

## **Rites of Passage and Oral Storytelling in Romanian Epic and the New Testament**

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The exploration of traditional narratives that circulated in the pre-modern age through the comparative study of contemporary genres has a rich precedent in the groundbreaking work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord. Starting in the 1930s, Parry and Lord sought to gain insight into the compositional style of the Homeric epics by observing and analyzing Yugoslav oral epic poets and their poetry. Their findings and conclusions were seminal. In 1960, Lord posited that traditional singers compose long sung poetry in isometric verses in performance through their reliance on groups of words that are regularly used—as parts of lines, entire lines, and groups of lines—to represent ideas in the poetry.<sup>1</sup> This became known as the theory of oral-formulaic composition and has had profound implications in the study of epic and other traditional genres from ancient to modern times.<sup>2</sup> Oral epic is no longer performed in today's former Yugoslavia. But there are still traces of traditional narrative poetry elsewhere in the Balkans, namely in southern Romania, where I have done much fieldwork among epic singers and at epic performances.

Though greatly inspired by the work of Parry and Lord, my goals in this article, of course, are far humbler. I examine narrative patterns in a Romanian epic song cycle in order to offer possible models for the further study of oral storytelling in the New Testament. My exploration centers on epics of initiation and the nature of the initiatory hero. I consider how the young hero is represented in epics from the so-called Novac cycle; I also discuss how the stories are constructed and how oral composition is reflected in them. The initiatory hero of the Novac cycle, Gruia, is a complex figure

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<sup>1</sup> See Lord 1960.

<sup>2</sup> See Foley 1985 (updated version at <http://www.oraltradition.org>), 1988, and 2002.

who embodies a paradoxical combination of characteristics: he is both semi-divine and mortal; he longs to come of age and get married but cannot meet the challenges set in order to win a bride; he has great courage and potential yet flees from danger; and he repeatedly needs to be rescued or aided in situations he cannot handle himself though he has every intention of doing so. Gruia is at once conventionally heroic and yet anti-heroic—juvenile, naive, impulsive, and buffoonish in his behavior. I argue that he is enigmatic because he stands at the threshold and mediates between youth and manhood and thus inherently embodies ambiguity. This ambiguity characterizes the universal transition from childhood to adulthood. Furthermore, the Romanian initiation epics and their heroes articulate a variety of concerns relating to the traditional family and the succession of generations. I explore how they mirror not only the tensions that mark the passage from childhood to adulthood, but also intergenerational dynamics and the cycle of continuity within the sequence of the generations.

My interest in treating narrative patterns that center on a specific protagonist in the Romanian epic stems from the fact that the New Testament is also comprised of stories that tell of the deeds and circumstances surrounding the life of a spiritual hero, Jesus, including life-cycle events. Moreover, like the oral epics in Romania and elsewhere in the Balkans, the narratives of the New Testament were circulated and perpetuated in ancient times, to some extent, through oral tradition.<sup>3</sup> The New Testament and Romanian epic are vastly different on many levels, to be sure. For one, the stories of the Gospels pertain to the sacred realm, while Romanian epic is a thoroughly secular genre. Moreover, the phenomenon of multiple stories circulating around a single figure, though found in both the Gospels and Romanian epic, is realized on a considerably different scale in each tradition. After all, the power of the Gospels lies in the uniqueness of Jesus as a protagonist, while Romanian epic heroes generally represent one strand of larger, collective heroic personae found throughout the Balkans. Nonetheless, both narrative traditions flourished in worlds characterized by a primarily oral culture,<sup>4</sup> and in both there are “heroes” who represent or advocate ideals of profound cultural significance. My observations implicitly serve, then, to juxtapose Jesus, the central figure in the narratives of the Gospels, many of which are also expressed in multiform, with the initiatory hero of Romanian epic, found in numerous tales in the tradition.

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<sup>3</sup> See Kelber 1983.

<sup>4</sup> See Ong 1982.

In the pages ahead, I offer first a few introductory remarks about Romanian oral epic as a genre. I then examine select epic songs from the Novac cycle with a focus on the initiatory hero and his narratives. Altogether I discuss nine epic song texts: five songs, plus four additional variants of three of them. They were all collected from different epic singers in southern Romania at various times during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>5</sup> Throughout, I also consider the role of the Romanian initiation epics within the larger Balkan epic framework. Ultimately, I hope that my approach to Romanian epic, which combines a close reading of the poetry and insights gained from extensive fieldwork with a comparative perspective—especially within the Balkan context—will prove useful to others outside my immediate field.

### Romanian Oral Epic

Romanian epic songs are called *cântece bătrânești* (“old songs”). The genre is typically performed for ethnic Romanians by traditional professional male singers and instrumentalists—*lăutari* (sg. *lăutar*)—who are Romani (Gypsy).<sup>6</sup> Traditional music and song, including epic, are performed at weddings, baptisms, and other family celebrations in Romania. Epic singers are accompanied by small ensembles of musicians who play traditional instruments such as the violin, hammer dulcimer, and accordion. The epic performance begins with an instrumental introduction played by the whole ensemble; it is followed by vocal sections performed by one singer and subsequent instrumental interludes. An instrumental finale concludes the performance. Romanian epic songs are usually only several hundred lines long. The generally trochaic verse—corresponding to the melodic line—normally has seven or eight syllables. The poetry reflects a considerable degree of formulaic composition, as singers rely on repeated

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<sup>5</sup> I have selected texts from Amzulescu 1956, 1964, 1974, and 1981. All of the translations, which are simply literal, are mine (I make no claims to “poetic” interpretations).

<sup>6</sup> Music-making among Romani musicians is learned and transmitted within the family, along the male kin line. For a fuller treatment of Romanian Romani (Gypsy) epic singers and Romanian epic, see Beissinger 1991:chs. 1-3; on identity (occupational and ethnic) among Romani musicians, see Beissinger 2001.

syntactic and lexical patterns that are employed according to the narrative context.<sup>7</sup>

While epic in Romania has flourished for centuries, it is performed at the present time only in a few villages in south-central regions of the country. Romanian oral epic, like the South Slavic genre, mirrors distinctly Balkan historical and cultural circumstances. It is attested from at least the fourteenth century and reflects the Ottoman presence in the Balkans. Many of the epic songs are heroic narratives. Indeed, the core of Romanian heroic narrative deals with conflicts between the native Orthodox Christians and the Turks. The Romanians share many tales and heroes with the South Slavic epic tradition. These stories portray a distinctly patriarchal world where heroic deeds are related in ordeals of capture and rescue as well as in conflict and resolution. Romanian oral epic includes a number of cycles surrounding the exploits of specific heroes. The Novac cycle<sup>8</sup> tells of the deeds of Novac and Gruia, fabled heroes found in South Slavic epic as well.<sup>9</sup> Novac, often called “bătrînul” or “Baba” Novac (“old” or “Old Man” Novac), is a mature and seasoned hero and warrior who is invariably triumphant in his exploits. His son (or nephew) Gruia, by contrast, is presented as youthful—either as a boy or young man—and in this role undergoes multiple initiations in various epic songs. Gruia is frequently called “Gruia lui Novac” (“Gruia, Son of Novac”) or “Gruia” (“Little Gruia”). He occasionally merges with “Ioviță,” also presented as Novac’s son or nephew.

Heroes in traditional narrative are often depicted as undergoing various stages of the life cycle. This is a widespread phenomenon<sup>10</sup> and is

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of formulaic composition in Romanian epic, see Beissinger 1991:chs. 4-5; on text and music, see ch. 6.

<sup>8</sup> The narratives of the Novac cycle reflect the Ottoman world, containing Turkish officials, Islamic institutions, “Țarigrad” (Istanbul), and a conspicuous Turkish lexicon, as well as narratives that include mythological and fantastic elements (such as fairies and dragons). The epics in this cycle were at one time widespread in southern and southwestern Romania, though they no longer circulate in oral tradition.

<sup>9</sup> In Serbo-Croatian epic, they are called “Starina Novak” (“Old Man Novak”) and “Novaković Grujo” (“Grujo, Son of Novak”); see, e.g., *ER* 1720 and Karadžić 1846. In the Bulgarian epic tradition, the two heroes are Stari Novak and Novakov Grujo (also “Old Man Novak” and “Grujo, Son of Novak”); see *BJE* 1971.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Oedipus, Heracles, and many more; see Raglan 1965.

also found in the life of Jesus,<sup>11</sup> whose birth and death (and resurrection), in particular, are key to the Christian narrative. The Nativity of Jesus, including his miraculous conception and birth as a semi-divine Savior, is rendered in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Gruia, the initiatory hero of the Novac cycle, is himself part-human and part-supernatural, as revealed in an epic collected in the late nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> This song relates how the hero Novac, herding pigs in the mountains, falls in love with Magdalina, a woodland fairy (*zână*) who is bathing in a “lake of sweet milk.” In order to wed her, Novac steals her “fairy” clothes, replacing them with “Romanian” (mortal) clothes. Once Magdalina dons the Romanian attire, she and Novac are married. The singer continues (ll. 96-99):

Iar când anul se-implinea	And when a year had passed,
D-un fiuț că-și căpăta;	They acquired a little son.
Ce nume că-i punea?	What name did they give him?
“Gruia lui Novac.”	“Gruia, Son of Novac.”

At Gruia’s baptism, his mother Magdalina manages to retrieve her fairy clothes and then deserts him, ceding her care of him to his father Novac. Elsewhere in Balkan epic, heroes also have partly other-worldly parentage through contact with fairies. In a story that closely resembles that of Gruia’s birth, Marko Kraljević, the legendary Balkan hero represented in a large cycle of South Slavic epic, is the offspring of a mortal father (King Vukašin) and Mandalina, a *vila* (fairy).<sup>13</sup> Such semi-divine, or semi-supernatural, parentage confers a special status on the hero.

Death as the final rite of passage likewise plays into the life story of many heroes. The narrative of Jesus’s death (and resurrection)—a cornerstone of the Christian faith—is related in all four Gospels. By contrast, Gruia’s death is not narrated in the Romanian epic tradition,

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<sup>11</sup> See Dundes 1976.

<sup>12</sup> “Novac porcărașu” (“Novac the Swineherd”), sung by Pavel Monea in Banat. Collected by D. Vulpian (1886); reprinted in Amzulescu 1981:269-70.

<sup>13</sup> See “Vukašin Kralj i Vila Mandalina” (“King Vukašin and Mandalina the Fairy”): *HNP* 1896-1942:i, no. 51; see also “Rodjenje Marka Kraljevića” (“The Birth of Marko Kraljević”), which renders a similar story: *HNP* 1896-1942:ii, no. 1. In the Bulgarian tradition, Krali Marko is suckled by a *vila*, giving him supernatural strength; see *BJE* 1971:no. 143.

perhaps because he is represented as an eternally youthful hero who never really grows up.<sup>14</sup>

Initiation in a traditional male sense articulates the passage from childhood to adulthood and is often linked directly to marriage. The New Testament contains few references to the boyhood or youth of Jesus. The only narrative that refers to his early years is found in Luke 2:40-52. Here, having returned to Nazareth, “the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40).<sup>15</sup> This account continues with the well-known episode of the visit of the twelve-year-old Jesus to the temple, where his parents, after searching for him, finally find him “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and answers” (2:46-47). When Mary asks Jesus, with, one senses, some amount of frustration, “‘Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously’” (2:48), he answers, also, perhaps, with a tinge of impatience, “‘How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’” (2:49). Jesus here is represented as a spiritually precocious child, wise and enlightened far beyond his years—a characterization that is accorded to other child heroes.<sup>16</sup> This brief incident is a telling event. Jesus is twelve—the approximate age at which boys in traditional society become initiated.<sup>17</sup> He is a boy moving away from his childhood, and there are tensions expressed just below the surface; Jesus clearly feels a growing separation from his parents. But it is a spiritual coming of age, not a sexual one. Except for this episode, there are no stories in the Gospels that treat Jesus’s initiation. This situation may be explained by the fact that because Jesus did not marry, he did not undergo a traditional initiation. After all, initiation is closely associated with sexual awakening and marriage.

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<sup>14</sup> Marko Kraljević’s death, however, is; see “Smrt Marka Kraljevića” (“The Death of Marko Kraljević”): Karadžić 1845:no. 73. Unlike Gruia, Marko is typically portrayed as an adult hero.

<sup>15</sup> All citations from the New Testament are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV 1959).

<sup>16</sup> E.g., Heracles; see Apollodorus 1976:175, 177.

<sup>17</sup> See van Gennep 1960:espec. ch. 6 on initiation rites.

## The Initiatory Hero

Turning to Romanian and other Balkan epic, the most common narrated rite of passage is initiation.<sup>18</sup> The songs of Gruia's initiation contain a relatively stable configuration or pattern of narrative ideas.<sup>19</sup> In each of them, young Gruia anxiously longs to come of age, specifically to get married. He considers himself ready for his first quest, which, in all but one of the texts, involves his intended acquisition of a bride. Novac—the wise and experienced hero—often attempts to dissuade Gruia from his initiation journey, claiming he is too young, but later offers him advice. Gruia sets off, either despite his father's dissent or without heeding his counsel, becomes embroiled in difficulties, and—more often than not—ends up being rescued or assisted by Novac. Gruia is depicted time and again in these narratives as a precocious, willful youth who is insistent about his own readiness for initiation (marriage) and who stubbornly determines to achieve

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<sup>18</sup> Childhood deeds of Balkan heroes are also not uncommon. Consider Meho in “Ženidba Smailagina Sina” (“The Wedding of Smailagić Meho”) (Bynum 1974; English translation, Lord 1974). See also Krali Marko's early deeds in “Marko i tri narechnici” (“Marko and the Three Soothsayers”): *BNT* 1961:116-23.

<sup>19</sup> I have broken down the initiation songs from the Novac cycle into fifteen basic narrative ideas that make up a general structural pattern. I will be referring to them by number as I discuss them in the pages ahead. I am aware of but refrain from using the term “theme,” originally employed by Parry and adopted by Lord (see Lord 1960:68-98), and instead prefer “narrative idea.” Not every song includes all of the following narrative ideas, nor are they always in exactly the same order, but all of the songs include some combination of the following:

1. Banquet at Novac's residence
2. Gruia is restless and withdrawn
3. Novac questions Gruia
4. Gruia responds, expressing desire to get married or go on a first quest
5. Novac ridicules Gruia and sometimes challenges him
6. Novac provides advice for the journey
7. Gruia disregards or violates Novac's advice
8. Gruia prepares himself and selects a horse for the journey
9. Gruia departs
10. Gruia captures and brings his bride home
11. Gruia is pursued by her father but needs help or fails in his quest
12. Novac jeers at Gruia after his journey
13. Gruia is humiliated
14. Novac pacifies his daughter-in-law's father or rectifies Gruia's failed quest
15. Wedding

it but is ultimately less than heroic in its culmination. Also constant in these tales is Novac, a father who attempts to establish dominance over his son's coming of age as he admonishes, advises, and even mocks him in his quest to grow up. There is in these roles intense, unmasked conflict relating to the boy's maturation and socialization and his father's uneasy recognition of these transitions.

Most of the initiation epics in the Novac cycle begin with an assembly or banquet, typically a rollicking feast at Novac's residence, where he and his cronies are eating, drinking, and making merry (1). Only Gruia, depicted deep in malaise, refuses to join in the revelry (2). In "The Wedding of Gruia and the Sultan's Daughter,"<sup>20</sup> Gruia's discontent as he idly sits among Novac's feasting guests is described (ll. 20-26):

Toț' boieri bea și mânca,	All of the boyars were drinking and eating.
Frumoșel că petrecea,	They were having a great time.
Numai Gruia să uita,	Only Gruia was watching.
Nici nu bea, nici nu mânca,	He was not drinking, nor was he eating.
Numa' cu ochii privea,	He was just looking around with his eyes.
Coate albe să scotea,	He pulled up his white elbows
Pe masă le răzima.	And leaned them on the table. <sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "Însurătoarea lui Gruia cu Fata Împăratului," sung by N. Zlătaru in Runcu-Gorj. Collected by Constantin Brăiloiu in 1930 and published in Brăiloiu 1932; reprinted in Amzulescu 1981:344-48.

<sup>21</sup> Other renditions of (2) include (from "Gruia the Child" [Amzulescu 1964:i, 363-68; ll. 25-27]):

Numai Gruia lui Novac	Only Gruia the son of Novac
Nici nu bea, nici nu mânca,	Wasn't drinking, nor was he eating,
Nici voie bună n-avea.	Nor was he having a good time.

In "Gruia, Son of Novac" (Amzulescu 1964:ii, 7-17; ll. 9-12), it is:

Dar Gruia, Novăciță,	But little Gruia, Novac's little son,
Nici nu bea, nici nu mânca	Was neither drinking nor eating,
Nici voie bună n-avea,	Nor was he having a good time.
Ci sta gata de-a pleca.	Instead, he was all ready to depart.

In "The Wedding of Ioviță" (Amzulescu 1964:ii, 28-34; ll. 23-27), the singer tells us:

Numai Ioviță nici nu bea,	Only Ioviță wasn't drinking,
Nici nu mânca,	Nor was he eating,
Numai cu ochii privea.	He was just looking around with his eyes,
Că ședea de zid răzmat,	As he was sitting, leaning against the wall,
Făr' de igealcă în cap. . .	Without a fez on his head.

Novac then invariably asks Gruia why he is so troubled (3). In “Gruia the Child,”<sup>22</sup> the scene is depicted thus (ll. 28-32):

Novac din gură-mi grăia: “Gruio, Gruio, puiul meu, Măi copile, dragul meu, De ce șezi tu supărat, Nebăut și nemîncat?”	Novac said to him: “O Gruia, Gruia, my chick, Hey, my child, my dear one, Why are you sitting there so angry, Neither drinking nor eating?” <sup>23</sup>
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<sup>22</sup> “Gruia copilul,” sung by an anonymous singer in Crîjma-Caransebeș-Banat. Collected by Gheorghe Cătană and published in Cătană 1895; reprinted in Amzulescu 1964:i, 363-68.

<sup>23</sup> Narrative idea (3) is highly formulaic; in “Gruia, Son of Novac,” we find (ll. 16-19):

“Măi Gruito, fiul meu, Să-ți ajute Dumnezeu! De ce șezi tu supărat, Nebăut și nemîncat? . . .”	“Hey, little Gruia, my son, May God help you! Why do you sit there so angry, Neither drinking nor eating?”
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In “The Wedding of Gruia and the Sultan’s Daughter” (Amzulescu 1981:344-48; ll. 28-30), we hear:

“Gruio, Gruio, fiul taichii, Nici nu bei, nici nu mănînci, Numai cu ochii te uiț’,	“Gruia, Gruia, Daddy’s boy, You aren’t drinking, nor are you eating. You’re just looking around with your eyes.”
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In a device termed negative parallelism, Novac asks Gruia a series of questions in “The Wedding of Ioviță” (ll. 32-39):

“. . . Ce nu bei, ce nu mănînci, Numai cu ochii te uiți? Ori bucatele nu-ți plac, Mă rog, și-altele să-ți fac? Ori gălbenăși mi-ai sfîrșit, Sau mai mulți c-ai dobîndit? Sau, frate, ți s-a făcut, Neică, de căsătorit?! . . .”	“. . . Why aren’t you drinking or eating, But just looking around with your eyes? Perhaps you don’t like the food here? Well, should I make something else for you? Or has your gold run out? Or have you received more gold? Or, brother, have you realized That you’re ready to get married?!”
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The same device is employed in “The Cadi’s Daughter,” when Novac asks his dejected nephew, who has just walked in the door (Amzulescu 1981:339-44; ll. 52-58 ):

“. . . Ce vîi, taică, năcăjît, Cu ogarii ciumpăviț’, Cu șoimeii veștejîți’, Or’ dechelciug c-ai sfîrșit, Sau țoale c-ai ponosît,	“. . . Why do you come here, man [Daddy*], all upset, With your hounds all tired out, With your falcons all drooping? Perhaps you’ve spent all your riches? Or your clothes are all worn out?
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Gruia typically answers by conveying his desire to get married (4). In the same song, he impatiently points out that, unlike his peers, he is not yet wed (ll. 33-37):

Gruia din gură-mi grăia: “D-oi tu, tăicuță Novace, Voie bună cum mi-oi face, Că văd vrîstniceii mei Că sînt toți însurăței.”	Gruia said to him: “Hey you, Daddy Novac! How can I have a good time, When I see that my age-mates Are all already married?”
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His change from boyhood to manhood is then metaphorically represented in a reference to his moustache and beard, which have begun to appear on his face, indicating, he implies, that he is becoming a man and deserves to have a bride (ll. 39-41):

“Însoară-mă, taică-nsoară, Că barba că mă-mpresoară, Și mustața îmi strică fața;”	“Let me get married, Daddy, let me get married! Because my beard is growing fast, And my moustache is all over my face.” <sup>24</sup>
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Sau cineva te-a bătut, Sau fetele nu te-a vrut?!”	Or someone beat you up? Or the girls didn't want you?!”
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\*“Taică” (“Daddy”) is an affectionate term of address, even to a younger man or one's own son.

<sup>24</sup> See a similar moustache metaphor in narrative idea (4) in “The Wedding of Gruia and the Wild Girl” when Gruia tells Novac (Amzulescu 1981:274-75; ll. 12-15):

“Însoară-mă, taichii-nsoară Că mustața-m' strică fața, Mi-i mustața-n vârvăric, Cum stă bine la voinic!”	“Let me get married, Daddy, let me get married Because my moustache is all over my face, My moustache is long and all curled up, The way heroes have theirs!”
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Another example of (4) comes from “The Cadi's Daughter,” where Gruia responds to Novac's questions (ll. 60-69):

“Niminea nu m-a bătut', Nij' de chelciug n-a 'firșît, Dar io, taică, m-am plimbat P'in tîrgu Odriului, La fata Cadiului, La Rada, fata frumoasă,	“No one has beaten me up, Nor have I spent all my money, But, Daddy, I took a walk Over to the Odriu marketplace, To the daughter of the Cadi, To Rada the beautiful girl,
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Gruia presents a portrait of the brooding, anxious youth who yearns to come of age. Parallels to this figure are found throughout Balkan epic.<sup>25</sup> One of the most well-developed is the initiatory hero Meho in the Serbo-Croatian Muslim epic “The Wedding of Smailagić Meho,”<sup>26</sup> who, like Gruia, sits inert and withdrawn in an assembly attended by elders and nobles who, also like Novac’s peers, are drinking and conversing. In imagery strikingly similar to that in the Romanian epic, the dejected and unhappy Meho refuses to drink but soon explains his gloom: he has not accomplished anything heroic yet since he has not yet been given the chance by his elders. Likewise, Gruia needs Novac’s approval to get married, a fact that enrages him, as reflected in his furious threats against his father in “Gruia the Child” (ll. 42-48):

“Iar de nu mi-i însura,  
Vei păți-o tu așa,  
Eu hoț mă voi face  
Și nu ți-oi da pace,  
Acas-oi veni,  
Pe tine te-oi omorî,  
Pe mamă oi văduvi!”

“Because if you don’t let me get married,  
This is what I will do:  
I will become a thief,  
And I won’t give you any peace.  
I’ll come home  
And I will kill you.  
I’ll make my mother a widow!”

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O’i negri de curvă-aleasă;  
Di-un cântecel mi-a cântat,  
Mi-a căzu’ mie cu drag,  
La inimă m-a săcat!”

With dark eyes like a choice hussy.  
She sang me a little song,  
I truly fell in love with her,  
My heart was taken!”

In a truncated version of (4), Gruia naively shouts out his wish to get married in “The Wedding of Gruia” (Amzulescu 1981:270-71, ll. 1-5):

Strigă, Doamne, cine strigă?  
Strigă Gruia lui Novac:  
“Eu sînt, taică, de-nsurat  
C-o fată m-a sărutat  
Și m-o spus că-s de-nsurat!”

Someone was yelling, Lord, who was yelling?  
Gruia the son of Novac was yelling:  
“I’m ready, Daddy, to get married!  
Because a girl kissed me  
And told me that I’m ready to get married!”

<sup>25</sup> One obvious parallel is found in the Serbo-Croatian “Ženidba Grujice Novakovića” (“The Wedding of Grujo Novaković”), in which Old Novak, while feasting with his peers, notices that Grujo, his son, is downcast. He learns from Grujo that he wishes to get married (Karadžić 1846:no. 6).

<sup>26</sup> See Bynum 1974 (Serbo-Croatian), Lord 1974 (English translation).

Meho also threatens to assault the assembly and all of Bosnia if his situation is not rectified. His grievance—that he has not been recognized by the elders and allowed to prove his manhood—is akin to that expressed by other young heroes in various Serbo-Croatian epics of initiation.<sup>27</sup> The situation is resolved by the elders' acknowledgment of Meho's authority, however temporary, which necessitates a journey to Budapest, where he also finds a bride. In other words, Meho's initiatory journey also ultimately includes a marriage. Gruia's only explicit concern, by contrast, is his gaining of a bride. He does not desire political recognition of his manhood, as does Meho. In many ways, Gruia's anxiety about marriage gets right to the heart of the question of generational continuity. Gruia knows that he too will participate in the ongoing process of family-making, just as his father did (and—in some songs—as he sees his peers doing), and he is impatient to begin. Moreover, in wishing to get married, Gruia effectively wishes to become just like his father (who is a married man); he feels a strong affinity with his hero-father. At the initial banquet in "The Wedding of Gruia and the Sultan's Daughter," when Novac asks Gruia why he is so despondent, Gruia answers, overtly expressing this affinity (ll. 36-43):

“Taică, tăculița mea,	“O Daddy, my little daddy!
Nici haine n-am ponosît,	I haven't worn out my clothes,
Nici de chelciug n-am sfîrșit,	Nor have I spent all my money,
Dară timpul mi-a venit	But the time has come for me,
Taică, de căsătorit,	Daddy, to get married,
Fie una lîngă mine	For there to be someone next to me
Cum 'i maica lîngă tine,	Like mother is next to you.
Bine mi-ar părea mie!”	I would really like that!”

Gruia's relationship with his father finds an ancient precedent in Odysseus and Telemachus in the *Odyssey*. Like Gruia, Meho, and many others, Telemachus is anxious to embark on his initiation journey. Accordingly, he is introduced in the *Odyssey*, as are his modern counterparts in their epics, as brooding and eager to separate himself from his childhood. Telemachus in Ithaca, like Meho, is denied the political authority that manhood would confer on him. And, like Gruia, he wishes to become just like his father—a theme echoed over and over in the *Odyssey*, especially in in Books I through IV and then again when the son joins his father later in the epic and proceeds to aid him in defeating his mother's suitors.

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<sup>27</sup> See Bynum 1968 for a discussion of this and eight other Serbo-Croatian epics of initiation, which all by and large follow the same general narrative pattern.

It is not only sons who are anxious in matters relating to generational transitions, however, but fathers as well. As Novac sees Gruia begin to pursue greater authority, he attempts to direct and even control his son's activities. Following Gruia's appeal to get married, Novac often admonishes him, telling him that he is too young (5). In "Gruia the Child," Novac argues (ll. 58-62):

<p>“Gruia, copil de rînd          Și cu capu cam bolînd,          Tu nu ești de însurat,          Toate fetele te bat          Și nici un război n-ai spart. . .”</p>	<p>“O little Gruia, you simple child          With your ailing mind!          You're not ready to get married yet.          The girls all still beat you up          And you haven't even fought a battle yet.”<sup>28</sup></p>
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Novac goes on to boast about the exploits of his own youth, explaining that by the time he got married he had already fought in seven wars. He challenges Gruia to prove whether he is worthy of a bride (5); in "Gruia the Child," Gruia is to defeat a monstrous creature called "fata sălbatică" (the wild girl), discussed below.

Novac's advice for Gruia's journey (6) is frequently disregarded or violated by Gruia as he implicitly declares his rebellion (7). At the opening banquet in "Gruia, Son of Novac," when young Gruia declares his wish to set off to Țarigrad (Istanbul), Novac shakes his head and warns him that if he is intent on this voyage, he should be sure to not drink wine there, as it could be poisoned. The singer comments (ll. 40-51):

<p>Gruia, copil zburdat,          De mic la rele-nvățat,            El în seamă nu băga</p>	<p>Little Gruia, capricious child,          Who had learned bad ways since he was          small,          He didn't listen</p>
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<sup>28</sup> In another example of (5), Novac tells Gruia in "The Wedding of Gruia, Son of Novac" to grow up first before he can get married (Amzulescu 1964:ii, 40-43; ll. 4-6):

<p>“Nu ești, neică, de-nsurat          Pînă fetele te bat          Și nevestele te luptă!”</p>	<p>“You aren't ready to get married, boy,          As long as the girls beat you up          And the wives fight with you!”</p>
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And in "The Wedding of Gruia" (ll. 6-10):

<p>“Nu ești, taică, de-nsurat          Că zău, fetele te bat,          Fetele cu furcile,          Babele cu drugile,          Neveste, cu prislite!”</p>	<p>“You aren't ready to get married, man,          Because, really, the girls still beat you up:          The girls with their pitchforks,          The old women with their bars,          The wives with their distaffs!”</p>
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Ce tatăl său îi spunea	To what his father told him.
Ci-și încingea armele	Instead, he girded himself with his weapons
Și-și gătea podoabele;	And got his accoutrements ready;
Apoi murgul și-l scotea,	Then he brought out his dark bay horse.
Slugile i-l țesăla,	The servants curry-combed him.
Cu șeaua mi-l înșela,	They put the saddle on him.
Cu frîne mi-l înfrina.	They bridled him.
Gruia pe el se suia,	Gruia mounted him
Rămas bun că mi-și lua.	And bid farewell to everyone.

Gruia insists on the journey; the verses describing his horse, weapons, and preparations (8) underscore the importance of his departure (9). And, once in Țarigrad, dismissing Novac's warning, he finds the "sultan's inn" and proceeds to drink glass after glass of wine for three days and three nights. But he also refuses to offer payment to the barmaid, who finally, in desperation, runs to the sultan for help. Gruia is subsequently imprisoned by the Turks and remains a captive for seven and a half years. He is finally rescued by Novac, who cannot resist scolding his son once again upon seeing him (12) (ll. 397-400):

"Gruito, copilul meu,	"O little Gruia, my child,
Tu faci tot de capul tău	You always do everything according to your own will
Și n-ascuți cuvântul meu,	And never listen to my advice.
Rău te bătu Dumnezeu!"	God punished you badly this time!"

This song includes contradictory imagery—on the one hand, of a young boy hardly ready to leave home by himself, and on the other, once in Țarigrad, of a ferocious and powerful drinker who is fearful enough to be thrown into prison by the Turks. Home (where Gruia was a boy) and Țarigrad (where he is a man) symbolically reinforce stages within his initiation.

Novac's pre-journey advice to Gruia pertains mostly to women and horses. In "Gruia, Son of Novac,"<sup>29</sup> Novac dispatches his son to Buda to find a bride (6). Once there, Gruia locates the maiden, artfully abducts her, and rides off in a classic bride capture (10). At the end of the song, the heroic Gruia's craving for recognition by Novac is revealed when he arrives home with his bride and tells him (ll. 69-70):

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<sup>29</sup> "Gruia lui Novac," sung by an anonymous singer. Published in *Gazeta poporului*, Timișoara, 1886. Reprinted in Amzulescu 1981:350-51.

“Ce tu, tată, ai gândit Eu toate le-am isprăvit!”	“Wouldn’t you know it, Dad, I did it all!”
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In “The Cadi’s Daughter,”<sup>30</sup> Novac wishes to dictate which horse should accompany Gruia on his bridal quest (6). He sends Gruia to the stable and tells him (ll. 76-84):

“. . . Să faci cum te-oi învăța: Tu la grajd să mi te duci Și tu cai să nu ne-alegi: Să nu iei pe Neguriță, C-ala ie bun de suliț; Și să iei pe Șargu cea zlabu, Care fuge cu anu Și răsuflă cu ceasu, C-ala ți-o scăpa capu!”	“. . . Do now what I tell you to: Go out to the stable. Don’t you pick from the horses; Don’t take Neguriță, Because she is like a spear. But do take Șargu, the lean horse, Who runs like crazy And breathes like a clock. With her you’ll escape with your head!”
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Gruia does not take the horse Novac has identified but rather the one that he himself prefers, which is the forbidden horse Neguriță (7). With Neguriță, he goes straightaway to the bride he wishes to marry. In a variant of this song, “The Wedding of Ioviță,”<sup>31</sup> Novac sends his nephew (called Ioviță) to the stable with advice about which horse to choose (6). Ioviță is dissatisfied with all of them, however, until he glimpses a special horse off to the side, Albu, which he selects. Novac cautions him to not ride Albu, since he is a rambunctious horse and will “ruin him.” Ioviță senses, however, that this is a special horse (ll. 84-87):

Știi, ca para focului, Luceafărul cerului, D-inșelat și d-înfrînat, Cum e bun de-ncălecat;	You know, red-hot like fire, Like the morning star in the sky, Great for saddling and bridling, Just as he is great for mounting.
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Ioviță defies Novac (7), mounts Albu, and rides off, arriving at the Turkish mosque where he spies the daughter of the Cadi, with whom he has fallen in love. In these songs, Gruia has an intuitive knowledge about which horse best matches him as a hero, despite what his father suggests. This special

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<sup>30</sup> “Fata Cadiului,” sung by Ștefan Neagu in Sadova-Dolj. Collected by Amzulescu in 1961 and published in Amzulescu 1974:159-66.

<sup>31</sup> “Însurătoarea lui Ioviță,” sung by Dumitru Burcea in Merenii-de-Sus-Videle-București. Collected by Amzulescu in 1951 and published in Amzulescu 1956:67-72.

knowledge again serves as an expression of rebellion as Gruia seeks to grow up and rely on his own instincts, not his father's.

“The Wedding of Gruia and the Sultan's Daughter” presents a graphic depiction of father-to-son role transferral when Gruia prompts Novac to pass his horse and weapons on to him, saying (ll. 55-59):

“ . . . Dă-m' murgu din bătrînețe	“ . . . Give me the dark bay horse from your old age
Și arme din tinerețe;	And the weapons from your youth:
Săbioara cea mischie,	The little pale-gray sword,
Mi-a fost dăruită mie	Which has been promised to me
Din mică copilărie!”	Since I was a small child!”

Novac then leads Gruia to the stable and opens the door to find the magnificent horse Roșu, who terrifies the whole world when he neighs and must be restrained by twelve people and saddled by seven—a fitting metaphor for a spirited young hero. In the scene that follows (8), Gruia undergoes a symbolic initiatory rite of passage, including separation, transition, and incorporation.<sup>32</sup> First “Gruia” (“Little Gruia”) exits from the stable in what is clearly a separation. Then he enters “a little room” (a transitional space) where he changes his attire and obtains the sword. In his incorporation, Gruia then returns to the stable as if reborn a hero, equipped with his new sword and a change of clothes. Gruia is now truly ready to come of age: he easily mounts the fierce Roșu and takes off to Țarigrad, where Novac has advised him to find a bride. Gruia's new-found symbols of manhood, their significance augmented since they come directly from his hero-father, are conspicuous: horse, weapons, and dress. The extraordinary horses in these epics are so unruly that no one but an exceptional hero—Gruia—can ride them. They are reminiscent of other special horses in Balkan epic that can fly and sometimes talk; they are also devoted companions to their hero-masters.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the novice hero throughout

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<sup>32</sup> See the three-stage paradigm for life-cycle rites of passage in van Gennep 1960.

<sup>33</sup> Marko Kraljević's horse, Šarac, talks and flies (in the Bulgarian tradition, Marko's horse is called “Sharko”). Other parallels are found in Serbo-Croatian Muslim epic, where the hero Mujo Hrnjičić has a white winged horse who also speaks, while Djerdjelez Alija has a chestnut winged steed. On horses and horse culture in Balkan epic, see Lord 1991.

Balkan epic is typically outfitted for his initiatory quests with special accoutrements—clothing and arms, in addition to his steed.<sup>34</sup>

On quests to prove his manhood, Gruia is not always “man enough” to accomplish what he sets out to do, such as capturing brides or slaying dragons. It is often Novac who finishes off heroic tasks such as acquiring Gruia’s bride for him or dealing the final blows to Gruia’s opponent. It is in these moments, perhaps more than anywhere else in the initiatory epics, that the paradox of what Gruia wants and what he is able to do is portrayed most poignantly. In “The Wedding of Gruia,”<sup>35</sup> Novac suggests that Gruia find a fairy to be his bride (6). Gruia goes to the mountains and comes upon her asleep. He leans over to kiss her, but she wakes up and strikes him. Gruia, frightened, runs back to Novac, who reminds him (12) (ll. 32-34):

“Nu ți-am spus, tăichiță, spus,	“Didn’t I tell you, man, didn’t I,
Nu ești taichii de-nsurat	That you’re not ready to get married, man,
Că și fete mici te bat. . . .”	Because even little girls still beat you
	up.” <sup>36</sup>

Novac then sets off, captures the fairy himself, and brings her home to Gruia (14), who marries her (15). But the fairy is not meant to live with mortals; she deserts Gruia after the wedding and returns to her own world.

In “Gruia the Child,” Gruia responds to his father’s challenge to conquer the hideous “wild girl” in order to prove his readiness for marriage. The confrontation between Gruia and the terrifying creature, whom he finds asleep, is full of comic hyperbole. Gruia kicks her, at which she wakes up

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<sup>34</sup> E.g., Meho’s horse, attire, and weapons are elaborately described before he sets off for Budapest in “The Wedding of Smailagić Meho”; see Lord 1974:99-108.

<sup>35</sup> “Însuratul lui Gruia,” sung by an anonymous singer in Serbian Banat. Collected by I. G. Bibicescu and published in Bibicescu 1893; reprinted in Amzulescu 1981:270-71.

<sup>36</sup> In a variant of (12) from “The Wedding of Gruia and the Wild Girl,” Novac meets Gruia after his defeat by the wild girl and says (ll. 59-64):

“Nu ți-am spus, taichii, ți-am spus	“Didn’t I tell you, man, didn’t I,
Ca io, taichii,-am așteptat	That I expected you, man,
Să vii cântînd și fluierînd	To come back singing and whistling
Și pă drumuri pușcărînd,	And firing your rifle all the way home.
Da’ nu isci, taichii, dă-nsurat,	But, you aren’t ready, man, to get married,
Că toate fecili ce bat; . . .”	Because all the girls still beat you up. . . .”

and seizes him, squeezing him so hard that three of his ribs break.<sup>37</sup> In an inversion of the motif in which a hero hurls his sword up into the clouds, waiting seemingly forever for it to return, the wild girl tosses Gruia into the sky so high that it takes three days for him to come back down, whereupon he lies nearly lifeless for three more. Finally, several days later, Gruia revives (13) (ll. 126-29):

Dar pe loc el nu mai sta,	But he didn't stay there any longer
Ci la cal mi să ducea,	But went over to his horse
Tot plîngînd și suspinînd	All weeping and sobbing
Și pe fată blăstămînd.	And cursing the girl. <sup>38</sup>

When Gruia returns home, the humiliation is not over, as Novac caustically asks him (12) (ll. 139-42):

“Ce atît-ai zăbovit,	“What took you so long?
Ori cu fata te-ai iubit?	Did you and the girl make love?
Eu te-aștept să vini rîzînd,	I expected you to return laughing,
Iară tu îmi vini plîngînd!”	But instead you've come back crying!”

Novac then departs to find the monster and decapitate her (14). Gruia is depicted yet again as an anti-hero, as the final verses relate his horror at the sight of the girl's head, which Novac has brought home.

Finally, “The Cadi's Daughter” tells how Ioviță (the hero's name in this variant) abducts a bride (usually in Țarigrad) through disguise and deceit<sup>39</sup> and then flees with her, angrily pursued by her father, the Cadi (10). As Ioviță and his bride gallop back home, they see an “enormous rain cloud” following them but soon realize that it is the Cadi chasing them. Ioviță is terrified (11) (ll. 175-79):

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<sup>37</sup> In a variant of the same song, when Gruia sees what the wild girl is like when she wakes up (l. 36), the singer tells us that “Friguri dă moarce-l pringea” (“Death-like shivers gripped him”): narrative idea (11).

<sup>38</sup> In the same variant, the narrative idea “Gruia is humiliated” captures Gruia's failure to conquer the wild girl (ll. 54-55):

Așa trist și necăjit,	He was so sad and upset
Ca dă Dumnezeu bătut.	As if God had defeated him.

<sup>39</sup> One could argue that Gruia's skills in deception augment his heroic persona. Odysseus's competence in deception, for example, is often interpreted as a heroic trait.

De-aşa frică ce-i erea,	He was so filled with fear
Paloj din teacă trăgea,	That he pulled his sword out of its sheath.
Cu el de-azvîrlita da,	He hurled it into the air.
Drept în grindă să-nfigea,	It landed right on the veranda,
Vezi, în grinda lui Novac,	Look, on Novac's veranda.

This passage embodies the paradox of Gruia as both anti-hero and hero. As an anti-hero, he is so frightened by the Cadi that he calls on Novac to rescue him and his bride. But the means by which he signals to Novac his need for help reveals incredible heroism: he flings his sword into the distance with such precise marksmanship that it lands exactly on the veranda where Novac is sitting. Novac immediately understands his son's cry for help and sets off, meets the Cadi, and manages to make peace with him (14) (ll. 203-7):

Cu Cadia să-ntîlnea,	He met up with the Cadi.
De departe că striga:	He called out from a distance:
“Dura, dura, cuscre, dura,	“Wait, wait, father-in-law, <sup>40</sup> wait,
Copiii fac vrăjbile,	Children feud,
Noi bătrînii—pacile!”	But we old people make peace!”

The song ends with contented heroes, horses, and a festive wedding.<sup>41</sup> In another variant, “The Wedding of Ioviță,” the action proceeds in similar fashion. Near the end of the tale, however, as the chase is on, Novac confronts the irate Cadi and tries to reason with him, but this Cadi is intent on beheading Novac.<sup>42</sup> Novac then deals the Cadi a death blow, takes his horse, and returns home where Ioviță and his bride have already arrived. Soon after, the wedding takes place and the festivities begin (15). This

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<sup>40</sup> *Cuscru* is a kinship term meaning the father of one's son- or daughter-in-law (in the vocative case in the excerpt).

<sup>41</sup> Another variant of this song, “The Wedding of Gruia,” also ends with a peaceful reconciliation between the Cadi and Novac (14), thanks again to his diplomacy. Both fathers agree to leave “the children” alone.

<sup>42</sup> In “The Wedding of Ioviță” (in narrative idea 14), Novac tells the Cadi (ll. 216-22):

“Dur, dur, dur, cuscre Cadio,	“Wait, wait, wait, father-in-law Cadi,
Nu glumi cu copiii	Don't fool around with the children,
Glumește cu bătrînii.	But do fool around with the old people.
Copiii că-ngîlcevesc	Because children quarrel,
Bătrînii că-mpăciuiesc.	But old people make up.
Copiii fac vrăjbur'le,	Children feud,
Iară bătrînii păciur'le!”	While old people make peace!”

narrative pattern—bride capture and pursuit—is typical in Balkan traditional narrative and is even still found, at times, in real life.<sup>43</sup>

### Conclusion

The initiatory hero in the Romanian oral epic tradition—Gruia, of the Novac cycle—mediates between two universal life-cycle stages: childhood and adulthood. He occupies an ambiguous and often paradoxical position as he expressively articulates the passage from boy to young man. As both hero and anti-hero, Gruia brings diverse meanings—passion, strength, joy, humor, anger, obstinacy, weakness, and failure—to his role in the epics of initiation.<sup>44</sup> I have charted how Gruia and his father (or uncle) Novac represent concerns that pertain to the traditional patriarchal family and its successive generations. Gruia and Novac are constantly in conflict—an apt reflection of generational dynamics. I have also demonstrated how oral tradition—the structure of the stories in multiform and the ways in which singers turn to similar narrative patterns and repeated verbal forms—characterizes the genre. Indeed, Gruia’s meaning within Romanian oral narrative gains depth in the context of other novice heroes. These heroes—Telemachus, Meho Smailagić, and numerous others from Balkan oral tradition—also undergo meaningful initiations as they pass from childhood to adulthood.

I have attempted in this article to suggest a number of connections between the narratives of Jesus and the epics of the Balkan world. Rites of passage play a crucial role in the narratives that surround Jesus in the Gospels. While initiation for Jesus is not central to his story, birth and death take on marked, symbolic meanings in the New Testament. Moreover, most

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<sup>43</sup> E.g., the Bulgarian “Marko otvlichia nevestata” (“Marko Abducts the Bride”), Miladinov and Miladinov 1861:no. 147. See also the Russian *byliny* (oral epics) about the hero Solovei Budimirovich, who often figures in stories of bride capture (Bailey and Ivanova 1998). Bride capture is still occasionally practiced in some communities in the Balkans. During recent fieldwork in a southern Romanian village, a young Romani man (a musician with whom I have worked) had recently “abducted” and eloped with his bride, having taken her to another village where they stayed with her aunt for several days. His family then recognized them as married. See also Bringa 1995, espec. ch. 4 on marriage procedures and elopement.

<sup>44</sup> Although I have collected Romanian epic extensively, I have never encountered a performance of a song from the Novac cycle. This is unfortunate, since I have a great fondness for these narratives and the richness of their expression, especially for Gruia, who is such an imperfect yet thoroughly sympathetic “hero” that it is almost impossible not to identify with and love him.

of the narratives and episodes in the Gospels were orally transmitted, at least at one time, and were told in multiform, though many were eventually preserved in written form. Finally, I have also proposed that Jesus is a hero whose life-story can be fruitfully viewed in a broad comparative framework. His life-story illuminates other traditional heroic life-stories, just as other narratives of birth, initiation, and death can enlighten his.

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