THE MAN IN PROVERBS

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Abstract:

The essay proposes an interpretation of proverbs as condensed forms of practical thought, organised by a proverbial reason articulated through three interdependent dimensions: functional, cognitive and expressive. The functional dimension orders experience through relations of causality, proportion and temporality. The cognitive dimension regulates critical judgement by mechanisms of reciprocity and limitation. The expressive dimension fixes meanings through contradiction and analogy. The paremiological examples illustrating this interpretation are drawn from Mihai Eminescu's journalistic writings and highlight the mechanisms that convert empirical observation into norms and instruments of collective validation.

Keywords:

Proverb, practical reason, causality, proportion, limit, contradiction, analogy.

> *Geaba vii, geaba te duci, geaba spargi nişte papuci. Ţara piere de tătari, baba bea cu lăutari. Dracul, când n-are de lucru, îşi cântăreşte coada. A poruncit câinelui şi câinele pisicii, şi pisica şoarecelui, iar şoarecele de coadă şi-a atârnat porunca. Trage nădejde ca spânul de barbă.*[1]

This small string of proverbs, excerpted from Eminescu's journalism (Milică 2023), though seemingly nonsensical, sketches the figure of the man in proverbs: the man who runs without purpose, the man who ignores catastrophe, the man seized by cosmic boredom, the man who issues commands for the sheer pleasure of commanding, the man who, against all evidence, believes that hope never dies. Beneath the cloak of absurdity, proverbs bear the cut of human inconstancy, striving to capture, in memorable

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[1] These proverbs can be roughly translated into English as follows: *In vain you come, in vain you go, in vain you wear out your shoes. The country perishes under the Tatars, while the old woman drinks with the fiddlers. The devil, when idle, weighs his tail. He commanded the dog, and the dog the cat, and the cat the mouse, and the mouse hung the command from its tail. He clings to hope like a beardless man to his beard.* (T. N.)

formulas, the very order of the world. The man in proverbs is the synthesis of collective experience and practical thought, codified in the grammar, semantics and pragmatics of these miniature texts of wisdom. Considered as miniature wisdom texts, these lapidary verbal structures are characterised by cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativeness, situationality and intertextuality (Beaugrande & Dressler 1981: 1-12). Within their structure, these features govern both form and meaning: cohesion and coherence organise parallelisms and oppositions; intentionality and acceptability establish pragmatic valences and cultural recognition; informativeness and situationality ensure practical relevance; and intertextuality integrates them into the sapiential architecture.

Proverbs condense practical observation into short, transmissible formulas, recirculated in new contexts. Each proverb stands at the intersection of individual experience and collective memory, of personal reflection and the tradition of common thought. These texts do not appear in isolation but form a network. They constituted diachronically, through accumulation and selection, until they became stable elements of a shared rationality. Taken together, proverbs express an implicit worldview, elaborated through experience and verified over time. Norms of action, criteria of judgement and forms of expression sustain one another, maintaining the balance between knowledge and conduct.

Proverbs encode the practical reasoning of a community, fixing it in relatively stable linguistic patterns. Through them, language acquires an ordering function: it establishes relations between facts, causes and consequences, norms and exceptions, ends and means. In oral cultures, these anonymous texts, collectively recognised, serve as moral and cognitive guides, preserving criteria of judgement and rules of prudence.

Proverbial reason is articulated in three dimensions (functional, cognitive and expressive) that sustain the architecture of practical thought. Correspondences link and differentiate these dimensions, each contributing, through its roles, to the equilibrium of the whole. The functional dimension organises the way experience is understood through relations between action and consequence, cause, measure and time, extracting a verifiable order from the repetition of facts. The cognitive dimension regulates judgement and sets the limits of knowledge through relations of reciprocity and adequacy that confer stability to reasoning. The expressive dimension ensures the transmission and permanence of proverbial expressions, transforming observation into concise form through contrast and analogy. Through the interaction of these dimensions, the sphere of proverbial reason takes shape,

where world, knowledge and language mirror and balance one another in a durable form of experience.

Within the *functional dimension*, proverbial reason orders experience through recurrent relations between actions and consequences, rendering the practical structure of the world intelligible. *Causality* expresses one of the relations through which this dimension manifests itself, as illustrated by texts such as "Cine alege, culege" ('He who chooses, reaps'), "Unde nu-i cap, vai de picioare" ('Where there is no head, woe to the feet') or "Vorba multă, sărăcia omului" ('Many words will not fill a bushel'). In these texts, the link between action and outcome is reduced to its verifiable essence: the deed brings the result, and the result confirms the deed. What is expressed is not an abstract causality but one drawn from the repetition of observation. Proverbs retain only what recurs constantly in experience and transform the finding into a short, transmissible and applicable rule. Also within the functional dimension, *proportion* represents another type of relation through which experience is ordered and evaluated. It establishes the balance between action and result, cost and gain, means and ends. This principle is illustrated by texts such as "Cu măsura cu care măsori ți se va măsura" ('With the measure you use, it will be measured to you'), "Mai mare daraua decât ocaua" (roughly 'Much ado about nothing') and "O mână spală pe alta și amândouă obrazul" ('One hand washes the other and both wash the face'). In these paremiological illustrations, practical observation underpins the norm of balance, and the deed is judged by the fit between effort and effect. In "Mai mare daraua decât ocaua", disproportionality has no moral sense but a material one: the weight of the packaging exceeds that of the contents, and the loss arises from the imbalance between means and ends. "O mână spală pe alta" expresses the reciprocity of efficiency and shows that effort shared symmetrically multiplies the result. Proverbs about measure formulate the principle of proportion as a rule of action. Every deed is evaluated through the internal balance of its resources and its purpose.

Temporality completes the series of functional relations through which experience is ordered. The temporal relation establishes the link between timing and efficiency, showing that the value of an action depends on the moment in which it is fulfilled. This principle is illustrated by texts such as "Bate fierul până-i cald" ('Strike while the iron is hot'), "Toamna se numără bobocii" (roughly 'Don't count your chickens before they are hatched') and "Mai bine mai târziu decât niciodată" ('Better late than never'). In such proverbs, time is not a mere duration but a condition of success. "Bate fierul până-i cald" formulates the rule of intervention at the right moment.

"Toamna se numără bobocii" fixes the time of evaluation after the process has ended. "Mai bine mai târziu decât niciodată" acknowledges the value of delayed action when the optimal moment has passed. Through these texts, practical experience defines time as an element of functional reason and integrates the rhythm of moments into their natural order.

The relations of the *cognitive dimension* introduce the self-regulation of judgement: what is legitimate, what is possible, what is true in a practical sense. Through the *relation of reciprocity*, balance is formulated as symmetry: "Omenia, omenie cere" ('Kindness demands kindness'), "Cu măsura cu care măsori ți se va măsura" ('With the measure you use, it will be measured to you'), "Fă ce zice popa, nu ce face el" ('Do as the priests say, not as they do'). Virtue is not preached in itself; rather, a relationship is stabilised: what you give returns in the same register; coherence between word and deed is the criterion; authority is measured by rules, not by the personal example of the one who utters them. Reciprocity converts morality into social calculation: equity becomes a form of balance.

The *relation of limit* defines the threshold between desire and possibility and fixes the boundary of reason within the field of action. It functions as a filter of adequacy and as a mechanism of protection against confusion between what seems and what is. In such proverbs, the sign of limitation does not close off action but orients it toward what can be accomplished. "Nu tot ce zboară se mănâncă" ('All that glitters is not gold') tempers credulity and prevents the waste of effort. "Din coadă de câine sită de mătase nu poți face" ('You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear') identifies the impossible and restores the relation between matter and intention. "Cară apă cu ciurul" ('Carry water in a sieve') signals an unproductive method and reveals the error of an unsuitable means. Through these texts, proverbial thought transforms prudence into a form of lucidity and keeps action within the field of the real, avoiding the squandering of effort.

The relations of the *expressive dimension* ensure the transmission and fixation of meaning through form. In this dimension, contradiction and analogy are the means by which proverbial reason preserves its clarity and durability: the former through opposition, the latter through correspondence. The *relation of contradiction* renders intelligible the tension between planes and transforms it into an instrument of understanding. In these texts, opposition does not dismantle meaning but organises it through contrast. "Dracul nu face biserici" ('The devil does not build churches') expresses impossibility and safeguards the coherence of values. "Una zice, alta face" ('One thing said, another done') denounces the rupture between word and

deed and warns against incongruence between intention and realisation. "Capra râioasă ține coada sus" ('The mangy goat holds its tail high') exposes the conflict between appearance and condition, offering the criterion for recognising false prestige. Through such formulas, contradiction does not unravel reason but compels judgement to distinguish between what seems and what is.

The *relation of analogy* expresses the link between forms and meanings and constructs correspondences between different orders of experience. In these texts, resemblance implies a transfer. "Lupul părul îl schimbă, dar năravul nu" ('The wolf changes its fur but not its nature') establishes the equivalence between appearance and character and shows that external modification does not touch inner nature. "Așchia nu sare departe de trunchi" ('The apple doesn't fall far from the tree') fixes continuity between origin and result, while "Cum e sacul, și peticul" ('Such carpenters, such chips') formulates the rule of compatibility between parts. "Părinții au mâncat agurida și copiilor li se strepezesc dinții" ('The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge') extends the relation of cause to the level of generations and transforms a physical observation into a moral law about the transmission of consequences. Through such texts, analogy does not merely describe resemblance but uses it to generalise, preserving the concreteness of observation. It organises thought through correspondences and gives proverbial reason a stable form capable of linking the particular case to the constant structure of the world.

The three dimensions of proverbial reason do not act separately but converge in the same order of signification. The functional dimension regulates the relations between action, measure and moment and maintains the balance of practical processes. The cognitive dimension ensures the validation of judgement through balance and limit. The expressive dimension guarantees the transmission and preservation of meaning through contradiction and analogy. In a single text, all these layers can be recognised, each with its role in constructing reason. "Cine s-a fript, suflă și-n apă rece" ('A scalded dog dreads cold water') links deed to consequence, limits excess through prudence and fixes its memorable form in concise expression. Each proverb is thus a complete unit in which thought is applied, verified and transmitted. Through the convergence of these dimensions, proverbial language codifies observation into rule or norm and experience into knowledge, preserving harmony between action, judgement and expression.

Proverbs thus actualise relations of cause, measure and limit in different contexts, adapting them to particular situations. "Bate fierul până-i cald" ('Strike while the iron is hot') indicates the right moment for action,

while "Toamna se numără bobocii" ('Don't count your chickens before they are hatched') highlights the potential benefit generated by the completion of a process. The same law of opportunity is calibrated for different phases of experience. "Cu măsura cu care măsori ți se va măsura" ('With the measure you use, it will be measured to you') and "Omenia, omenie cere" ('Kindness demands kindness') reiterate the principle of proportion but apply it in different domains – moral and relational. "Mai mare daraua decât ocaua" ('Much ado about nothing') and "Vinde pielea ursului din pădure" ('Don't sell the skin till you have caught the bear') warn against disproportion, one in the calculation of effort, the other in the promise without substance.

In proverbial thought, authority does not belong to the speaker but to the formula confirmed by time. A proverb endures not because it is ingenious but because it works in practice. "Unu-i adevărul, oricum l-ai spune" ('Truth is still truth, however you phrase it') is recognised for the stability of the meaning it expresses, and "Cum e sacul, și peticul" ('Such carpenters, such chips') for the precision of the fit it formulates. Language preserves what has been verified and eliminates what does not hold. The authority of a proverb is founded on proven usefulness, not novelty. Through this mechanism, the proverb becomes a collective form of validation, and time the criterion that separates transient expression from enduring truth.

Proverbs do not transmit principles but proportions between facts, time and measure. The reason that organises them is empirical, grounded in the balance between action and consequence. In this order, truth is not asserted but problematised. Ultimately, the reflections condensed in these small sapiential texts do not speak of others. The man in proverbs exists in the mind and in the words of each of us.

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(Translated from Romanian by Oana Voichici)