# *"UNVEILING THE TRUTH" IN THE PROSE OF IOAN PETRU CULIANU*

**Simona GALAȚCHI**
**"Mircea Eliade" Center of Oriental Studies**
**Metropolitan Library of Bucharest**

***Abstract:*** *In the collection of manuscripts of "Mircea Eliade Book Fund", which belongs to the Centre of Oriental Studies "Mircea Eliade" of Bucharest Metropolitan Library, one can find the novel* ***Râul Selenei*** *[Selena's River] by Ioan Petru Culianu, a typescript novel not published yet. The paper focuses on the presentation and on the analysis of this novel that is a rewriting in contemporary vision of a rite of shamanic initiation. The research encounters Culianu's vision – expressed in literary terms – as a replica (and even more) at Mircea Eliade's thought and at what Carlos Castaneda did in his books. The American anthropologist, Carlos Castaneda, published his first volume,* ***The Teachings of Don Juan*** *(1968), with a "non-fiction" warning as to its contents, and was finally suspected of pure invention in his writings, because nobody except his apprentice could ever see Don Juan. On the other hand, Culianu's paradox is that he writes* ***Râul Selenei*** *with the mention "novel", but, beside not being published, we can notice (as to be seen) its non-fictionality character. Going back to Mircea Eliade's ideas, we may consider* ***Râul Selenei*** *an attempt of literary illustration of how the sacred – and implicitly the initiatic dimension involved by the access to it – is hidden in the profane, in the prosaic, everyday existence.*

***Key words:*** *Romanian literature, shamanic initiation rites, cultural anthropology.*

## Introduction: The Story of a Manuscript

Among the numerous documents included in the "Mircea Eliade Book Fund" that belongs to the Centre of Oriental Studies "Mircea Eliade" of Bucharest Metropolitan Library (respectively, books, manuscripts, summaries, abstracts and notes of Mircea Eliade), there is also the unpublished yet novel *Râul Selenei* [Selena's River], entrusted by Culianu to the famous writer and historian of religions. The novel's manuscript was brought to Romania in 1996, when Christinel Eliade (the wife of the renowned historian of religions) donated to the "Sergiu Al.-George" Institute of Oriental Studies in Bucharest Eliade's "Parisian library", made available when she sold off the apartment of 4 Place Charles Dullin, where the Eliades used to live in the months spent in Paris.

## General Presentation

The front page of this manuscript indicates – as results from the author's handwritten dedication – the fact that the manuscript was given to Mircea Eliade in 1976, in Paris, (probably) at one of the meetings the two of them had in the first years of their relationship. The correspondence Mircea Eliade – Ioan Petru Culianu, published in the volume *Dialoguri întrerupte* [Interrupted dialogues] (the letters sent in the period 1973-1976), but also in Mircea Eliade's *Journal*, prove that, beside the professional



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help that Eliade tried to provide for Culianu by the time, the two of them used to mutually stimulate and support each other in literature.

Aside from this dedication (written by the author in black ink), the last page of the manuscript is clarifying with respect to the moment the novel was written. Culianu ends its text with the following note: "13 May – 22 August, / In several places". We hereby assume that the novel was written in the period 13 May – 22 August 1976, therefore in only 2 months and a few days, when the author was 26 years old, and was immediately entrusted to Eliade after finalization, in August 1976, when the two were in Paris.

The holograph dedication on the first page of the manuscript included other few mentions: "To Mircea Eliade and his Lady, this novel written under the sign of a good owl, with all the love and gratitude of the author, and with the joy of having written it. I.P. Culianu, Paris, '76". These words speak of Culianu's relation with Mircea Eliade and his wife, revealing a close and warm relationship in which the encouragement and stimulation to write are rewarded with the author's "love and gratitude", while the fact that he found the time and inspiration to write this novel – as an emigrant in Italy, overwhelmed with the tension of sitting for his exams, a situation that Eliade was familiar with – adds to the text "the joy of having written it". Besides, this dedication also speaks about placing the novel under the sign of an owl, a bird which in the popular beliefs announces death, only that in this case the owl has become a beneficial sign (and we shall further see how).

The novel opens, also on its front page, with three quotations placed as mottos: "If the owl screams, you should rightfully be afraid" (Menander) / "The horned owl sings near de house of a sick man three days before his death." (DE GUBERNATIS, *Zoological Mythology*, volume II, London 1872: 249) / "The bird acquired gigantic proportions, like in a vision. Its open wings shall be the sun and the moon." (FRANKFORT, *Kingship and the Gods*, Chicago-London 1969: 37). The book therefore starts with the traditional mythological symbols granting the owl the role of a messenger of death, and comes to portray a fantastic, huge bird representing the canopy.

The author's explicit intention, presented on this introductory page of the novel, is to offer the reader the possibility to see the "deep chaos opened behind the curtain torn apart by a theological matter". In other words, Culianu rises against the "ignorance and vanity" of ordinary men, who are kept away from the "nothingness" to be found behind any existential aspect, behind every incident presented: "If I somehow managed to tear this curtain apart for one moment (the wounds of nothingness are restored as quick as thought), the reader is going to realize that better than myself". Considering the counterweight of negative theology, respectively the positive, assertive theology, we can understand the metaphor of "curtain torn apart" as an attempt to see "beyond" – beyond the everyday, immediate reality. We are thus made a suggestion about the fatal alternation between positive knowledge (tear apart the curtain and have a glimpse of the "nothingness") and the negative one (instant restoring of the "nothingness"), which makes the real things, concealed behind the shroud of appearances, not to let themselves got known but also caught in a glimpse, understood with the help of in-lightning intuition. What Culianu proposes with this text is a transgressing of the ontological and psychological limits ("Today the issue of the limits has not got a theological echo any more, but rather an ontological and psychological one"), which we need to be capable to do in the conditions of an ordinary, prosaic life. What we are to see that it happens in the novel, under the *apparent* form (my underline/ S.G.) of an "honest report or detective story", according to the author, represents



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therefore an example of transgression of limits, of crossing the barriers that any particular system of creation has. *Râul Selenei* is a thesis novel, and this thesis, so repeated at the beginning and at the end of the front page (but also as motto of chapter 8, as a quotation from Emil's journal), is: "*The only limit is that everything is as it is*".

**Architecture of the Novel**

After the page exposing the thesis of the novel, the author writes a chapter independent from the remaining text and entitled *Pasărea* [The Bird]. Here we discover Emil, the main character of the novel in which we recognize Ioan Petru Culianu with his autobiographical details. Emil is living in his room in a flat-roof loft, where he is visited by the nestling of an unknown bird, which inspires him "a vague feeling of fear". The event is followed by the appearance of an owlet, which cries out "a desperate message" to him. The chapter ends with the author's omniscient voice, which explains: "Emil could not know that birds are not indifferent, that they had invited him at a meeting which he could not honour. He could not know that by then – at least not before the 15th of August – and only the owls could save him any more" (mss., page 4). If the novel's mottos warned us that owls would announce frightening events and even death, these birds pop up in the hero's life only to contradict the reader's expectations, as we see them vested with positive symbols: "(Emil) knew that owls and owlets are his guarding animals" (mss., page 4). The chapter intends to raise anxiety before the hero's fear and confusion suggested by such birds, on the one hand, and, on the other, to trouble and vex the reader by changing his/her expectations. This de-conditioning of the reader (who gets something different than expected) is made by changing the signification granted to owls. To this purpose, Culianu takes the owlet for an owl. The Native Americans believed that "the owl may grant support and protection (at night). (…) Meanwhile, the positive symbols of owlets are older and probably prior to Christianity" (CHEVALIER, GHEERBRANT, volume 1, 1994: 214-215). And here it is a first reference to the universe of symbols of the American Indians, to which Culianu is going to connect, as we'll see, the very writing of this novel.

Going further to the antinomy suggested by Culianu, we find out from mythology that the owl represents two contradictory notions: death or wisdom, which – according to ancient conceptions – is synonymous to life. The contradiction is explained by the fact that the god of death, in pre-classic beliefs, knows the secrets of life, birth and reincarnation, as well. This symbol is widespread in the Greek world, where the owl is a mark of Athens, the Goddess of Wisdom.

In the analysis of dreams proposed by psychoanalysts, the owl forecasts important changes. This night bird is granted the capacity to approach the human soul, "as it may reach the secret messages of the unconscious" (COUPAL, 2000: 96).

Stupefied with sleep and withdrawn in an obscure room, lost in drinking and existential confusion, Emil is not ready to go to meet these birds: this would be a date meaning both death and salvation, namely an initiatic, shamanic experience.

From now on, the **novel**, structured in two parts – *Until death comes* and *Life of a warrior* –, **is a rewriting in contemporary vision of a rite of shamanic initiation.** Through the quotations placed by the author as mottos for the two parts of his book, Culianu indicates, as a source of inspiration for this particular level of his writing, the North-American shamanism. The above mentioned quotations are: **Part I: Până la moarte [Until death comes]** – mss., page 5 – motto: "Certain things in your life will



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count to you because they are important. Your deeds will be undoubtedly important to you, but to me there is nothing of real importance, either it may be my deeds or the deeds of people like me. Nevertheless, I keep on living because I have my will. Because I strengthened my will for a lifetime, until it has become clean and almighty, and now I do not care any more that nothing really matters. My will will control the craziness of my life" (Don Juan Matus, a Yaqui warrior). ; **Part II: Viața unui războinic [Life of a warrior]** – mss., page 54 – motto: "A warrior considers himself already dead, so there is nothing to lose. The worst has already happened to him, therefore he's clear and calm; judging him by his acts or by his words, one would never suspect that he has witnessed everything." (Don Juan Matus, a Yaqui warrior). Over the years, close to the end of his life (in 1989), when he was writing the *Dictionary of Religions*, following the sketch outlined together with Mircea Eliade, Culianu wrote in the chapter on shamanism: "The members of the Grand Medicine Society (Midewiwin) of the Great Lakes tribes initiate a neophyte by «killing him» (…) and then «rise» him in the cabin of witch doctors" (ELIADE, CULIANU, 1993: 255). The initiatic rites of the Midewiwin Society also include the symbolism of owls. "In the ceremony tent, there is a representation of *an owl-man, who shows the path to the Sunset Land, the land of the dead*" (CHEVALIER, GHEERBRANT, 1994, volume 1: 214). Down the Mexico (where – close to the frontier with the United States – we can find the Yaqui tribes), in Guatemala, "the chorti wizard, incarnating the force of truth, may turn himself into an owl" (CHEVALIER, GHEERBRANT, 1994, volume 1: 214-215). If the birds visiting Emil in the novel are avatars of the shamans, agents of messages of the unconscious, or messengers of some radical changes or even of death, it is sure that the hero will experience something unusual. But *until death comes*, the hero needs to be prepared according to the advice of the Yaqui warrior, Don Juan Matus (advice placed as motto, as I said, at the beginning of the novel's first part). This advice regards, in the *before-death* stage, on the one hand, the **disconnection from the world**, through annulling the importance of all things and deeds of a man's life, and, on the other hand, through the strengthening of man's will, which should control "the craziness of one's own life" (see the motto of Part I of the novel). In the *life of a warrior*, after the hero has passed by death, according to the same Don Juan Matus, the **attitude** will be the one conferring power to the initiate. And this attitude comes **from the inside**, namely from the conscious belief that, being already dead, nothing bad can happen to him any more, and he has nothing to lose (see the motto of Part II of the novel). The source of the two mottos, the same as the novel's source of inspiration, can be found in the series of volumes signed by Carlos Castaneda, where the initiation is described of their author himself, an American anthropologist of Peru origin, into the secrets of Native American shamanism. We refer to the four books of Castaneda, brought out before the writing of the novel *Râul Selenei*: *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, 1968, the publication of Carlos Castaneda's doctoral thesis held at the California University, *A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan*, 1971, *Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan*, 1972 and *Tales of Power*, 1974. The text chosen as motto for the first part was taken over from Carlos Castaneda's book, *A Separate Reality*. Culianu used the Italian translation, *Una realtà separata*, published at Rome in 1972, as we could deduce from the *Works cited* at the end of part three of the book *Religie şi putere* [Religion and Power] (page 230), where Ioan Petru Culianu published his study *Religia şi creşterea puterii* [Religion and the Increase of Power] (Bucharest, Nemira, 1996: 161-232). The motto of part two is a quotation from the volume *Tales of Power* of the same author. Culianu also used the Italian translation of Castaneda's book, *L'isola del*



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*tonal*, brought out in Milan, in 1975, as results from the volume *Religie şi putere* (1996: 161-232). In 1977, Culianu published a review at the aforementioned book of Carlos Castaneda (the Italian edition, 1975) in the review "Aevum", no. 51, pages 583-585b.

Don Juan Matus, the warrior of the Indian tribe Yaqui, is actually a master of people's initiation into changed states of consciousness, a *brujo*, as he introduces himself in Spanish, namely a wizard and a witch doctor. He wants to turn his disciple into a "man of knowledge", capable to distinguish the shapes to be found beyond the immediate, explicit level of reality, a man "able to see" in his terms. At this shamanic school, the neophyte must become a "warrior", which means that he needs to appropriate a certain way of existence (lived after a code of strict rules), meant to allow him the access to "power". The purpose of Don Juan's learning is to make Carlos see and control an energetic form of existence which connects things. In this case, "power is an entity that can be experienced after the pattern of the Jungian *libido*" (see CULIANU, in *Religie şi putere*, 1996: 181), which exists independently from the consciousness and has autonomous manifestations. The aforementioned books of Castaneda are descriptions of the complex process of initiation, known in the history of religion under various forms: "The warrior (according to Don Juan Matus; my note/S.G.) is a man who «always goes beyond his own limits» and, through his «personal power», manages to fulfil the deeds that so many categories of recluses, from the Indo-Tibetan Yogis to the Sufis, take so much pride in: extension in space, emission of light, transportation in space, dual personality, prolongation of life span, etc." (CULIANU, *Religie şi putere*, 1996: 195). In 1981, when he published his study in the volume *Religie şi putere* (accompanied by other studies signed by Gianpaolo Romanato and Mario Lombardo), Culianu subscribed Don Juan to the category of "specialists of the sacred" / "specialists of power", of the culture gods, meaning that "a man able to create shall not be placed on the same level with another who just submits to cultural norms". "«To create» means at the same time «to transcend» the thing as compared to which you prove your creative existence, meaning your own culture. To transcend something means somehow to be free form the transcended thing" (*op. cit.*: 197). He comes to these conclusions taking one more step than Mircea Eliade, who had claimed that, in order to have access to the "sacred", you have to die as a "profane": "(…) Transcending the norms is possible, in all these cases, because, in various ways, all the «specialists (of the sacred / power, my note/S.G.) (…) pass through the experience of a «death» followed by a «resurrection». (…) Death – which is «death» proper, in the material sense of the term, but not irreversible – will attack man, for he belongs to his own culture; it is therefore a *cultural death*. On the other hand, the resurrection produces only individuals immune to the conditioning of norms".

The novel *Râul Selenei* is rightly the literary illustration of this fundamental idea: it is possible to have access to liberty, to the essential energies of life, or it is possible to "uncover the shroud" and "illuminate the nothingness" that Culianu speaks of in the opening of his novel, if (any kind of) restrictions, limits and norms are diminished and cancelled.

Here we have Culianu's vision – expressed in literary terms – as a replica (and even more) at Mircea Eliade's thought and at what Carlos Castaneda did in his books. The American anthropologist published his first volume, *The Teachings of Don Juan* (1968), with a "non-fiction" warning as to its contents, and was finally suspected of pure invention in his writings, because nobody except his apprentice could ever see Don Juan. On the other hand, Culianu's paradox is that he writes *Râul Selenei* with the mention "novel", but, beside not being published, we can notice (as to be seen) its non-



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fictionality character. Moreover, in this novel Don Juan is embodied by a real character, whose explanations may be taken for mottos for the two parts of the writing, while Castaneda's name is nowhere mentioned. Going back to Mircea Eliade's ideas, we may consider *Râul Selenei* an attempt of literary illustration of how the sacred – and implicitly the initiatic dimension involved by the access to it – is hidden in the profane, in the prosaic, everyday existence. Mircea Eliade notes in his *Journal*, on 3rd May 1976: "If we accept what we called the «dialectic of the sacred hidden in the profane», we must admit also this possibility: that a certain type of «initiation» is fulfilled nowadays before our very eyes, but so perfectly concealed in the «profane» that it cannot be recognized as such" (ELIADE, 1993, *Journal*, volume II: 229). The novel is undoubtedly the materialization in terms of artistic creation of the idea that Culianu shared with (or had taken over from) Eliade, namely that, "in an epoch of radical desacralization, the initiatic scenarios survive in oneiric and artistic universes" (ELIADE, *Journal*, volume II: 229).

After Culianu's exposition in the first pages of his book, the novel, structured on chapters, offers a dense text that is difficult to summarize. The author presents – under the pretence of a reporter's objectivity, as a technique taken from Castaneda, as well – a mixture of people and events entangled for several years in various places of the world. The presented events are mostly drawn out from ordinary life, and pages on end are filled with a relaxed, expositive, almost anti-literary atmosphere. The much too numerous characters coming forth on the stage – some of them apparently meaningless, as they get lost subsequently in the novel or have unimportant episodic appearances – make reading even more difficult, and complicate the novel. Their role in the economy of the writing is not to participate in a complex narrative structure, developing the topic on several levels, but rather to somehow reflect the complete image of the society of the 1970s over the last century. They do not distinguish themselves by any characteriologic features or by the profundity of the ideas or analyses exposed. They only come to illustrate the author's strong belief that "all people are tied to invisible threads and some of these threads cannot get entangled with others" (mss., page 6), and to signify, according to their actions, stages in the evolution of consciousness (as described in the psychoanalysis). Besides, they run into one another, they are like ghosts moving from one place to another in order to trace intercrossing (or not) trajectories with the threads of other characters' destinies. At a given moment, the author's solution for such non-intercrossing trajectories is to create parallel series (see mss., pages 67-68), which he mentions all over part II as an intention to resume in a subsequent volume, as he confesses in the text (see mss., page 67). This is a particularly postmodern manner, to be materialized in a volume "using the literary technique of a «puzzle», the various directions of different episodic characters, scarcely sketched."

Formally, Culianu's major preoccupation in this novel seems to be the precise description of the trajectories followed by his characters, with indications of place and time, as if he had scheduled their lives in words. From this viewpoint, the text illustrates a form of literary writing which is both experimental and innovative. The characters' movement, what they do, how they live, all these do not represent, in the author's mind, simple events. "To be more precise, nothing actually happens" (mss., page 7), the author warns us. "*Incident* (the author's underline) is only something illuminating the nothingness" (*Ibidem*). "I insist on warning the reader that I use the word «event», just like the word «incident», with the following meaning: something illuminating the nothingness. We could say, in this respect, that love is an «event» or an «incident», that death is an «incident», for love and death both illuminate the nothingness" (*Ibidem*). We



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notice that, although dived into the deepest layers of the profane, Emil still pursues the steps of the initiation described by Castaneda.

*Râul Selenei* is a dense writing with a complicated structure, although it does not run on so many pages (the manuscript has only 126 pages). Culianu opts for the form of a report, due to the emulation that animates him toward Castaneda. The book of the latter, *A Separate Reality*, had convinced him that the mere events, that is their objective registration, should be the best solution to capture the dramatism and spontaneity of genuine life situations (see the Romanian translation of Castaneda, 2005: 7-23). We may believe that a report is meant to substitute the "look", as an action defined in terms of the Yaqui shamanism as follows: "«To look» used to refer to the usual way of perceiving the world, while «to see» involved a very complex process, by virtue of which a man of knowledge was able to perceive the very «essence» of things in the world" (*op.cit.*: 14). In other words, in order to come to "see", to understand the essence, we need to "look" into Culianu's report.

However, why does the author say that we could read these pages like a detective story? The crime that was supposed to be investigated happens almost at the end of the novel (Frog murders Ileana), and the murderer is immediately arrested by the police. It is not a first-degree murder, and the series of episodes occurred until are no insights of what would happen.

Culianu's ("seemingly") detective story needs to be looked for elsewhere: Emil is the one whose death is pursued, in the first place, and the guilt for such death should be found in the very structure of our culture: in the intricate social and political system of the contemporary society, a topic often brought up in the novel (through the references to bourgeoisie, to communism), as well as in the critical ways in which people relate to each other.

## Conclusions

The complex construction of the novel and the overall signification granted to the things described, render Ioan Petru Culianu's talent of prosewriter. Formally, the writing seems to be a non-fictional one but, although we find many autobiographical elements in the text, they are not relevant at all in defining the novel as such. Without being non-fictional, *Râul Selenei* would rather be deemed a novel deprived of fiction, due to the style adopted, which is cold, impersonal, objective.

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