

Oszkar Mailand and the Romanian Curse

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Abstract:

In 1891 an interesting article about the Romanian curse, entitled *Der Fluch in der siebenbürgisch-rumänischen Volkspoesie* (*The Curse in the Transylvanian Traditional Poetry*), appeared in Leipzig in the prestigious journal *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, edited by Dr. Edmund Veckenstedt. The author, a Hungarian scholar from 19th-century Transylvania, published the article in the same issue of the renowned journal in which other Transylvanian Saxon scholars published their studies on Romanian traditions. The present paper aims to be a critical look at Oskar Mailand's article, whose existence is known but whose content is quasi-unknown due to the fact that access to foreign journals was almost impossible in the past. What is certain, however, is that the Transylvanian scholars of the 19th century, both Saxon and Hungarian, placed Romanian culture on the European map, a merit that cannot be disputed.

Keywords: Oskar Mailand, curse, traditional poetry, 19th century

The article *Der Fluch in der siebenbürgisch-rumänischen Volkspoesie* (*The Curse in Romanian-Transylvanian Folk Poetry*), signed by Oszkár Mailand, represents a valuable contribution to the study of Romanian folklore, with a focus on the specific elements of folk poetry from Transylvania.

Published in 1891 in the well-known journal *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* edited by Dr. Edmund Veckenstedt (based on internal references to earlier publications, such as *Ausland* from 1886), the text explores the role of the curse (*Fluch*) as a central motif in Romanian folk creation, emphasizing its cultural originality in the context of external influences.

A few biographical data are as follows: born in Geoagiu, Hunedoara County, the Hungarian ethnographer Oszkar Mailand graduated from Royal Hungarian Franz Joseph University in Cluj in 1883, with a diploma in German language and literature, teaching first in Sf. Gheorghe and later in Deva, Hunedoara County. Between 1885-1886 he followed Romance studies in Paris, and, at home, he also taught

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Romanian. As an ethnographer, he collected Romanian folk poetry and published in prestigious journals like *Századok* (*Centuries*) and *Ethnographia* in Budapest, *Ausland* and *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* in Germany and in 1889 he became the secretary of the Hunedoara County Historical and Archaeological Society. He died in 1924 in Deva.

As a connoisseur of the multicultural Transylvanian environment, Mailand approaches the subject from a comparative perspective – a novelty in the domain at that time – combining ethnography with literary analysis in order to highlight how the curse is not merely a rhetorical figure, but an essential force that grants Romanian folk poetry emotional and mythical depth.

This paper aims to dissect Mailand's article on several levels: structural, thematic, stylistic, and cultural, analyzing the way the author constructs his argumentation, the examples he selects, and the broader implications for understanding the Romanian popular soul. We will examine how the author positions the curse as a "*red thread*" (*roter Faden*) running through the whole of folk poetry, linking it to ancestral beliefs, external influences, and profound emotional expressions.

Mailand begins by defining the role of ethnography (*Volkskunde*) as the science that studies the expressions of the popular soul, influenced by local and natural conditions, emphasizing the importance of original features as opposed to universal ones. In his own words (Mailand, 1891: 208),

Die Aufgabe der Volkskunde ist es, sich auch mit solchen Äusserungen und Zügen der Volksseele zu beschäftigen, welche diese Wissenschaft mit neuen Gesetzen bereichern, ihr neue Gesichtspunkte aufstellen. Die Bildung der Volksseele ist, wie wir wissen, von Lokalen und Naturverhältnissen beeinflusst, verschieden und diese Verschiedenheit prägt, trotz den vielen ähnlichen Zügen, eine gewisse Originalität der Volksdichtung auf.(...) Diese Auffassung konnte ich auch beim Studium der rumänischen Volkspoesie nicht ausser Acht lassen. Die rumänische Volkspoesie ist ja auch sozusagen gesättigt mit solchen Zügen und Motiven, die wir bei den Fischern Skandinaviens ebenso vorfinden wie bei den Steppenbewohnern Persiens. Auf jeden Schritt überraschen uns Motive, die als allgemeine Äusserungen des menschlichen Genius jeder Poesie eigen sind oder wenigstens bei mehreren Völkern ähnlich aufgearbeitet werden.¹

¹"The task of folklore studies is to also study those expressions and traits of the folk soul that enrich this science with new laws and establish new perspectives. The formation of the folk soul, as we know, is influenced by local and natural conditions, and this diversity, despite the many similarities, shapes a certain originality in folk poetry. (...) I could not ignore this view when studying Romanian folk poetry. Romanian folk poetry is, so to speak, saturated with such traits and motifs that we find among the fishermen of Scandinavia as well as among the steppe dwellers of Persia. At every step, we are surprised by motifs that, as general expressions of human genius, are inherent in every form of poetry, or at least are similarly developed among several peoples".

He applies this perspective to Romanian folk poetry, acknowledging external influences (Slavic, Hungarian, Balkan), but insisting on the way in which the Romanian people adapt them to their own character. The curse is presented as a characteristic element, not merely an occasional expression, but a force that spreads through the very essence of poetry, derived from religious beliefs and intense emotions.

The author distinguishes the poetic curse from the everyday one, linking it to deeper causes: family conflicts, betrayals in love, social injustices. Examples include maternal curses (considered the most powerful), curses of lovers, personifications of animals (such as the cuckoo, a mythical bird), and magical formulae against diseases. Mailand compares these motifs with those found in the world literature (Shakespeare) and the mythology of other peoples, suggesting Balkan origins for the frequency of the curse.

The article concludes with an invitation to comparative studies, emphasizing the ethnographic value of the subject.

The central theme of the article, the curse is described as a vital force that grants Romanian folk poetry “*kraft und schönheit*” (power and beauty). Mailand presents it not as a mere rhetorical figure, but as a manifestation of the popular soul, connected to supernatural beliefs. In folk poetry, the curse appears as a remedy for the wounded soul, especially in contexts of primitive civilization, where belief in its efficacy provides consolation.

A key aspect is its religious origin: the Romanian attributes a divine power to the curse, carried out by higher forces. This is reflected in the examples given, such as the maternal curse: “*Schlange sauge deinen Körper / Wie du meine Brust gesauget*” (May the snake suck your body / As you sucked my breast). Here, the curse evokes crude, natural imagery, linking maternal pain to cosmic revenge. Mailand notes that only the mother’s curse is considered fatal, while the absence of the father’s curse suggests a latent matriarchy in Romanian folklore, likely influenced by pre-Christian myths, that is, this maternal curse may be compared with the curses in Greek mythology, where mothers such as Niobe or Medea invoke divine vengeance; the matrifocal vision of the family can be traced back to Dacian or Thracian cultures, where women held prominent spiritual roles. This contrasts with the Slavic patriarchal model, where fathers possess mythical authority, as in Russian epics. Consequently, the curse, as a motif, is not unique to the Romanians, but its mode of expression—intense, ritualistic, and tied to religious beliefs—makes it distinct. Mailand emphasizes that, although similar motifs appear in Scandinavian or Persian poetry, their adaptation to the Romanian soul grants them originality.

From a symbolic point of view, the maternal curse – “*Schlange sauge deinen Körper*” (May the snake suck your body) – uses the snake

as a symbol of vengeance and regeneration, common in Romanian mythology (e.g., the household snake in fairy tales). This curse inverts the maternal role: the nurturing breast becomes a source of destruction, reflecting deep psychological tensions, comparable to the Freudian Oedipal complex, but rooted in folk beliefs.

In the context of love, curses are passionate and Shakespearean, as the author says (e.g., Lear's curse). The example "*Wenn du mich nicht mehr kannst lieben, / Eisen schnüre deinen Körper*" (If you can no longer love me, / May iron bind your body) combines pain with images of physical destruction, underlining betrayal as a source of chaos. These curses are not merely verbal; they have mythical consequences, transforming people into plants or animals, reminiscent of European fairy tales (e.g., the cursed girl becoming a cherry-plum tree, similar to *Sleeping Beauty*). On the other hand, there is also an intertwining between irony and cruelty in the above example, which creates a tragicomic beauty, similar to Shakespeare's sonnets, demonstrating how Romanian folklore, though oral, reaches high literary levels, anticipating European Romanticism.

In love curses, natural imagery dominates: wind, sun, dew as agents of withering and destruction. The example "*Es verdorr' mich Gottes Wille / Wie der Wind verdorrt die Erde*" (May God's will wither me / As the wind withers the earth) evokes a cosmic fatality, where the curse aligns with divine will, underlining the Christian-pagan syncretism of Romanian folklore.

The cuckoo, as a mythical bird, represents ambivalence: oracular and benevolent in love, yet cursed when its prophecies fail: "*Dein Schnabel verdorre*" (May your beak wither). Mailand compares its role to that of the raven in Germanic myths or the nightingale in Slavic ones, but in Romanian tradition, the cuckoo is "*par excellence mythic*", both good and evil, tied to seasonal cycles and fertility.

Magical formulae against illnesses extend the theme: the curse becomes a therapeutic ritual, with phrases such as "*Ich verwünsche dich!*" (I curse you!), reversing evil back onto its source (stone, wood, fire). These reveal an archaic, pre-Christian layer, where verbal magic controls nature, like shamanic incantations which would suggest pre-Indo-European roots. Mailand notes the rarity of exorcistic formulae, preserved in secrecy, which emphasizes the esoteric character of folklore, accessible only to initiates (witches). The etymology of the word "*blastăm*" (from the Greek βλασφημία) indicates an interesting comparison with Balkan folklore. Mailand suggests that the frequency of the curse among Romanians derives from the Balkan Peninsula, a region marked by Byzantine and Ottoman influences. In Serbian or Bulgarian folklore, curses appear in heroic ballads, but they are more warlike, connected with battles and honor. Among Romanians, they are intimate,

centered on love and family, reflecting an agrarian society in which domestic conflicts dominate popular narratives. This highlights adaptation: Slavic elements (such as the personification of animals) are Romanized, blending Latinity with Oriental mysticism.

The article's thematic focus underlines the duality of the curse: destructive, yet cathartic, reflecting the resilience of the popular soul in the face of suffering.

From a stylistic point of view, Mailand adopts an academic yet accessible tone, blending scientific rigor with ethnographic enthusiasm. His German – used for an international audience as the article appeared in the well-known at that time journal *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* in Leipzig – is precise, with long and complex sentences, typical for the scientific prose of the era.

The author uses vivid metaphors – the curse as a “*roter Faden*” (red thread) – to illustrate the way the motif permeates poetry. The structure is logical: theoretical introduction, presentation of the theme, detailed examples, comparisons, and conclusion.

Poetic examples are cited in German, with approximate translations from Romanian, preserving rhythm and rhyme, which demonstrates literary sensitivity. Footnotes (e.g., the explanation of “*fliegendes Wort*” as the beginning of a poem without logical connection) add depth, linking Romanian poetry to Hungarian.

The narrative style alternates between objective analysis and emotional evocation, as in the description of maternal curses, where the raw imagery recalls Greek tragedy. Mailand avoids sentimentalism, focusing on ethnographic value, yet acknowledges poetic beauty (“*schönsten und mächtigsten Äusserungen*” – “the most beautiful and powerful expressions”).

A stylistic weakness is the lack of precise sources for the examples; the author relies on personal knowledge, typical of 19th century folklorists, yet this gives the text an authentic air of a direct witness.

The article belongs to the Romantic movement of rediscovering folklore, influenced by Herder and Grimm, where folk poetry is viewed as the expression of the national soul. Mailand, as a Hungarian Transylvanian, emphasizes the multiculturalism of the region by stating that the Romanian people, during their migrations, came into contact with various ethnic groups, and in Transylvania, where they found a stable homeland, they were surrounded by Hungarians, Saxons, and Slavs. This multiculturalism is reflected in the mythological conglomerate of Romanian folklore, dominated by Slavic elements yet adapted to a distinct character.

In the author's opinion, the curse, with its Balkan roots, reflects Romanian migrations and contacts with Byzantines and Slavs. Culturally, it highlights a fatalistic worldview, where the word carries magical

power, tied to pre-Christian beliefs (e.g., the personification of nature). Comparisons with Shakespeare or Persian/Scandinavian myths place Romanian folklore in a universal context, yet Mailand insists on originality: the adaptation of foreign elements to the Latin character of the Romanians.

In the Transylvanian ethnic mosaic context of the 19th century, the article contributes to intercultural dialogue, with Mailand (of Hungarian origin) appreciating Romanian poetry and counterbalancing the ethnic tensions of his era. He emphasizes that the curse is not vulgar but poetic, stemming from profound suffering rather than trivialities such as taxes. This implicitly criticizes the feudal society, where Romanian peasants suffered under foreign domination, the curse becoming a form of verbal resistance. The ethnographic implications are also profound: the curse as a coping mechanism in rural societies, where suffering is externalized through language; the cathartic curse provides solace in the absence of justice, reflecting an oral culture in which the word has magical force. Mailand distinguishes the poetic curse from the everyday one, suggesting that poetry elevates raw emotions into art. This anticipates modern theories of folklore as collective therapy (Lévi-Strauss, 1987). Comparison with other literatures shows similarities with Scottish ballads or Slavic poetry, but uniqueness in the maternal emphasis and the myth of the cuckoo. Later studies (e.g., those of Bartók or Eliade) confirm Mailand's observations, linking the curse to mythical archetypes.

From a literary perspective, the article elevates folk poetry to the rank of high art, with the curse functioning as a dramatic instrument equivalent to Shakespearean monologues. It anticipates modernism, where the word becomes a creative/destructive force (like Blaga or Arghezi in Romanian literature).

Although the article *Der Fluch in der Siebenbürgisch-Rumänischen Volkspoesie* represents a significant contribution to Transylvanian ethnography at the end of the 19th century, offering a valuable perspective on Romanian folkloric motifs, it is not without criticisms and limitations. These derive both from the historical and methodological context of the era, as well as from the specific approach of the author, Oszkár Mailand (Oskar von Mailand-Deva), a Hungarian ethnographer active in the multicultural space of Austro-Hungarian Transylvania.

In what follows, we will elaborate on these aspects, drawing on the analysis of the text, on the general limitations of 19th-century ethnography, and on later critical perspectives from Romanian and European folklore studies. The critique is structured along several axes: methodological, cultural-ideological, linguistic, and contextual, in order to provide a balanced evaluation.

From a methodological point of view, one can notice a certain lack of scientific rigor and empirical sources. The absence of precise and detailed sources for the poetic examples quoted is one of the most obvious limitations of the article. Mailand presents numerous fragments of folk poetry – maternal curses, magical incantations, mythical motifs with the cuckoo – but does not specify their provenance: whether they were collected personally, from which Transylvanian regions, or borrowed from earlier collections.

This is a common feature of 19th-century ethnography, when many authors relied on memory, oral accounts, or uncritical compilations, without documenting the process of collection. For example, in later studies of Romanian folklore the importance of collection context (location, informant, date) is strongly emphasized – an element absent here.

This omission risks distorting the authenticity of the material, since oral poetry is fluid and regionally varied – a curse from Maramureș might differ from one in Oltenia, yet Mailand generalizes everything under the umbrella of “*Rumänischen Volkspoesie*”.

Moreover, the article does not describe a clear research methodology. Mailand mentions “*beim Studium der rumänischen Volkspoesie*”, but does not specify whether he conducted fieldwork, interviews, or systematic comparative analysis. This reflects the limitations of romantic ethnography, later criticized in modern studies (such as those of the 1960s – 1970s influenced by Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism) for lack of empirical objectivity.

In the Romanian context, after 1945, folklore studies underwent major changes, shifting from romantic approaches to Marxist or structuralist ones, precisely to address such deficiencies (see, for instance, the research of the Folklore Archive in Cluj, which emphasized postwar methodological reconfigurations).

Without a solid empirical foundation, the article risks being perceived as a subjective compilation rather than a scientific analysis.

Certain ideological critiques, like nationalist bias and ethnic essentialism can be brought to the article. Mailand insists on the “*eigentümlichen Züge*” (peculiar traits) of the Romanian popular soul, presenting the curse as a unique manifestation of the national character. This essentialist approach – the idea of a fixed, immutable *Volksseele* (folk soul) – is typical of 19th-century nationalist Romanticism, inspired by Herder and Grimm, but criticized in modern ethnography for its reductionism.

The author generalizes traits such as belief in the supernatural power of the curse as intrinsically Romanian, ignoring socio-economic or regional variations. For instance, he attributes the frequency of curses to Balkan influences but does not explore how these interacted with social conditions, such as feudal oppression under Austro-Hungarian rule, which may have amplified verbal expressions of frustration.

As an ethnographer of Hungarian origin, Mailand could be accused of an external bias: his *outsider* perspective on Romanian culture risks exoticizing or stereotyping it. In 19th century Transylvania, ethnic tensions were acute, with Romanian national movements (such as the Transylvanian School) struggling for cultural recognition. Written in German for a European audience, the article may have served an imperial discourse in which Romanian folklore was presented as a “conglomerate” of Slavic influences, minimizing original Latin elements.

Recent studies on ethnography in Romania such as Alexandru Iorga’s “*Ethnography in Romania: Hegemony, Project and the Myth of Structuralism*” criticize such 19th-century approaches as tied to nationalist projects, where folklore was used to build hegemonic identities. While Mailand avoids aggressive nationalism, his generalizations may be seen as a subtle form of cultural appropriation, in which a non-Romanian author interprets the “soul” of the people without involving indigenous voices.

Furthermore, ethnic essentialism ignores cultural dynamism: folklore is not static but evolves, and the curse could have been influenced by migration or globalization – neglected aspects in his analysis. Postcolonial critiques inspired by Edward Said (Said, 1978) would detect here a form of Balkan Orientalism, portraying Romanians as a “primitive” people with intense magical beliefs.

From the linguistic and translation points of view, the poetic fragments are translated approximately into German, which alter the original Romanian nuances. For example, rhythm, rhyme, and the symbolic richness of the Romanian language (such as wordplay or natural imagery) are often lost in translation, compared to the translations of other Saxon scholars, like Friedrich Wilhelm Schuster² who, in his translations of Romanian folk songs preserves not only the rhythm and rhyme, but also the number of syllables.

Mailand acknowledges the Latin influence in Romanian, but his translations – such as “*Schlange sauge deinen Körper*” – may sound cruder or more literal than the original, distorting its poetic beauty. This was a common limitation of bilingual ethnography in the period, later criticized in modern linguistics for contextual loss, like, for example, Bronisław Malinowski’s *Practical Anthropology*, in which the author emphasizes the importance of the native language.

² Friedrich Wilhelm Schuster was an important Transylvanian Saxon scholar of the 19th century who contributed significantly to the study of Romanian folk culture through his collection of Romanian folk songs from around Sebeş compiled in the period 1845-1846, which remained in manuscript under the title *Wallachische Volkslieder aus Siebenbürgen* (Romanian Folk Songs from Transylvania), but also through his study on the same subject of the Romanian folk song, entitled *Über das walachische Volkslied* from 1862.

The etymology of the term “*blastăm*” is correct (from Greek), but his superficial analysis does not explore Transylvanian dialectal variations, where Hungarian or Saxon influences could have altered meaning. This reduces the comparative value of the article.

Written around 1887, the article reflects an era of romantic nationalism but overlooks ongoing social transformations, like early industrialization, urban migration, or the influence of modern Christianity on popular beliefs. The curse is presented as timeless, without analyzing how it evolved in the 19th century under the pressure of secularization.

Studies on Romanian cultural consciousness like Eliade’s *Aspecte ale mitului* for example criticize such approaches for ignoring major issues of the 19th century, such as national unification or agrarian reform, which had direct impact on folklore.

Moreover, the female gender of witches in magical formulas is noted but not critically analyzed: this reflects gender stereotypes of the era, in which women were associated with mysticism – a patriarchal limitation of ethnography at the time.

Despite these limitations, the article remains a valuable source, later confirmed by subsequent collections, such as Bartók Béla’s work on Romanian folk music. Modern critiques highlight the need for interdisciplinary approaches, with greater emphasis on diversity and social context – remedies offered by contemporary ethnography for example, the Kriza János Ethnographic Society in Cluj.

Developing such critiques shows the evolution of the discipline, transforming Mailand’s article from a romantic text into a starting point for critical reflection.

In contemporary terms, the text invites to reflection on the role of folklore in national identity. In the age of globalization, the curse as a motif survives in folk music or literature (e.g., the novels of Sadoveanu), reminding us of cultural resilience. Although Mailand idealizes primitive aspects overlooking social evolution, the article’s value remains intact.

In conclusion, Mailand’s article is a jewel of literary ethnography, revealing the curse as the very essence of Romanian-Transylvanian folk poetry. Through thematic, stylistic, and cultural analysis, the author of this paper tried to highlight how this motif blends the universal with the particular, offering a window into the popular soul, and to emphasize the lasting relevance of the text, while inviting to further studies.

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