between human body and parts of the tree (AGAPKINA 1995-2:73).

The apple tree is the most frequently encountered tree in Romanian folklore occurring in carols, customs poems, rites of passage and symbolizing the everlasting youth and renewal of nature at the threshold of the years (BERDAN 1999:142).

In a carol from Wallachia, fortunately named 'Towards the daybreak', the motif of the apple tree reveals in some lines a cosmologic model specific for Romanian spirituality. The apple is at the same time a substitute of cosmical tree and the tree of life and wisdom:

'You little dawns/ Coming to the daybreak/ Lost all in the way/ Do not rush so much/ To set in the sky/ Because all you know/ So well as me / That have not been/ For five years here/ And I was far off/ At the Round Apple, at the Dewy Field' (TEODORESCU 1984-1:50)².

The two lines contain an archaic nucleus, a regression to the proto-historical stages of evolution and a reminiscence of cosmogony and biblical myth. The apple is an ambivalent symbol from a cosmogony and religious point of view: on the one hand, its fruit was the symbol and knowledge for which the humanity was punished after breaking the interdiction of taking it from the biblical tree (GENESIS 3:6); on the other hand, it is depicted as the tree of divine reward because under its crown the saints gather at the table with paradisiac food. It implies the existence of an ancient myth engraved in the collective un-consciousness in which two main dimensions overlay: on the one hand, it is the ancestral pillar, axis mundi, linking the earth and the sky, on the other hand through its round shaped crown it resembles the perfect spherical form of the world and has an implicit esoteric value. This original association is a fortunate depiction of genesis in Romanian version from an ancient time denoting a stage of evolution lost in immemorial spaces and times.

The mythological picture of the apple tree with golden fruits as used to bring immortality appears in Hesperides' garden. Moreover, the symbol reflects the Celtic beliefs about the fruit of science also developed in the Bible as a fruit of magic and revelation. If the apple fruit is miraculous, the tree comes from the world beyond. In the traditional beliefs, the apple suggests the renewal and permanent refresh (GHERBRANT, CHEVALIER 2009:453).

In Romanian and South Slavic folklore, it received other meanings as feminine and fertility and became an important element of the popular calendar and rites of passage (BELAJ 2007:229-232, CARAMAN 1997:226-227). Its bough is put in the water on Saint Andrew's day and is used as a magic stick in the New Year customs, the fruit emerges as symbol of new born, a means of putting into test the groom in wedding rituals or in the funeral.

As a realm of gods, the orchard with golden tree is mentioned in a Slovenian folk song where fruits are believed to bring immortality:

'In our field, golden apple tree /underneath the golden apple tree a table/around the table golden chairs /on those sits God, Marie.' (apud ŠMITEK 1998:116)³.

If in Bulgarian tradition, the golden tree orchard is located on an isle in the middle of the sea, in Romanian and Slovene, they are on the top of the mountain or near the border to the other world.

A unique Romanian tale underlines even in title the magic function of the golden apple:

² Original Romanian Christmas carol: *Voi zorel de ziuă/Ș-ăl de dimineață/Cu toți rătăciți/ Și tot vă pripiți/ Ca să-mi răsăriți/ Că voi bine știți/Bine ca și mine / Că n-am fost aici/De anișori cinc, Ci-am fost depărtat/ La Măru rotat, la Câmpu-rourat.*

³ Slovene folk song: *V našem polji zlata jablan, /pod jablanko zlata miza, /okol mize zlati stoli, /na njih sedi Bog, Marija.*

‘Once upon a time, was a great and powerful emperor who had next to his palaces a beautiful and rich flower garden. At the back of the garden he had a tree with golden apples but since he had them he never could eat the ripe fruits because after seeing them blooming, growing and ripening, somebody was coming and stealing them just at the time the apples were about to get mature. Then the youngest son said to his father: Father, the time has come for me to go and watch the apple! Around daybreak time, he heard a rustling throughout the garden and aimed one arrow at the shadow, a second one and on the third, he heard somebody groaning.’ (ISPIRESCU 1989 [1880]:90-92)⁴

The initial part of the story called ‘Youth without ageing’ settles the key of conflict evolving in two different spaces, this world and the other one and the three number of sons among whom the youngest is the bravest. The time and space of the story are bordering and liminal: the orchard lies near a precipice, and the dawns put the hero into the ‘test of falling asleep’ (PROPP 2000:187). He succeeds to catch the thief: the dragon who was stealing the golden apples. Moreover, in many variants of ritual songs called winter solstice carol, a marine monster depicted as *dolf* (PORUCIUC 2010:2) comes and steals the magic fruits meant to bring the everlasting youth.

In some Bulgarian and Serbian folk poems, a historical hero transformed into a mythical personage, king Marko is depicted in a marital ritual bringing the apples from the other realm to his beloved, Roxana as a gift for the wedding:

‘God be with you, good lad Marko/ who goes beyond the sea/ there he has a golden apple/ who brings a golden apple/ who brings and gives it to me/ he will take Roxana maiden/ he didn't pick three golden apples/ but he pulled up the tree from the roots.’ (SNU-19:53)⁵

The emperor and young maid are grateful to the young hero for bringing her and family the miraculous apple as a gift of their marriage, after passing an initiatory threshold experience. Moreover, in some Russian tales the motif of golden apple, which gives the youth to the emperor comes together with other quests specific for his younger son who overpasses all the obstacles and gets married the beautiful girl from the other realm (AFANASJEV 2008-1:307-316).

Numerous illustrations and functions of the golden apple and tree in Romanian and some Slavic cultures show an assimilation of a universal motif into folklore significations and symbolic places related to the cosmogonic and cosmologic models. To the general meaning of everlasting youth bearer, the two ethnic groups added some peculiar notes like putting into test and a starting point of a journey to the other world.

The fir is a constant presence in Romanian folkloric productions with different dimensions. Its rich symbolism evolves from an ancient system of representations where the tree is imagined as impatient and rushing bachelor asking God to give him a name and a shape (BRILL 1994:19’20). On the one hand, it is a cosmic and sacred tree linking the earth and the sky. Through its arrow shape it seems to pin the sky and the roots are powerfully kept by the earth and mountains. Moreover, the fir plays an important role in the rites of passage joining all such important moments of life as birth, wedding and funerals where it is pictured through epithets like noble or tall tree and through numerical magic combination of three or nine firs. ‘Tree totem of Proto-Romanians’ (CĂLIMAN 2009:155) fir suggests eternal life, pride, vigor, verticality and it is found in the sublime depiction of the ‘cosmic liturgy of Romanians’, the ballad *Miorița* and in the funeral songs. Together with the sycamore, the fir was integrated into the cosmogony model reflecting the Romanian concept of death as an integration into the temple of nature created in the pastoral ballad

⁴ Romanian tale: *Era odată un împărat puternic și mare și avea pe lângă palatele sale o grădină frumoasă și bogată în flori și meșteșugită nevoie mare. În fundul grădinii, avea un măr cu mere de aur și de cnd îl avea el nu putuse să mănânce din pom mere coapte, căci după ce le vedea înflorind, crescând și pârguindu-se venea oarecine noaptea și le fura tocmai când era să se coacă. Atunci, fiul cel mic al împăratului zise: -Tată, iată a sosit timpul, mă duc să păzesc și eu! Pe la revărsat de zori, se auzi un fâșâit prin grădină. Dete o săgeată, dete două și la a treia auzi un geamăt iesi de lângă pom.*

⁵ Bulgarian epic song: *Бога тебе, Марко добър юнак, / кой си мене одонаде море, / тамо има той златна ябука, / кой донесе той златна ябука, / кой донесе, мене да я даде, / ои че земе Роксана девока, / не откина три златни ябуки, / нели дърво със корени скубло.*

‘The Little Lamb’ (Rom. *Miorița*), where through the allegory of death–wedding, the two trees are imagined as guests at the wedding and followers at the funerals:

‘Tell her honestly/ That I got married/ And at my wedding/ A star fell down/ And I have as guests/Firs and sycamore maples’ (ALECSANDRI 1943: 7)⁶

In Romanian folklore, there is also a tradition of burying unmarried bachelors and girls with a fir in a turned upside-down wedding ceremony, where the fir is kept by a lad with the top groundward and the roots to the sky.

A rich system of motives and symbolic representations about the sycamore are shared by Romanians with the Bulgarians and Ukrainians. For Ukrainians, the sycamore is a cosmogony tree. The Romanians imagine it as an axis of the world, the place where silk cradles are hung, but also a plant with psychotropic properties.

In some carols from Galicia, the old region of today Ukraine, the sycamore grew in the middle of the sea, on the isles which, hosting the angels, were the first embodiments of angels:

‘When was the beginning of the world/ We planted the golden sand/ That time were neither sky, nor earth/ And we have got just the black earth/ Only the blue sea existed/ To us remained only the golden stone/and amidst the sea a green sycamore/on the sycamore three doves/ To us remained just the clear sky/ Three doves have a council/ They decide how to make the world/ Brilliant sun, clear moon/ We will dive to the seabed/ Fine sand we will bring up/ A brilliant star, small stars’ (TOPOROV 1987:398)⁷

The sycamore is one of the cosmic trees in the folklore tradition of the Romanians and Ukrainians growing up as on a sacred place perpetuated from the Dacian tradition until the folklore epoch of cosmogony where the isle of the sea was identified with the Apollo’s mythical temple from Snakes’ island in the Black Sea (DENSUȘIANU N. 1975: 104). If in Ukrainian folklore, the sycamore is a tree of genesis, in Romanian one, beside the cosmic dimensions, shows the symbolism of life and suggests psycho somatic influences.

The cosmic tree as a model of the universe organizes its space vertically and horizontally. It has three parts and three tops, which reflects the threefold division of the world. It defines the world directions, it marks the center of the universe, it localizes its different elements, sun and moon on its two sides, the birds, in its branches, the herbivores, near the trunk, the chthonic, aquatic animals and dragons under the roots:

‘A snake came out/from sycamore roots/from tough stone/with one water eye/with another eye from fire/ The water one burst/it extinguished the fire one.’ (SNU 4:102)⁸

The cosmic tree substantiates the idea of unity and unbreakable wholeness of the universe and symbolizes the organicist vision on the world. For Romanian, Eastern and Southern Slavic tradition the world tree is a place where the souls of the deceased dwell. This perception is reflected in the Bulgarian, Romanian and Ukrainian folklore too in the picture of the tree growing up on an isle in the middle of the sea. This ‘insular cosmogony model’ (LAFAZANOVSKI 2000:39) circulates from Macedonia through Romania to Russia (see the image of Dixon-Kennedy 1998) having various pictures.

In a Bulgarian carol, the tree grown in the middle of the sea became the residence of the most sinful souls:

⁶ Romanian ballad: *Și să-i spui curat/Că m-am însurat/Că la nunta mea/A căzut o stea/C-am avut nuntași/Brazi și pâlinași.*

⁷ Ukrainian cosmogonic carol: *Коли не било з нащада світа, / Дрібний пісочок посіємо ми, /Тогда не било неба й землі. /Та нам ся стане чорна землиця. /Ано лем било синєє море. /Та дістанемо золотий камінь /А серед моря зелений явір. /Золотий камінь посіємо ми. /На явороньку три голубоньки./Та нам ся стане ясне небонько, /Три голубоньки радоньку радять. /Ясне небонько, світле соненько, /Радоньку радять, як світ сновати. /Світле соненько, ясний місячик, /Та пустимося на дно моря, /Ясен місячик, ясна зірниця./Та дістанемо дрібного піску /Ясна зірниця, дрібні зірнички...*

⁸ *Излязла е змя, /от яворово корене, /от становито камене, /с едно око вогъано, /с друго око огняно. /Пукна се вогъано, /угаси огняно.*

'In a sea, a tall tree/its tops are in the sky/with its lower part covers the earth/on each leaf a soul/and on the tops three souls/ These souls are the most sinful.' (SNU 5:20)⁹

Romanian carols and legends about the sycamore tree combine the myths of creation with heroic visions. The tree is not just the material used to make a church from one piece (some churches in Romania have this name) because a great carpenter found the world:

'A big man departed/ With a huge hatchet/Came to a tall sycamore/ To take out a big splinter/ To build a big church/ With nine doors, with nine altars' (SANDU TIMOC 1967:47)¹⁰.

Occurring in this carol from Banat region and in a story about God from Bukovina (NICULIȚĂ-VORONCA 1998-1:17), the motif of a mythical creator of the world uses two main pictures, the image of a giant and the magic tool, a hatchet thrown by God into the lake when he got upset because of solitude. The building created by this unknown big man is an image of the world, a church.

Other layers about the role of the sycamore tree in cosmology are to be found in Bulgarian and Romanian texts (GIORGIEVA 1993:31-32, OIȘTEANU 2004:125) as Christmas carols which dissolved the archaic structures of these pictures.

A Romanian carol, through a contamination of pagan and Christian motives, changed the conditions and personages of creation and underlined the cosmogony dimension of the tree:

'In the Christmas morning/ A young lad was born/ Young lad as God/ Young and frail/ And they make him small diaper/ Small swing made of cotton/ And a swaddling made of silk/ Small swing made of sycamore/ The wind blows/ To cradle him/ And the Lord is growing up/ Making soon a great work/ The sky and the earth/ The sky was made in two days/ And the earth in nine.' (VICIU 1914:26)¹¹

The archaic topic of the carol is cosmos regeneration covered in a religious one - Jesus's birth generated a suggestive image: Jesus became the creator of the world. The tree is the center of the world, but also a shelter for the new-born and swing hung among the sycamore branches. In the tree with a hung swing resonates the cosmogony image about a huge sycamore grown up in the middle of the sea; an archaic picture recalling the emergence of the world from endless waters.

Another archetypal symbol retained with alike meanings by the Romanians and the Slavs in their traditional cultures is the willow. In folk and universal culture, the willow symbolizes the power of life and rapid growth, vitality and regeneration (EVSEEV 2001:160, TOLSTOJ 1995:333). The motif occurs in some legends, but also in folk calendar and rites of passage. Some Romanian, Serbian and Slovene legends show how the willow bows its branches transformed into a bridge helping Holy Mother with crossing a river near Jerusalem and seeing Jesus after crucifixion (MARIAN 1994:84-85, MENCEJ 1996:31-36).

In the calendar of the Romanians and the Slavs, especially on the celebration called the day of the flowers, the willow is used in making wreaths, putting them on the running water of the rivers and guessing the fate of marriageable maids. With apotropaic functions, the bought emerges in the protective practices meant to cast away the demons or to bring fertility. On the day of flowers, the branches of willow are worn as a girdle in Serbia being believed they transfer the vegetal energy to human body and keep it vigorous. Lads and maids take bunches of willow and flowers to the church to give them the power of sacred boughs passed through water (KURENT 1998:115, MARIAN 1994: 123, TOLSTOJ 1995:336).

⁹ У море дърво високо,/ вършете му са в небето/ с нишини земя покрива;/ на всяко листе и душа,/ на вършете са три души./ Тия са души най-грешни.

¹⁰ Romanian carol from Banat region: A plecat un om mare/Cu o secure mare/La un paltin mare/Să scoată o aşchie mare/ Să facă o biserică mare/Cu nouă uși, cu nouă altare

¹¹ Romanian carol from Transylvania region: Dimineața de Craciun/Născutu-mis-a un domn tânăr./Domn tânăr ca Dumnezeu,/Tinerel și frăgețel. / Și mi-i face-un scutecel, /Scutecel de bumbăcel/ fașă alba de mătase, /legăniior de păltiniior./Vântul tragnăă /De mi-l leagăă./Domnul tare creștea/Lucuru mare că-mi făcea: /Făcea ceriul și pământul./Făcu ceriu-n două zile/ Și pământu-n nouă zile.

A mythological dendrology manifested in adoration and cult of trees reverberates in picturing them as sky columns. It was believed the trees had sacred energies and while carving them the wood masters did not uproot them and the work was made alive. When the sacred trees were to be cut down they invoked the spirits of the woods as fairies:

‘You Fairies/ You Empresses/ You Herodias’ daughters/ Help me to put it (the tree) down/ Without killing him/ To carve it without hacking it/ To charm it/ Without forcing it! (VULCĂNESCU 1972:171)¹²

Conclusions

The folklore of Romanians and the Slavs has transformed in artistic forms elements of ancient mythological concepts. The mythological consciousness organizes the world with the help of real forms and situations, while the social everyday reality, displayed in a mythological-cosmic plan, becomes a source and instrument for making sense of the phenomena for revealing their genesis and role. That is why cosmic phenomena originate similarly to actions borrowed from everyday life dividing such as eating, hatching, forging, sticking, spinning and weaving. All these actions in the mythological consciousness are rationalized as sacred and as a prototype of types of human activity. This is reflected in the different myths about heroes and gods, who taught people to work and created human relationships and institutions. (GIORGIEVA 1993:37, ELIADE 1995:142).

Cosmogony as a part of folk heritage reflects traditional concepts on creation, space organization suggesting folk cosmism and attempts to find transcendence. Built in a system of spatial oppositions like up and down, the cosmogony of Romanian and Slavs depicts a hierarchy and symbolic division of the world in specific zones. Up signifies the sky and the space of spiritual values and down symbolizes the earth. A vertical line links the lowest point underground with the highest point in the sky. The vertical line goes through the earth and its inhabitants, putting in the people the infernal roots of hell and the paradisiacal aspiration to the ideal of heaven.

The cosmic tree as a motif of universal mythology found original illustrations in Romanian and Slavic folklore reflecting cultural interferences and original depictions. If the apple signifying the everlasting youth has similar depictions among Romanians and Slovenes in the continental cosmologic model, the sycamore symbolism is shared by Romanians with Bulgarians and Ukrainians especially in the insular cosmogonic pattern. As a feminine symbol of life-regeneration and vitality, the willow as a part of vegetal univers The cult of trees in its rich and various images goes across the celebrations, customs and rites of passage giving to cosmogomy an inherent coherence.

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¹² Romanian charm: *Voi Zănelor,/ Voi Împărăteșelor,/ Voi, fetele lui Rusalim,/Ajutați-mă să-l pun jos/Fără să-l omor/ Să-l cioplesc cu toporul/Să-l vrăjesc,/Fără să-l rănesc.*

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