

The Dance at Mociu

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Peter Riley

The Dance at Mociu

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for Beryl

INTRODUCTION

One response you may have to this collection of factual encounters with the people and ways of Transylvania, might be to travel to the place yourself. However this would be to misunderstand the peculiar responsibility of the writer. Your experience could turn out to be entirely different to that depicted here; the place would literally not be the same for you, and this book misleading. Peter Riley's perceptions of the wooden villages and peasants of the region are distinctive to his relationship with them. Suffice to say this is not a travel book, he is not a guide and you may need this book in your life for quite other reasons.

When the separate accounts first appeared as pamphlets and in personal letters, I found something in them that I wanted; firstly the importance of music in the community and then, as the pieces grew, a non-dramatic and literal depiction of the meaning of wealth and poverty. Behind both discoveries is the core of the book, a community living as one rather than as random individuals.

The music of Maramureş is alive and embedded in the shared lives of the villagers. It is, suggestively, an element in lives which are not lived separately, and draws the common experience into a different significance. Music is there at funerals, weddings and any other events, and along with alcohol is the medium of festive time – the occasion that stands against linear experience but draws the day to day into itself. Significant events are marked in festive time; all weddings become one wedding, all deaths one death.

That music can have such meaning is not commonplace in the west. In Maramureş for instance, as in other parts of the Balkans through to the southern Greek mainland, the dead of marriageable age are married to death, they become death's spouse and wedding songs accompany the funeral. The custom is glimpsed in *The Funeral*. No claims as anthropologist are made, but the significance is unavoidable. "I get a feeling that funerals are common, that everybody knows exactly what to do and what comes next." Funerals are not the only occasions depicted for such certainty of behaviour; it is a characteristic feature of the community.

The view of the autochthonic music setting arising here is quite different from the currently popular commodification of the world

music scene, which elects only one Romanian gypsy band, only one kora player and only one narwhal blow hole soloist, and only if the artist/celebrity is photogenic. The scene here is plural, hybrid, organised and unpredictable but with everybody seeming to know what to do. Typically *Event at Desești*, within which music plays its usual, striking part, owes more to affectionate comedy than classical anthropology.

The other element here which first struck me, is the encounter with the cataclysmic tilting of wealth to the west and what it does to the poor from elsewhere. That there is a new sub-class of the dispossessed working in various forms of legal and illegal poverty in the West is well known. That the internationalised poor are drawn from communities in part impoverished by globalisation is also obvious. In the Maramureș of old Europe Peter Riley sees for himself the lives caught up in the issue. (Old Europe here is new Europe for Donald Rumsfeld and other global adventurers.) To glamorise poverty is a rich person's idiotic indulgence; to see the wealth of the west as the only richness is a different sort of mistake shared by the rich and poor.

Alongside this dilemma about what the young are to do is the overwhelming generosity of the peasants towards their visitors. Strangers are here to be looked after, "...in this small zone of wooden villages operating a system of land tenure considered about a thousand years out of date where we come from..." In comparison we are poor because we are ungenerous and distrustful. "We have lost it, and we live alone..." puts its finger on the essential difference between our present conditions. In fact the contrast is even more abject in *These People*, where again courtesy and generosity towards the stranger is exemplified but if these people should look for well-paid work in Britain they know they are treated as "vermin." We should be ashamed of our government and those individuals and institutions holding such attitudes. In these detailed, intimate and personal encounters is a whole world of quite other value, dependent upon the "possibility of remaining self-sufficient, of just about managing, with very little help from the town, and that at a high rate, but in circles of light."

Kelvin Corcoran,
June 2003.

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PREFACE

Most of them I call “factual stories”. That is to say, things did happen more-or-less as described (or failed to, or appeared to, both of which I accept), and personal and place names are unaltered, but they remain constructed things. Those I don’t call factual stories I call prose-poems, which means that nothing happened but there was a certain something in the air. We went there in search of music; everything else was glimpsed out of the corner of the eye, and hung on the frailty of singular instances. But instances which clearly could not occur anywhere else.

The first section derives from a tour in a hired car around Romania in 1998. It has to do with not knowing where you are, and noticing things which might later develop into glimpses of something. But the pieces in sections 2 and 3 at Poienile Izei, Mociu, and the second at Bude ti were also during this tour.

The second section stays in Maramureş, a mountain-ringed enclave in the far north of Transylvania against the border with Ukraine, which became the base of all subsequent visits through the generous hospitality of Ioan and Anuţa Pop in their house in Hoteni. The villages of the two valleys here, the Mara and the Iza, have a character quite distinct from the rest of Transylvania or anywhere else, most evidently relict, but also, as I claim, advanced, or at least exemplary. This is of course highly contentious in a world dominated by a materialism which regrets its own results.

For a directly opposed view based on roughly the same amount of experience in exactly the same place, see the TV film “The Last Peasants” by Angus MacQueen (first shown March 2003). Crudely: that behind the pastoral glamour it is a place for the old and the dull; all the bright young things can’t wait to get out and away from a life of poverty and toil. I don’t altogether deny this view, but most places can offer major contrary versions of themselves and this wasn’t the one we were looking for. We were looking for what held the place together rather than what was out to destroy it, in the hope that some things, not easily locatable elsewhere, might be unerasable. We didn’t go there to be disillusioned; we can be disillusioned where we are.

Of course one worries about what's going to happen to the area, but so one does of most areas, perhaps all of them.

The third section has pieces taking place in several different parts of Transylvania proper, including Hungarian-speaking villages of the centre and west, visited from Maramureş or passed through on the way there or back.

It should be added that in five years some of these places have changed considerably, especially as new non-traditional houses have sprung up everywhere, and the description "villages of wooden houses" is now only selectively valid. Tractors are replacing horse transport in some areas and lorry routes for forestry or quarrying are being driven through many villages, so that the very low ambient noise level of "Quiet Pastures with a Small Thunderstorm" is in process of erosion. Many of these changes are themselves the result of the efficiency of the traditional agricultural system.

Further ramifications of these visits are in my poem sequence "Sett Two" which can be consulted on the website *Jacket Magazine* (Australia, edited by John Tranter): <http://www.jacketmagazine.com/21/riley.html>

ARNOTA

First you go to the village of Bistrița, the end of the road. A scruffy place, the road turns to dirt at a bar among trees and ahead of you the gates of a big 18th Century monastery now a school for mentally disabled children. There is a parked bus, men sitting around outside the bar, children come and go, sunlight scattered on the ground through trees. To get to Arnota (having asked) you advance towards the monastery gate and turn to the right in front of it, descending behind houses on dirt and stones to the little river that bypasses the village. An open space at the foot of the mountain littered with sticks and grass and parts of concrete conduits. The track fords the stream, and there is an old painted sign: "MINISTIRE" with arrow where it turns into a wooded cleft and starts climbing. There is to be four kilometres of this. In the lower slopes there are wooden fences alongside under trees, wooden houses behind them, people walking, always there are people walking on the roads, carrying wood and water, leading beasts, children looking up. Then more steeply into the mountainside gullies and ledges, up towards the quarries. The surface is just about drivable, with big potholes and water-channels, sudden areas of soft sandy soil which need to be taken at some speed, hairpin bends one after the other climbing the mountain-side. Twice we come round a corner and meet a personnel-carrier descending, heavy trucks loaded with people, slowly creeping back down to the village, for it is already past mid-afternoon.

The track, and the guidebook gave no warning of this, leads straight into the quarry site itself, with a red/white barrier lowered across the road. A man appears at the door of a brick hut, I shout "Mănăstire!" and the barrier is raised, with a smile. We go ahead into an enormous lorry park, and stop, confused. The barrier attendant has walked out behind us and is shouting the Romanian for "left", and slapping his raised left arm. The message eventually reaches us and we locate a further track leading out from the left corner of the site, it is really the most enormous quarry. And this track is steeper than ever, we are crawling in first gear on a very rough surface with patches of

exposed bedrock, three more sharp bends, to come close up to the top of the mountain by a metal fence, with a gate, and an old sign for the monastery fastened to it. We stop, get out and look around. The quarry stretches away below us, half of that side of the mountain removed, caterpillar trucks crawling around far below. But we have risen past that and the summit area itself is wild enough beyond the perimeter fence, bare rocky slopes with tough shrubs and small oaks, and small flowers springing from crumbled red rock, for it is spring. The wire gate is open and we drive on through it and curve up to a parking space by the monastery wall.

A very small monastery, just a perimeter wall and a central church. You walk through the gateway and the church stands there in grass with the wall round it. Near the gate and opposite there are rooms in the wall, but the rest of the perimeter is bare. That is, the living quarters are built up against the wall and form a part of it, with balconies and windows facing inwards into the enclosure. Whoever lives here eats and sleeps inside the wall. A white church, 17th century Romanesque. We stoop to enter and it's dark, the iconostasis and hangings dimly glittering, painted figures on the walls, carpeted floor... an old monk sitting on a chair, who doesn't intervene.

He waves permission to photograph. He sits and watches us, in case, for instance, we might attempt to enter the sanctuary. We peer, the saints recorded on all sides, the silver icons, the heavenly narrative mounting up into the blackened dome, we walk back out. We notice the porch frescoes and the carved door, and go out into the compound and stroll around. There is an area where vegetables are grown to the west of the church, and a cow beyond a wooden fence. There are undisciplined poultry at various points. To the east, behind the apse, a single washing line stretches from the church to a post, bearing a few items of monkish underwear and socks. There are two kittens running round on a ledge near the gate. There is no sign whatsoever of a second inhabitant. It is quite warm in the late afternoon, the quarry sounds are distant, an even wind moves across the compound, stirring slightly the outside trees.

Where are we, and how does this place exist? The monk comes out and looks at his cow. He doesn't look like a monk but is one, old and

slightly bent, and wearing a black felt cap and a brown gown. He is not interested in visitors, but he has nothing against them. He moves slowly to the gate and stops near a small pile of logs.

And what about the night, and what about the depths of winter? Who or what comes to this site then? In snow and blizzard and darkness, the trees thrashing in the wind or standing frozen, living in the wall with a three-month store of fuel and food, alone, a candle under a crucifix in a wooden room in a stone wall – alone? is that right? – one church one guardian one cow? Scrupulous diurnal discipline, standing alone in the church on the top of the mountain with a candle at night reading the frescoes, saying the words. Who are the visitors then? – foxes, concerned novices who hike up from Bistrița, buzzards, bears? Do bears amble along in the middle of the night and sniff at the closed gate?

THE BRANCUSI MONUMENTS AT TÎRGU JIU

All the guide-books say, this is all the town has. All it has is what Brancusi gave it: a stone arch, an avenue, a stone table with ten stools round it and, on the other side of the town, a very tall and slender iron-clad column.

A square arch of limestone through which you enter an avenue cut through the trees of the town's park, with egg-timer-shaped (cross-shaped) stone stools marking its edges, leading on the far side of the park to a low circular stone table, the Table of Silence, with ten similar stools round it, just before a grassy embankment. If you climb the embankment you find the river, very wide here, a few factories and flats far away on the opposite bank. If you turn round and look back down the avenue towards the arch you are facing straight towards the Endless Column on the other side of the town, but you don't see it.

The arch (like the column) is a construct of motifs. Vertical lines turn to drape over vertically bisected circles, which if you have been told, writes of an intimate Platonic harmony proposed as the foundation of a new public structure, at the end of a war. The column, if you see it or if you know, over there beyond the buildings the other side of the railway, is a sign of ultimate belonging, the cross of "here" reaching into the sky. If you don't know, or can't see, you are left with the town.

I was perfectly happy with the town.

We got to stay in a monster ex-Party concrete hotel full of unused spaces and unlit stairwells. We got driven out of this in the evening by hunger, to circumambulate the town's big central space looking vainly for an eating-place (no one can afford to eat out in Romanian towns) but admiring the big public space free of traffic with people strolling around and little children on bikes, how the milder poverty promotes calm and safety. Then viewing a couple of closing coffee-bars, a half-stocked food store, buying a bottle of sweet red wine from a small shop and finding eventually a little pizza-place opposite the hotel, friendly and slow. And I had to admit I was rich here, who back home

couldn't afford a thing. And being rich with nothing to buy restored me to my place.

And we got back to open the window on the second floor and look out as darkness arose between the buildings below us, which seemed sparsely occupied or hollow things, unkempt gardens, the corvines in the treetops over Brancusi's structures making a hell of a row.

Next morning the third struggle with breakfast-language produced a sausage, at last. We were at tables to one side of a sombre, brown, unused ballroom with an unstocked bar, a television loudly on as always and an empty bandstand with a carpet on it. Everyone else was male and looked like a migrant worker. Behind where the last band ever played, the brown wall had a scattering of silver paper stars glued to it, rather tattered now, looking as if they had been cut out of chocolate wrappers with scissors.

But a bright morning sunlight that makes any poor town a good place, restored our energy. The Arch of the Embrace, the avenue again, the stone table vacant and silent as if waiting seventy years for the meeting which will settle all our differences. We follow Brancusi's instruction and walk back down the avenue under the arch and straight on through the town: past the hotel, across the town square and its half-stocked shops in vague morning movement; then a street of uncertain institutional buildings, to be diverted either side of a lumpy 19th Century church, and straight on again through the small inner suburbs, slightly rural houses, finally to step across the railway where the street ends into the other park, the other space. And there, straight in front, half a kilometre across long grass, the column.

The column is encased in scaffolding. A camp of temporary huts and large vans enclosed in a steel barrier spreads round its foot. Peering through the scaffolding reveals that the column is completely boxed in, and invisible. A multilingual notice explains that the column is being restored because it is suffering from rust. The restoring enterprise is based in Paris and financed internationally from western Europe. A message from places where we are always in search of reasons for spending money.

And what happens to Brancusi's schemes, his allegorical interventions, when you don't have any of his statements to hand or any of the art criticism in the world but stand in some fairly desolate Romanian town going about its inscrutable business on a mild morning with these forms and lines before your eyes, which are not so different after all from a lot of the forms and lines that appear before us in most places in the world, small town parks, trees, half-tended flowerbeds, with desolate aviaries, straight-sided public toilets, lines curving or not over circles or mounting into the sky crossing each other...if you could see them? If you don't remember in detail the Kiss at Montparnasse you are mainly left with a vertically bisected circle and a Romanian park struggling in vain against nature. And it is always better not to be instructed, on what you are supposed to perceive. But to feed what you notice into a reservoir, somewhere behind the brain, of accumulating tokens, to be spent as needed.

But what you do see, that particular line curving to bisect that uniquely swelling circle in creamy travertine polished to something like the gloss of human skin... diagrams of affection replacing the triumphs of a military arch, a new foundation of the state.... I think these simple forms convince us that what we share at large is the very basis of what we are.