

When People Write as They Speak: An Analysis of Letters Left on the Miraculous Graves of Bellu Catholic Cemetery

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ABSTRACT

Starting with the second half of the twentieth century, a number of graves from Bellu Catholic Cemetery in Bucharest became the stage of a ritual. The allegedly miraculous graves achieved fame due to different and, in some cases, random characteristics. Many people (most of them Greek-Orthodox, not Catholics) come to perform this ritual to have their wishes fulfilled. As an important part of the ritual built around these graves, its performers are leaving written notes on them, containing their wishes. The notes are often handwritten on different pieces of paper (notebook pages or even receipts), although they may also be typed on a computer and printed. In rare cases, the performers leave notes written on the back of printed photos. My research consisted in observing the ritual, talking with a small number of people who performed it, and, most importantly, analyzing the notes left by the graves. All the performers I interviewed were women, and most of them (with one exception) strongly disapproved of the practice of leaving notes. Nevertheless, judging by the great number of pieces of paper I found by the "miraculous" graves every time I went to Bellu Catholic Cemetery, this practice seems to be general and deemed to be effective.

The paper I propose is, therefore, focusing on the analysis of those notes. The way they are handwritten or typewritten, as well as how their content offers valuable insight into the performers' social identity, religious affiliation, and level of education, as they contain specific formulae, spelling errors, and professional or personal wishes. The "secondary orality" (Zumthor 1972) involved in these texts is an important element of the "vernacular religion" horizon (Primiano 1995) to which the performers of the ritual obviously belong.

KEYWORDS

Urban ritual; prayer letters; popular akathists; vernacular religion; orality.



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Preliminaries

It is common knowledge that orality was characteristic of *Homo sapiens* long before we invented writing. And at the same time, ever since the beginning of written culture, there was a tension, a competition between the two forms of communication, oral and written. On this subject, Walter Ong notes that "writing, commitment of the word to space, enlarges the potentiality of language almost beyond

measure, restructures thought, and in the process converts a certain few dialects into 'grapholects'" (Ong 2002: 20).

Our Western culture could be therefore considered deeply typographic (to use the term coined by Walter Ong), even in what concerns the less educated, therefore more orality-bound, population of a country. This frame of thinking and communicating could cause people to forget about the importance assigned to the spoken word in oral cultures, which results in all kinds of folk productions, such as spells, curses, an even euphemistic names for fear-inspiring beings.

Nevertheless, it is of great importance for folklore scholars to keep in mind that “writing is a ‘secondary modelling system,’ dependent on a prior primary system, spoken language. Oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing at all, writing never without orality” (Ong 2002: 20).

This paper aims to stress the tension existing between orality and writing in the consecrated space of a Bucharest cemetery where a special ritual developed over the years. Every time a cemetery goes under the magnifying glass of a researcher, the notion of *lieu de mémoire* will spring to mind. The concept, defined by Pierre Nora, seems to be all-encompassing and all-explaining, since the space of the cemetery itself calls for it to be interpreted as such. In Pierre Nora terms, the *lieu de mémoire* is double: a site of excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name, but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations” (1989: 24). A cemetery is neither an entirely public place, nor an entirely private one. Due to this ambiguity of status, it is a repository of memories and a privileged space for folk imagination, a threshold where the contact between the living and the dead is still possible. This is why, in traditional communities, the cemetery occupied a special place, being the scene for both different funerary rituals and magical practices, the latter officially rejected by the community, who nevertheless tolerated them secretly. It is precisely this in-between characteristic of cemeteries that make them natural *lieux de mémoire*, which “only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications” (Nora 1989: 19). And the cemetery that is at the centre of this case study is by all means a very strong *lieu de mémoire*, as shown by the ritual itself that coagulated in its space.



The Cemetery and the Ritual

This paper is a case study, centered on a ritual which takes place in Bellu Catholic Cemetery, one of the most important and oldest cemeteries in Bucharest. In order to understand the tension between writing and orality that this ritual implies, it is necessary to present the cemetery and the history of the ritual.

In the 1850s, in a time of great administrative changes for the city of Bucharest, who had just become the capital of the young state of Romania, the municipality established several cemeteries in the southern part of the city, to be used by the main religious denominations: Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Armenian. All these cemeteries, still in use today, formed a sort of “city of the dead,” now totally incorporated in the city of the living which continued its expansion around and beyond them, the consequence being that the cemeteries now occupy an almost central location in Bucharest.

The Orthodox and Catholic cemeteries, situated on the left-hand side of Șerban Vodă Boulevard, one of the city’s main arteries, are forming a complex together with the military cemetery, which is situated between them, and the cemetery of the Heroes of the 1989 Romanian Revolution. The Orthodox and Catholic cemeteries are commonly known as “Bellu,” after the owner of the land transferred in 1850 to the municipality for the purpose of building this “city of the dead.” Probably starting with the second half of the twentieth century, people developed some devotional practices around a number of graves from Catholic Bellu. The Romanian sociologist Irina Stahl was the first to analyze this phenomenon from multiple points of view. In a study entitled *The Nine Miraculous Graves: Seeking Help from Beyond* (Stahl 2015), she presents the history of the cemetery in relation with the beginning



Apple offering at Olguța's grave. Photo credit: Florența Popescu-Simion.

and, respectively, the expansion of several practices, among which candle lighting and requesting the dead to mediate or to fulfil different (material, social, and spiritual) wishes formulated by the believers.

According both to Stahl and other people interviewed, including the oldest caretaker of Catholic Bellu cemetery, these ritual practices originated in the devotion towards the grave of an eight-year-old girl, Olguța Gambara who, the story goes, was killed by her father in 1912. Many years later, a woman prayed to her grave and her prayers were answered. The news about this miracle spread slowly but constantly and, consequently, people began to pray at Olguța's grave. In 1981, her sister, who was living in Canada, asked the Romanian communist authorities to allow her to move Olguța's remains to her new country. Instead, the Romanian authorities levelled out the grave and buried the remains of the girl in a secret

corner of the cemetery. But later, one of the women whose prayers were heard erected a cross on the grave site, transforming it into a cenotaph. On the cross's plinth, one can read: "I sleep, don't cry."

Nevertheless, it seems that a devotional ritual was already well developed at that time and other graves had become part of it (Stahl 2015: 520). Among them, two graves belonging to a Catholic cardinal and a Greek-Catholic bishop, both victims of the communist persecutions, four groups of graves belonging to Catholic priests, teachers, and nuns, and also the grave of an unknown orphan child, a family grave (Petelenz), another family grave (Rogalski) distinguished by the chains that encircle the tombstone, and two graves decorated with statues: one statuary representing a woman and a little girl, and another statue of an angel placed on a high plinth. Nowadays, apparently there is a total known of thirteen graves or groups of graves which are included in the devotional and prayer request ritual.



Food offering on the Rogalski grave. In the background the notes left by the graves are visible. Photo credit: Florența Popescu-Simion.

In two other studies (Popescu-Simion 2020; Nubert-Chețan and Popescu-Simion 2020), all the parts of the ritual have been extensively presented, therefore I will just give an overview of it in this paper.

The performer chooses between one and nine graves which will make the object of her devotion ritual, for nine days in a row. Then, starting usually on the right side of the cemetery, at Olguța's cenotaph grave, she performs the ritual counterclockwise in front of each of the chosen graves, in the following order: lighting a candle in a candle box provided for this purpose by the cemetery administrators; praying to the grave while touching its tombstone or cross; (for some) placing on the grave a piece of paper containing the wishes of the person, generally in a (more or less) hidden place; leaving the grave taking care not to retrace one's footsteps; in the last day of the ritual, leaving an offering on each grave, such as cakes, biscuits, fruits, water, flowers, and even small amounts of money.

Although many of the people interviewed in the cemetery did not seem to approve of the written notes and could not provide the information about the right moment during the ritual to leave them by the graves, these notes could nevertheless be found in large numbers around. As Irina Stahl put it, "The notes are often well hidden in the holes and cracks of the funerary monuments. Sometimes there are so many that they cover the graves and the ground around them. The content of these notes varies: it can be very short, merely a name, or it can be very long and similar to the akathist that Orthodox believers bring to church" (Stahl 2015: 522).

The practice of leaving "notes" in places considered holy is far from being singular; it is also far from being unique to Romanians. There are places in Romania (most famously, Saint Andrew's cave and monastery in Dobrogea, the *Dintr-un Lemn* Monastery in Vâlcea County, and Radu Vodă Monastery in Bucharest) where believers

are known to leave notes containing prayers, akathists¹ and *pomelnic*—lists of living and dead persons handed by family members to the Orthodox priests with the request to pray for their souls during mass. Notes containing prayers are also common in many other cultural and religious spaces, such as Bulgaria or Croatia (in specific churches), Turkey and the Muslim world (next to the graves of famous holy people), or Israel (in Jerusalem, in the cracks of the Wailing Wall).

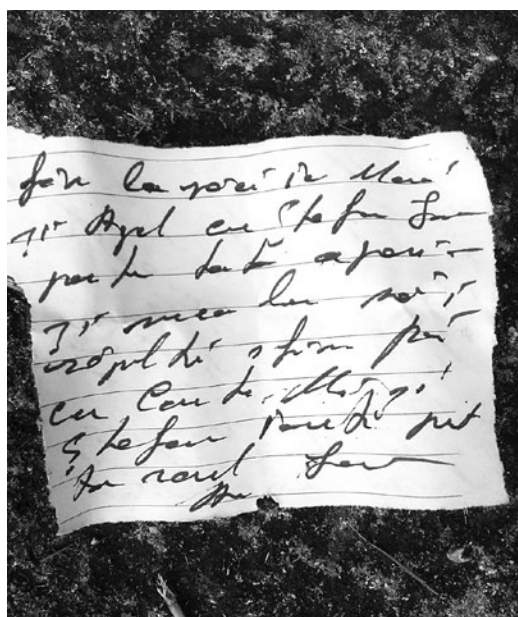
The phenomenon is representative of a magical worldview. In many cultures, including traditional Romanian culture, writing is believed to be imbued with magical power, or even to be a magical act itself, given its "capacity to conserve and to transmit a message," sometimes in combination with ritual acts (Ofrim 2001: 173). Therefore, when you think you have chased it away, orality returns triumphantly, and the words take back their original magical power. It is not paradoxical at all to discuss about magic in religious places, because "the opposition between the clergy and the laic mentality is far from being clear. In an oral culture, any religious formula is strong on its own" (*Ibid.*: 200). The chasm between magic and religion is not, in fact, as impenetrable as one may think; if we look at folk representations of religion, we will discover that in fact we can rather talk about a magic – religion continuum, the two being fully interlinked. Thus, magic and religion are complementary. Or in Ofrim's words, "in folk mentality there was no fracture between magic and religion" (*Ibid.*: 200).

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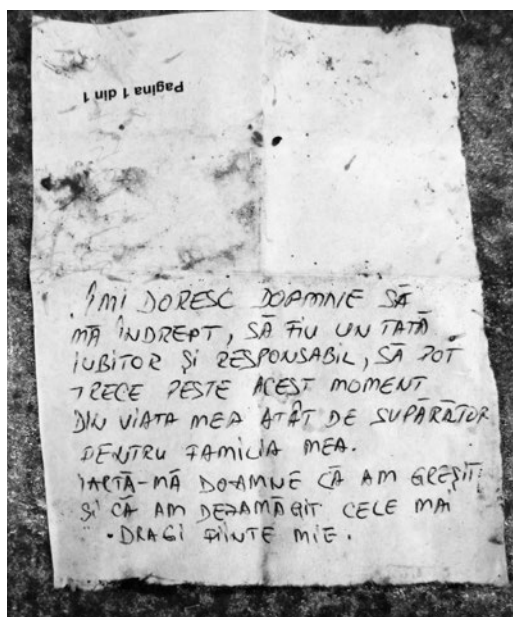
The Notes Left by the Graves

From 2016 to 2019, my colleague Mihaela Nubert-Chețan and I did a survey of Bellu Catholic Cemetery, observing the ritual and its performers, conducting interviews with





Note by the Angel grave. Some spelling errors are present. Photo credit: Florența Popescu-Simion.



Note written in capitals, not an usual practice in Romania. Photo credit: Florența Popescu-Simion.

some of them, and taking pictures of the notes left by the graves. The survey is part of a large research project of “Constantin Brăiloiu” Institute of Ethnography and Folklore, consisting in identifying and observing the mutations which take place nowadays in the structure of rituals and customs.

The large quantity of notes “collected” during these fieldwork sessions could be grouped into several categories: (1) according to the “type” of grave: nuns’ and priests’; Greek-Catholic martyrs’; common people; untimely (or violent) deaths; graves adorned with specific ornaments or having an unusual morphology; (2) according to the gender of the performers of the ritual; (3) according to the real recipient (the writer of the note or another person); and (4) according to the themes of the requests.

Of all these categories, I concentrate on the themes of the requests, as they are written in the notes left by the graves. They seem to belong to two main categories: material requests (requests for good health, a better job, a better salary, success

at exams, buying or selling houses and/or cars, having success in legal matters, etc.) and social-spiritual requests (for good fortune, forgiveness of sins, marriage, removing spells, defeating enemies, personal development, etc.).

Therefore, this study focuses on the notes containing specific keywords, such as charms, spells, cure from evil. The analysis is restricted, finally, to just five of these notes, grouped according to the level of emotional and personal involvement of the believer in the request.

It is important to specify that, by the markers of orality contained, all the notes left by the graves seem to express a sort of contract, or rather a pact between orality and writing. This is due to the fact that the magical practices are oral practices par excellence and writing is for them just a secondary vehicle. The words take their strength from being pronounced, so in the case of the silent words written in the notes, which are meant to be only read by some supernatural beings, the power is transferred to the act of writing. Two more

observations are required. The first is that people seem to leave copies of the same notes next to different graves. Also, several copies of the same note were placed by the same grave. This could be considered strong evidence of the fact that leaving the notes next to graves is indeed a very important part of each stage of the nine-day ritual.

The second observation is that the graphic form of the texts depends largely on the shape of the paper used by the supplicants. They generally used small pieces of paper, not larger than A5 size. Their internal structure could be either of akathist prayers or charms that can remove evil spells. Also, the original graphic form of some of the texts includes different spelling errors, which are unfortunately lost in translation. As a general rule, I would suggest that the more these errors occur, the less literate the sender is, resulting in him/her being closer to orality.

N. (woman),

L. (woman),

M. (man),

M. (woman)

Health, harmony, **forgiveness** of sins, good fortune,

a bigger salary, job promotion, success in everything, [success] in selling and buying an apartment.

Removal of spells, curses, oaths, diseases, enemies, accidents.

(Collected on June 26, 2018; the "Mother Candida" grave, in the German nuns group of graves.)

The first part of this note is in the form of the specific Orthodox prayer called *pomelnic*, which is supposed to list the names of all the members of a family. There is no mention of the addressee; the request seems to be made to the divinity, but there are no clear markers of address.

The body of the note displays a series of requests, going from the spiritual ones (harmony, forgiveness of sins), passing through some very mundane requests

(bigger salary, success in selling an apartment), to asking for both spiritual and material protections (forgiveness of sins or removal of curses, on one hand, and protection against enemies or accidents, on the other).

Thus, the note seems to be a combination between a prayer and a protection charm. It could belong to the category of what Artur Gorovei called prayer-spells, recorded since the late 1700s (Gorovei 1931). This kind of texts, usually chanted and probably also created by priests, were meant to protect the people, the household, or the farm animals against the evil. The note does not distinguish between formal religion practices and magic. On the contrary, the supplicant moves freely from magic defense to natural defense, from the spiritual to the material register.

I, O. (man),

pray the Good Lord and the Sweet Mother of the Lord and the Holy Trinity

for forgiveness of sins,

[of] **curses**

by nine relatives,

by baptism and wedding godparents,

for cleaning me of **spells and charms**

which have been put on me,

either **by eating,**

drinking,

soiling

or by my **stepping on crossroads,**

let your tears, Sweet Mother, **clean** and

wash me,

from the top of my head/hair to the

soles of my feet,

let me be **cured** and **anointed,**

let me be **cleaned** through Maria the sinner.

(Collected at July 27, 2017; Olguța's grave)

This note is special because the supplicant is a man. The addressees of the letter are mentioned from the very beginning of the text, immediately after the name of the supplicant. Also, unlike the first note, this prayer is not at all specific. If, in the first case, the words allow to guess behind



them the real person who prays for mundane advantages (a good job, more money, a good house, etc.), this second note provides no details about the person, except the name and gender. The reader cannot guess what ails him, the reason of his performing the ritual is not mentioned. Nevertheless, what is to be remarked is his insistence on healing his spirit. He does not have any material requests. Even when he asks for health, it is in relation with spiritual purification (anointment).

A characteristic of this text is that it is full of folklore formulas: "curses by nine relatives," "my stepping on crossroads," "from the top of my head to the soles of my feet." Also noteworthy is his invoking the magic of the number "nine," which is typical of spells, both good and evil, and thus a marker of magical thinking.

Last but not least, it is important to mention that this note is not handwritten, but typed on a computer. This particular feature is apparently in contrast with the magic formulas mentioned above. The mixture of traditional content and very modern technology used to write it (very likely chosen because it was easier for the supplicant to obtain the necessary number of copies for performing the ritual), together with the fact that the supplicant is a man give a clue about the level of education of the writer and of his/her profession. The ambiguity of the pronoun comes from the fact that it is not possible to know if the writer and the supplicant are the same person. In fact, the word "Amen," added in handwriting at the end of the note, could be an indication of the nonidentity of the writer with the supplicant. However, this remains just speculation, since any information that could support one hypothesis or another lacks from the note.

The content of the text oscillates between sins (to be forgiven) and spells and charms (to be removed), both of them considered to be the cause of the supplicant's misfortune. The focus of the text is both propitiatory

(forgiveness) and apotropaic (cure). The latter objective is very clearly stated, as results from the three times repetition of the verb "cleaned" (of bad spells, through tears, through Mary). This repetition indicates the efficiency of the spell and also, the powerful need for purification experienced by the supplicant.

Akathist (Prayer)

C. (woman)

prays you, holy grave:

the same way these chains were broken, so may the envy, the hostility, spells, curses **be taken away** from me.

Help me, holy grave,

[so] may the envy and hostility of M., E., A. (N.), I., and A. [all are female names]

be broken

and taken away from me.

Amen.

(Collected at June 26, 2018; the "Chains" grave)



While, in the first two notes, the addressee is the divinity, either named or not, the writer of the third note directs her request to the "holy grave." As I mentioned before, this is not something special. Rather, the majority of the texts recorded are calling to the power of the holy graves. The importance of the grave as a dispenser of a cure can be inferred from the fact that the supplicant begins by using the third person, as it is customary for intercessory prayers, but soon she switches to the first person, as in the direct prayer.

The text is structured in two parts, both appealing to sympathetic magic, centered on the chains ("the same way these chains were broken, so may the [...] curses be taken away from me"). The term of comparison ("chains") is mentioned only once, but it structures the entire text around it. In contrast, the envy and hostility (of the enemies) are mentioned twice, being thus singled out as the most important causes of distress for the supplicant. The evil spells and curses are

also mentioned. The supplicant also seems to know the cause of her problems: five women, who are named in the text as bearers of envy and hostility; the supplicant even wrote their names in capitals to make them more visible for the miracle-making authority who would presumably read her note.

The naming of the evil doers and the principles of sympathetic magic help to identify this text as a protection spell. The supplicant definitely believes in the power of the grave by which she leaves this note. The Rogalski (or “chains”) grave was used for love spells in the past, either maleficent or benevolent, because of its initial chain ornament. This particular feature, combined with the legend of the grave (known to be of a young woman who died either during her wedding, or shortly before it) contributed to the Rogalski grave’s being associated with spells and charms. The news spread among people that the chains from this grave were a powerful instrument of magic. This feature gave the grave a particular importance in the group of miraculous graves. A few years ago, the owners of the Rogalski grave removed the chains, very likely in order to dissuade the people from performing magic rituals around it. But the effect was not what they hoped for. As the analyzed text shows, the people integrated the removing/breaking of the chains in the economy of their prayers, using this fact as an analogy for solving their problems. It is a clear demonstration that the grave has a “life” of its own and, as in the case of Olguța’s grave, once a legend comes to life, it incorporates all. In conclusion, it is no more up to the owners to remove the grave from the ritual circuit.

The last observation about this note is that the supplicant named it akathist. The beginning of the note analyzed, written in the third person, is typical of the akathist prayers, and it is not an exaggeration to suppose that the supplicant knew them well. But the body of the text suggests that it rather belongs to the category of protection spells.

*M. (woman) **prays***

*for the **removal of spells**,*

for God to take L. (man) away from me.

*M. **prays***

to have the spell blocking marriage undone.

*I **pray***

for my good fortune.

*M. **prays***

to have the evil which looms over her house removed.

*I **pray***

for health and success, at home and at work.

Amen.

(Collected at March 25, 2016; the “Chains” grave, the professors-priests group of graves)

This note and the previous have a common feature: the indecision about the personae of the discourse. The supplicant, another woman, is not sure about the right way to address her requests. But, unlike the third note, in this case the oscillation characterizes the whole text, because the supplicant alternates between the third and the first person all the way to the end of her “letter.” At a closer examination, one could discern a different class of requests assigned to each person. The third person is preferred for general spiritual wishes, such as “removal of spells,” “having evil removed,” “having the spell blocking marriage undone.” But when it comes to personal wishes, such as “my good fortune,” “health and success,” then the first person is used.

This distinction is not sharp, as there is overlap between the personae now and then, as shown in the first paragraph: “M. prays [...] for God to take L. away from me.” It is possible to assume that this request represents the core of the supplicant’s note. The assumption is supported by the wish to the spell blocking marriage undone, expressed by the supplicant a little bit further. One needs to notice the ambiguity of the note in this respect, because it does not contain enough clues to understand if



L. (the man that the supplicant wishes to be taken away from her) is her husband or an unwanted suitor. Consequently, the “undoing of the spell blocking marriage” could be read either as the wish to be freed from an unhappy marriage, or a desire to have the path cleared so she can find a husband. In either case, the apotropaic intention of the note is clear.

*May the Holy Graves hear my prayer
and give me the solution:*

***may** M.(man) be freed from spells,
may he have his **path, roads, eyes, and
love opened,***

***may** he return to C. (woman)
and ask her to marry him and be his
wedded wife.*

***May** M. leave the house in S. L. [street] as
soon as possible,*

***may** him not stand S. (woman) and V.
(man) anymore*

*because of **quarrels, reproaches,
frictions, slander** of S. and V. against M.*

***May** neither S. nor M. wish to marry each
other anymore,*

***may** they give up the wish to legally own
the house in S. L. [street]. **May** M. **loose
peace,***

***[may he] loose the wish to sleep
and to eat***

*together with S. and V. in the house in S. L.
[street].*

***May** M. wish to **come back** immediately
to C.,*

*with **love, tenderness, peace, and
marriage** forever.*

AMEN

(Collected at November 29, 2017;

Petelenz grave/ The “Family” grave)

It is important to stress from the very beginning that this note has all the features of a love charm. The text is written in the third person, but the supplicant (C.) and the writer are the same person. The request is typical for love charms: the supplicant asks for the removal of the spells made by another

woman in order to steal the man destined to her, while in fact she is the one who performs a love spell, trying to create bad blood between the members of the couple she wants to undo. The man of her choice is not allowed to have a free will, he is rather objectified, considered by the supplicant to be a sort of prey to be snatched back from the other woman. This is the typical structure of a love spell.

In order to repair her destiny, the supplicant performs a magic attack, which takes the form of a prayer. The beginning of the note should not deceive us. Despite the prayer formula, “May the Holy Graves hear my prayer and give me the solution,” the note is, in fact, an imperative request. The subjunctive mood used in the original text in Romanian has all the functions of the imperative, being the grammar mood used par excellence in Romanian charms and spells, evil or protective. In this particular text, the use of the subjunctive mood helps to conceal the command (magic) by a prayer (religion).

The note represents an “autoperformance,” a term coined by Nicoleta Coatu to describe a type of spell where the performer and the recipient are one and the same person (2004: 181). In this case, the autoperformance signals a fantasy wish for power, the hope to dominate the marital partner. In this magical structure, the psychology of anger and violence has a specific application: the active female performer (no more a supplicant, because she actually acts, she does not pray) takes action against the given order, trying to build another order that she considers right and preordained by the hand of the destiny. In fact, what the woman performs is a counter-spell, in her acceptance, in order to make sure that she will marry the right partner (Golopenția 2018: 38) who for now has been lured into a wrong match.

The notes left by the miraculous graves led to think about their nature. Some of them are named akathists (prayers) by



the supplicants. Some have the structure of a letter addressed to a supernatural entity (God, the Holy Virgin, the dead in the graves or even the graves themselves). And some others are built on the structure of protection spells. The latter have a composition which is easily recognizable in the texts presented here. The main elements which recommend them as such are: the imperative invocation ("may..."); the spell formulas ("curses from nine relatives"), the final formulas ("let him/me be cured and purified"), the performing intention (neutralizing the evil spells, re-establishing the equilibrium of the world or of the person affected by the evil doers), the exhaustive identification of the causes of evil (either humans or supernatural entities); and last but not least, the internal cadences of the texts. This structure could be corroborated with that of the prayer books, especially the books containing prayers meant to protect the people, the crops and the domestic

animals from spells and other evils. These books were in circulation during the past centuries and the priests or the clerks, as some of the few literates (Golopenția 2007: 21), were those who helped them spread, since the Orthodox Church never denied the existence of the spells and charms (Gorovei 1931). In fact, the prayer books published by or with the approval of the Church contain two levels: the prayer, conjuring the Christian divinity, and the request to cast out the spells (Gorovei 1931). The structure of the texts from these prayer books is very similar with that of the texts collected during the fieldwork, which could lead to the conclusion that this type of structure circulated in different social milieus, switching with the centuries between the oral and written circuit.

As can be easily discerned from the analysis of the texts presented in this study, most of them include all of the elements of protection spells, which is why it is possible to affirm they are indeed a special (written) form of spell. The fact that the receiver and/or the mediator are the graves seems to support this interpretation. The notes are left by the graves in order for the addressees to "absorb" their content, meaning that, as in the case of "regular" spells (spoken rapidly, in a low, whispered voice, or even just in one's head), no living person is supposed to read them.

As with the case of the ritual analyzed, there is no priest to act as an intercessor for the prayers, some of the women interviewed during the field research saying that they doubted the efficiency of the notes left by the graves. When asked about these texts, they replied with a rhetorical question: "Who reads them?"—meaning that if they are not read, then they are not effective. This statement contradicts the underlying principle of the custom of leaving prayer notes by many holy places in Romania (St. Andrew's Cave in Dobruđa, the *Dintr-un Lemn* Monastery in Vâlcea) or other countries (the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem



Notes left by the Grotto grave. Photo credit: Florența Popescu-Simion.



The Mother and Child grave. The notes are placed even in the interstices of the statue. Photo credit: Florența Popescu-Simion.



Woman performing the ritual, Mother and Child grave. Photo credit: Florența Popescu-Simion.

being only the most famous example). In these situations, the notes are either burned (because they are considered evil or, on the contrary, because this is how the prayers are thought to reach their destination more quickly) or buried. Regardless of how they are destroyed, the force of the written word is well-known and accepted. This is strong, even if indirect, support for the belief in the power of the notes left by the miraculous graves at Bellu Cemetery.

One last observation: in this short analysis, I made a distinction between magic (evil) spells, on one hand, and protection spells, on the other. In fact, for many scholars (Gorovei 1931; Candrea 1944; Golopenția 2018), both evil and protection spells are part of a continuum whose purpose is to manipulate the magic for a specific purpose, be it beneficent or maleficent. I can also add that what is good for a person is evil for another, the fifth note analyzed being a strong proof of that.

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Coda

This case study has merely scratched the surface of an apparently surprising phenomenon: the perpetuation of written protection spells, which are in fact imbued with orality, in our time and in an urban space, as part of a ritual developed mainly by Orthodox performers in the twentieth century in a Catholic cemetery. The notes analyzed—or rather the written-oral protection spells as they ought to be called—are part of a continuum that is based on the magical power of the written word, which reaches across time and space. The practices of writing in this particular case seem to represent a sort of identifiable protocols, reiterated time and again with every new performance of the ritual. This way, the dynamic relation between orality and writing finds a delicate balance.



NOTE

1. The akathist is normally a hymn chanted in church during the mass, in honor of the Holy Virgin Mary. The congregation must stand during the chanting of this hymn. In Romania, the term is also used to describe the practice of asking the priest to pray for the fulfillment of a specific wish. The term is mostly used with this second meaning, although the practice is not officially accepted by the Orthodox Church.



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