COMMUNICATION AND NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN ROMANIAN SHORT STORIES

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Abstract: *The European readers know quite a lot of information about Romanian contemporary fiction, but very little about the one created during the interwar heydays. Several of the most important and interesting Romanian writers belong to this epoch. Authors of famous novels, they also wrote extremely successful short stories dealing with diverse issues. Trying to highlight these Romanian achievments, we comment upon the works of Mircea Eliade and Marin Preda. They wrote attractive and challenging short stories with undoubted mythological and philosophical implications (With the Gypsy Girls, – M. Eliade, The Horse and Meeting the Earth – M. Preda). This paper specifies these aspects besides the staging procedure that emphasizes the foreground and the background of the discourse. This interrelation is a fruitful one for subtle significances, interesting insights into Romanian folklore, myths and specific philosophical aspects related to both writers. The sudden intervention of unexpected events is supported by incident schemes and specific stylistic and narrative strategies. We comment upon prerogative perspective which is important for referential continuity. We also highlight the impersonal vision (Marin Preda) and the diffuse perspective implying temporal compressions, imbrications and contagions (Mircea Eliade). One of the main objectives of this approach is to present historical and cultural activities and influences framing Romanian society and national literary context in addition to local cultural circumstance.*

Keywords: *narrative, myth, Romanian literature.*

The paper is focused upon two important short stories of these outstanding Romanian writers (*With the Gypsy Girls* by Mircea Eliade and *The Horse* by Marin Preda). Both authors showed interest on short stories during the first stage of their creative period. They also manifested a similar interest in fantastic short stories with mythical inferences.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Romanian literature faced various cultural trends and currents, few of them overlapping. Some were modern and others were traditional. Besides, the psychological roots may disclose the original features of the expression level. Thus, if the interpretation spots a fine, revealing detail (Spitzer, 1954), this will offer a key-element for understanding a fragment or the entire artistic work. The linguistic expression indicates a particular interest in spiritual themes. Generally, one can say that most Romanian writers had a preference for the idea of still, recurrent time. Mircea Eliade explicitly developed this conception from a philosophical and theoretical point of view. This mentality has nothing in common either with the current French formula (*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*) or the theory of circles or that of *corso et ricorso*. This is a leit-motif of the Romanian literature and it is related to events, not to the time itself. Human acts become rituals which offer the possibility of an incessant world. This specific way of conceiving the world's course is common to

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both heroes of the two short stories: the physician Gavrilescu in *With the Gypsy Girls* and Florea Gheorghe in *The Horse*. Although, one may easily notice an obvious difference existing in the social frame: the first one performs in an urban, Balkan context, the latter takes action in a countrified environment (a plain village near the Danube). The fluctuation between traditionalist rural themes and modern town-subjects is also characteristic for Romanian literature during the first half of the 20th century. It had to follow cutting-edge influences and it needed to synchronize with the European spirituality.

Time-Epitome

Both heroes have the courage to confront the mystery of time and to analyze the coherency appearance *versus* essence. We consider these two short stories a kind of epitome for time as a force able to restore creation (Eliade, 1978: 3). This is the basic idea of this paper and we offer a few arguments in favor for our previous statement. These short stories have several features in common, but the paper concentrates on two similar mythical approaches: the myth of Orpheus and the myth of Ulysses which are enriched with various convergent symbolic and mythological features.

The myth of Orpheus

Mircea Eliade's character, Gavrilescu, is a music professor, a modern and common version of the classical Orpheus. He descends into hell. The gypsies' house is the place of no return and it recalls mythical origins. Gavrilescu undergoes a ritual death in that house and his eager wish is to retrieve his two beloved women, Hildegard and Elsa. Gavrilescu wants to recreate the Adamic couple. He struggles to regain the feeling of pure love being terrorized by the thought that he has sentimentally failed. As Orpheus, he breaks rules (example: the interdiction to drink coffee in gypsies' house), and he does not succeed in his attempt to accomplish love.

Florea Gheorghe, the character of Marin Preda, goes to a deserted, morbid and shattering place; he reaches a large, deep backwoods that is full with corpses. Disarray and confusion are obviously present in this lurid space. This is Tartarus, but an uncommon one. The backwoods resonates with sounds and noises very similar to a strange song. The bones of the old horse which will be killed twiddle tragic notes. Organic, irregular forms and sounds portray a life at its end, at its sunset. The scenery full of bones and signs of death evokes a poetic archeology of prehistoric time. The man and the horse had interfluent lives. The horse is the metonymy of the life of Florea Gheorghe. Thus, the countryman tries to delay or to defeat his own spiritual disappearance and the tragic outcome. The enchanting music of the nature is for his survival. He also uses a primitive tool (a huge bone) to put to death his horse. Thereby, he rejects modern times and introduces himself as a simple, primitive human being driven by moral law. His regrets and empathy may be explained by his continuous experience in *illo tempore*.

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Both characters prove eloquence and endurance, being able to cope with crises. They also have the leading part in important initiating journeys towards themselves. Their travels have the symbolic and mythological shape of a labyrinth.

The labyrinth is a complex and very sinuous road implying skills, but especially willingness to find the core of the maze and the essence of the soul. The heroes' efforts are greater and more intimate. They wish to reach a hardly accessible place that is very well watched over (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1995: 191-192). The covering of the labyrinth-road involves also a selection process. Some manage to reach the center, while others do not. The two short stories contain a few symbols, metaphors and metonymies of the labyrinth. First of all, the conscience and the thoughtfulness of Gavrilescu and Florea Gheorghe are coextensive with the labyrinth.

Both persons deal with psychopomps creatures responsible to accompany the souls into afterlife. A classic psychopomp-symbol is the horse appearing in either short story. Florea Gheorghe has to kill his old horse and walk together obeying the ritual stops of a religious orthodox funeral. Professor Gavrilescu uses a modern version of the horse. At the beginning, he travels by tram and, afterwards, by a cab; the cab-driver stands for a telluric Charon who drives Gavrilescu to the dark woods. The myths update and take new, advanced forms (Durand, 1977: 162). The symbol of horse has clear affinities with water and sun, symbolic elements that are present in both short stories.

Another common component is the gypsy-hero. Professor Gavrilescu meets three women, one of them being a gypsy. There he descends into a parallel world and the mediocre man, the anti-hero finally lives "his chthonic life" (Eliade, 1991: 252). Ilie, the blacksmith from *The horse*, is a gypsy too; his nickname is *One-eyed*. Any gypsy character inhabits malefic realms. The gypsies' house is such a place and the forge figures a locked devil-abode. Besides, Ilie may be interpreted as an alternative for the mythological Cyclops. Cyclops helps Hephaestus, the blacksmith of the gods. Even, the fight of Ulysses with Polyphemus/Cyclops offers the clue for the combat of a hero with his own obsessions. Professor Gavrilescu and Florea Gheorghe succeed to break loose from the cave of their own consciousness.

The gypsy people have another devilish feature. They can counterfeit everything, but they cannot copy the primary word *Paraşabda* as it is coincident with the divine *Logos* (Lovinescu, 1989: 76). The one-eyed Ilie, one of the characters in the short story *The Horse*, cannot pronounce correctly the word *potcoave* and he says instead *coptoave*. (Besides, the shape of a horseshoe resembles the pound, the harp of Orpheus by which he challenges Inferno.) In Eliade's short story, *With the Gypsy Girls*, the old woman who watch over the house as a kind of Cerberus. She submits professor Gavrilescu to a tricky game: guessing. This game involves deceit, lies, hide, and masks, all of them being symbols of falsehood. This resemblance with Cerberus allows a new association with the myth of Orpheus.

A common symbolic figure in both short stories is the circle. It is a classical symbol for time, but it also evokes the idea of movement, of change. This complex form expresses the aspiration to a superior world or to a higher standard of living. Both desires are common for professor Gavrilescu and Florea Gheorghe. The circle has become the classic image of the intellect succeeding to figure out a mystery (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1995: 296). Gavrilescu's roads are repeated at cyclical intervals (three o'clock, three days, twelve years), the hint of a round period of time being dominant in the entire short story. Gavrilescu lives a temporal compression. The subjective time

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(several hours) does not correspond to historical time. The supernatural features erase or blur the time-limits. In *The Horse*, the symbolism of the sphere impresses. The food-bites of the old horse and of his master, Florea Gheorghe, are all round and resemble pellets or clods. The water itself takes a solid and globular form when it is drunk. We wish to highlight the fact that the mouth itself is considered a perfect round shape in all ancient civilizations, cultures and folklore. Thus, in these two short stories the symbolism of circle overlaps the epitome of time, of eternity and continuous renewal.

Psychopomp-journeys

Any reflection on the relationship between artist and dying is anguish and unsettling. The literary and philosophical tradition sees in these terms two fundamental, unimaginable concepts that are placed at an intelligible interface. As Plato said, art is the bridge beyond the absolute. The association of these terms open two ways. At the same time, we have to admit that death is a privileged object for any artistic representation. Both heroes of the Romanian writers undertake journeys to death and the journey is actually an allegory of life as dream. Life is a flash of non-being, of a dream, of a mate-game of contemplation. It takes place during a cyclic time.

The mortal word-wound of the villager

It is needless to underline the fact that the character of the short story requires full attention and characterization. The life of the Romanian countryman is like water, a vital element which is ever-present in Marin Preda's work. It floats over rude times, difficulties and obstacles. The Romanian countryman loves his animals and the vegetal kingdom from his crop field and stack yard. All our writers have mentioned and focused on the harmonic life of the peasant in the nature, especially in the intimate nature found around his establishment. The main character in Marin Preda's most important novel *Morometii*, Ilie Moromere, has also a dual vegetal body in the big and old golden chain from the back of his house. The trees, the corn and draft animals are vital, precious, and dear for the peasant's heart. Thus, Florea Gheorghe's old horse, a beloved creature, is free to stop in order to drink water several times in the last day of its life. These breaks anticipate its meeting with the death. Nevertheless, this is also a mental feature of the Romanian countryman: he cares for stopovers and going-bys. These are places and moments for talking to himself, for remorse, regrets, joy, grief, reasoning, atonement. Florea Gheorghe has to go with his old horse in order to put an end to its life. He pretends to be in a hurry, having a busy day ahead, but he stops in the middle of the courtyard, on the footbridge, near the well, at the blacksmith's house, next to a brook, and at the open red pit where he will sacrifice his stale friend. He tries to offer a lodgment and a pause for his grievous thoughts. The narrative-speed is slow down. The character has to part with his horse. Even more, he is the one who has to kill it.

Although the horse is deaf, tired, almost blind, skin and bones, he stands for a long and strong relationship that ends tragically. The act of killing the horse tangibly reminds Heracle's deed when he accidentally wounded Kheiron/Chiron. Kheiron was an immortal god, half-brother of Zeus, the oldest and the wisest of the Centaurs, half horse men. Hercules deadly hearted him with an arrow coated in venom. Kheiron voluntarily relinquished his immortality and died. However, instead of being consigned to Haides, he was given a place amongst the stars by Zeus. Florea Gheorghe put an end to the life of the old creature, but he suffered. Florea Gheorghe is a character shaped by custom.

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As customary, he must flay its skin and this final scene resembles to a fight which is not over yet. Is it a struggle or an embrace? It is hard to decide. The short novel concludes with the mocked remark of a shepherd passing by on the surrounding hills. The narrative thread is disrupted and, in our opinion, these last lines really represent an assault of a mythological and symbolical scene. The shepherd's words inflict the lethal wound of the horse.

The mortal aesthetic-wound of an intellectual

Gavrilescu, the music teacher and the main character in Eliade's short novel, is a failed Oedipus. He is an intellectual living in Bucharest at the beginning of the 20th century and he goes astray in the initiating maze of human condition. Eliade emphatically stated that Bucharest is for him "the center of boundless mythology" (Eliade, 1991: 131). The scattered mythology of modern human beings survives in this city. "Celebrated already in Plato and Aristotle, the city seems a symbolic solution to one of the philosophy's most central problems - the many and the one" (Shusterman, 2000: 100). The precise historic period is not mentioned. The character Gavrilescu travels by street-car through an iconic Bucharest during a canicular summer-day. Heat is the basic principle of rebirth and communication (Chevalier, J., Gheerbrant A., 1995: 271), but this time Eliade's hero experiences fear, astonishment in front of the mythic place of origins which is found in the whorehouse of the gypsies. There he lives a compressed, subjective time indicating the ingoing into Hell. All the interpretations have agreed with this representation, and the three gypsies are the Parcae, the female personification of destiny while the old woman-gatekeeper embodies Cerberus. Gavrilescu is terribly thirsty. His thirst is a symbol for human sufferings. Gavrilescu steps into memory lane by disobeying the advice of not drinking the coffee offered by the evil character. He drinks it and experiences the loss of his identity and the death of Self. The coffee is the cursed water or death water. The character and the writer face the mystery of death, the artistic illusion being the only salvation-way. Art is a magical elixir and the author uses existing representation of death in Romanian imagination.

Conclusions

- First original Romanian fictional writings appeared after 1840. In only 90 years, Romanian literature encompassed all European cultural currents, associating them and producing works of high quality.
- M. Eliade and M. Preda are two of the most important Romanian authors of short stories, but with different perspectives and techniques. Both presented intellectual updates for Romanian culture.
- Preda uses a single story line that is proper for rescue models in which the wise character/narrator admits his weak and unstable condition. Preda masters a subtle rhetoric ending for his short story in which life is perpetuated.
- The philosopher and historian M. Eliade is a complex individual who looked mainly for a literary adjunct for his scientific works. He has the calling of monumental, being a multivalent personality using story lines according to his ideas. His fiction preserves random, relative and oscillating elements. He keeps the order of imaginary instead of the disordered reality and he chooses the narrative experience in the world of accuracy and causality.

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- The two writers learn to penetrate the mysteries of death, succeeding to anticipate their ends. To a certain extent, these short stories are a kind of self-portrait with death.
- Eliade created the literary similitude of a difficult life in which death reveals the essence of human and open-mindness for a richer reading.

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