Myth and Symbol in Eliade's Novella *Youth without Youth*

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The paper *Myth and Symbol in Eliade's Novella "Youth without Youth"* aims at identifying the myths, archetypes and symbols which constitute the framework of the plot in this novella and create a unifying pillar for the polyphonic architecture of the narrative discourse: the myth of time and that of the labyrinth, supported by different archetypes and symbols – the double, *regressus ad uterum*, *descensus ad inferos*, the rose, the island, the tree etc.

The short story *Youth without Youth*, written by Mircea Eliade and published in 1980, deals with the myth of eternal youth and deathless life, which illustrates the Romanians' unique way of showing insubordination to time.

> Tinereţea veşnică simbolizează refuzul fiinţei de a intra sub apăsarea istoriei şi de a exista între limite; dacă în mentalităţile altor popoare accesul la nemurire este determinat de trecerea unor probe eroice şi spirituale, în viziune românească nu există decât o cale: refuzul de a coborî în timpul fragmentar; de aceea prinţul nu vrea să se ivească, să prindă fiinţă în lumea profană, iar cel care nu vrea să se nască pentru a îmbătrâni, respinge evoluţia şi mersul timpului; nu spre tinereţea ca stare de graţie aspiră prinţul, ci spre armonia raiului [The ageless youth symbolises the human being's refusal to accept the hardhips of history and live within its limits; if, according to other people's mentality, the access to immortality is determined by accomplishing both heroic and spiritual tasks, there is only one way in the Romanian vision: the refusal to descend in the finite time; that is the reason why the prince will not be born and appear in the profane world, and he who will not be born to become old rejects the evolution and passage of time; it is not youth as a state of grace that the prince aspires to, it is the harmony of heaven] (Ruşti 2001: 163).

Similarly to Prince Charming in *Ageless Youth and Deathless Life*, Dominic Matei, Eliade's character, rises to eternity and falls again into mortality with all its consequences: aging, poor memory and death.

The time myth is supported both in the fairy tale and the short story by the amnesia-anamnesis game: Prince Charming, that is Dominic Matei, "forgets" for a while about his birthplace, which was prone to amnesia, and enters the realm of anamnesis, in a different manner: while the folk hero recuperates the ages of mankind that had passed since he entered the land of "ageless youth" on his way

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back, Eliade's hero recuperates/anticipates the stages of pre-historic or post-historic humanity on his own or with Veronica's help.

In Mircea Eliade's work, the concept of anamnesis means reactualizing the primordial time on different levels of human existence. Anamnesis projects man outside the historical time and means revalorizing time; it equals the discovery of a transcendent principle inside the self, and this very revelation constitutes the central element:

> Adevărurile ultime sunt în posesia noastră, avem nevoie de un loc să le revelăm. Cel care se întoarce ca să moară acasă e în posesia accestui adevăr unic [We hold the ultimate truths; we only need a place to reveal them. He who comes home to die holds this unique truth] (Alui Gheorghe 2004: 92).

Amnesia means sinking into oblivion and it is followed by anamnesis, triggered by the gestures or words of a messenger. The amnesia-anamnesis process symbolises the return to oneself, to one's origins, thus acknowledging the human being's divine roots.

Most of Eliade's characters go through a shock-induced amnesia which makes it easier for them to enter universal time, to refind a deleted past or to postpone a decisive experience. In *Youth without Youth*, amnesia is related to detachment from the past, so the family album that Dominic leafs through becomes the messenger that reminds him of profane life.

Anamnesis has a mythical dimension which resembles the Christ archetype, through death, ressurection and initiation. As a consequence, Dominic Matei becomes a "master" of the future.

> Principala caracteristică a noii umanităţi va fi structura vieţii psihomentale: tot ce fusese cândva gândit sau înfăptuit de oameni, exprimat oral sau în scris, era recuperat printr-un anumit exerciţiu de concentrare [The principal characteristic of the new humankind will be the structure of the psycho-mental life: everything that was once thought of or put into practice, orally or writtenly expressed, was recuperated through concentration] (Eliade 2007: 286).

Another consequence is the fact that the charachter gains the ability to foresee other people's future:

> Cred că ghicesc ce s-a întâmplat. Când s-a dezlănţuit furtuna, se aflau, foarte probabil, acolo unde […] [I believe I can guess what happended. When the storm started, most probably, where (...)] (Eliade 2007: 286).

Apart from the mythical dimension, anamnesis entails a cultural one too. Suddenly Dominic realizes that he can speak Chinese perfectly, a language he had so wanted to learn back in his youth. Similarly it dawns on him that he knows Albanian and he possesses knowledge related to anything in his interest.

The character is endowed with immortality as long as he is not rooted in a certain place. His pilgrimage across Europe reminds us of the labyrinth myth and represents his victory over time. His native town is a sort of *axis mundi*, making the connection between the worlds the character lives in along his life. Triggered by a rose he finds in his family album, Dominic's return to Piatra- Neamţ means death.

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Despite being considered amnesic by his friends, he finds himself split between different time dimensions. Suddenly he becomes physically old and dies.

The temporal labyrinth – in which anamnesis, amnesia and hypermnesia mingle – turns into a spatial one as time and space are interchangeable categories for the textual imaginary.

At the beginning of the story, the character leaves his homeland in order to overpass the feeling of forgetfulness, from a double/dual perspective: being forgotten by the others and in turn he himself forgetting about the world. Dominic is struck by lightning and he comes to think that he is the chosen one:

> Am fost ales pentru că am dorit, în tinereţe, să posed o ştiinţă universală, şi atunci, chiar în momentul când eram pe punctul de a-mi pierde complet memoria, mi s-a dăruit o ştiinţă universală cum nu va fi accesibilă omului decât peste multe mii de ani [I have been chosen for I have yearned for possessing total knowledge in my youth and then, when I was on the very brink of completely losing my memory, I was provided with such absolute knowledge man will be able to access only after many thousands of years] (Eliade 2007: 275).

Dominic leaves his native town with a clear aim in mind – to commit suicide. His escape becomes a physical and spiritual labyrinth. The hero takes this journey through this labyrinth because he is searching for his inner center and wishes to find his true nature. This way, his pilgrimage across the world has an archetypal meaning, marking his parting with one centre and his search for another one, thus growing spiritually. As Mircea Eliade himself said, any journey is a way to regain fragments from one's personal history which becomes a source of anamnesic surprises.

> Într-un fel sau altul, când străbat spaţii geografice familiare sau necunoscute, călătoresc în acelaşi timp în trecut, în propria mea istorie [One way or the other when going through familiar or unknown geographic spaces I travel back in time through my own history] (Eliade 1973: 570 *apud* Tonoiu 1989: 99).

The places he travels have symbolic and sacred value, offering his pilgrimage the archetypal and psychoanalytical status of *descensus ad inferos* and *regressus ad utterum*.

Once within the initiation place, the character has to descend into the darkness of his own being, where he is put to various tests which, if passed, provide him with another ontological status. Dominic Matei's arrival at North Railway Station, in Bucharest, a profane space par excellence, may be considered his first descent to hell. His experience converts this space and time into a sacred chronotope he enters once he is struck by lightning, which symbolizes his spiritual enlightment.

> Pe plan spiritual, fulgerul naşte o lumină lăuntrică, obligându-l pe cel în cauză să închidă ochii, să se reculeagă deci. Fulgerul îl însemnează [Spiritually, lightning gives birth to an inner light forcing the person who is struck to shut his eyes and to be plunged into meditation. The lightning marks him] (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1993: 75).

Not only does Dominic survive being struck by lightning, but he also grows younger (30−40 years) and his memory knows no limits. He transcends his chronological time gaining access to universal memory, gathering essential information about the evolution of the humankind. The reader is offered a scientific

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explanation for the lightning which does not kill but rejuvenates (the theory of the German doctor) and the sacred value of the lightning is permanetly emphasized by the testimonies and also by the reoccurence of this event in the story. Dominic is not the only one who gets to experience another "time" of his self; there is also a female character – Veronica. She regains one of her avatars (Rupini), after going through a similar experience in the mountains.These "accidents" occur in symbolic places – near a church and a cave. The lightning brings radical and amazing trasformations, both physically (the hero gets the attributes of eternal youth) and psychologically (he is able to communicate with his own spiritual double).

Regressus ad uterum is related to the symbolism of water (the rain) which regenerates through dissolution: „imersiunea în apă simbolizează […] regenerarea totală, noua naştere" [Imersion in the water symbolizes total regeneration, a new birth] (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1993: 197).

The previously mentioned descent into hell converts to *regressus ad uterum* because the symbolism of the church is closely connected to the archetype of the sacred mother (Virgin Mary). Dominic's return to the native town is also regressus *ad uterum*, as well as finding his self. Within the plot, the counscious self is the "free arbiter": Dominic chooses to return to Piatra-Neamţ, just like Prince Charming decides to leave the realm of eternal youth and deathless life whereas the double/ the unconscious represents the predestination (the person struck by lightning will live 100 years). The character frees himself from human destiny when, coming back home, he finds his centre and takes over his double. *Regressus ad uterum* is also highlighted by Veronica's experience: she becomes amnesic in a cave and identifies herself with Rupini who died in a cave – an archetype of the womb.

Standing for birth and regeneration, the cave is both *descensus ad inferos* and *regressus ad uterum* because Veronica is kept prisoner in the hell of her inner torments. She is also captive in the "prison" of love and of Dominic's experiences on the island of Malta. Finnaly, she sets herself free of the Purgatorium she lives in, free of Dominic and the "caves" of her soul, getting to contemplate the true side of reality.

Apart from the cave, the island is also a sacred place. The symbolism of the latter is related both to paradise and hell. It is the paradise of love, the adamic couple being reiterated by Dominic and Veronica; it is also a hell for her as Dominic forces her to return to prehistoric times. Of course, this comes with a very high price for Veronica to pay as she grows older over a very short period of time. Dominic is aware of his influence on her losing her youth and so decides to sacrifice their love and asks her to leave him and the island.

Another symbol is the tree, which represents a gate to the sacred dimension of life. The tree was seen by Mircea Eliade as a centre of the world, a pillar of the entire universe, a symbol of life and regeneration. Through death, humans transcend their condition and become like a tree seed. The oak tree represents Dominic's double. The association with the tree is amazing. When the main character goes to Ireland, he finds out about an oak tree which had been struck by a lightning when the tree turned 100. The oak tree grows new branches as a symbol of regeneration and of moral and spiritual strength. Similarly, as a metaphor, the hero has grown new teeth after being struck by lightning near the railway station and he dies after

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turning 100 years old. At the end of the story, he loses his teeth as a suggestion of a new birth into another dimension of life.

The double and its symbolism is not just suggested by the oak tree but it is specifically mentioned in the novella:

> Dar această descărcare electrică a făcut de asemenea posibilă apariţia unei noi personalităţi, un fel de *dublu*, o persoană pe care o ascultă vorbindu-i mai ales în timpul somnului şi cu care uneori discută amical sau în contradictoriu [But this electric discharge also enabled the creation of a new personality, a sort of *double*, a person he listens to, who speaks to him mostly during sleep and who sometimes talks to him in a friendly or unfriedly tone] (Eliade 2007: 262).

At first, the reader is tempted to believe that the double is the "voice" of Dominic spirit, a part from the universal spirit endowed with unlimited powers, due to hero's hypermnesia which is able to amazingly recollect everything about the past, from actions to sensations, by reading and traslanting into all the languages. But the double cautiously advises him to never reveal the whole truth so as to protect himself from the Security and the Gestapo. Moreover, it is still the double that helps Dominic foresee future events such as the trip he will take after Doctor Bernard's death. Finally the double answers his questions and identifies himself with a true guardian angel. In spite of having establishing a "dialogue", Dominic says that he does not believe in the existence of his double and the latter proves him wrong by instantly bringing him two red roses, a third being promised on his 100th anniversary. The main character is to find the third rose in the family album and this suggests both his rebirth and death. According to the Greek tradition the rose is considered to have been created from Adonis's blood when he was in agony. The rose is the most striking symbol encompassing a lot of values:

> Simbol al labirintului, iar prin aceasta, imagine a misterelor, căci este floarea cu treizeci de petale, care ascunde, care învăluie [Symbol of the labyrinth and through this image of misteries, being the flower with 30 petals which hides] (Ruști 2005: 208).

The rose has an epiphanic scent and it plays an essential role in the character's existence. Mircea Eliade confessed that

> Frumuseţea şi parfumul unui trandafir, în ciuda caracterului lor efemer, nu există mai puţin, şi acelaşi tip de existenţă, „epifanică şi fulgurantă", poate uneori schimba lumea [The beauty and the smell of a rose, in spite of their efemerity, last no less, but this kind of existence "epiphanic and flashing" can sometimes change the world] (Eliade 1973: 570 *apud* Tonoiu 1989: 99).

Dominic Matei's experience is thus marked by three roses, suggesting rejuvenation and death: the first two have the colour of fresh blood and announce the physical rejuvenation of the character; the third rose, a sign of death is purple. The colour of the first two roses symbolizes love (Dominic's two love affairs – Laura and Veronica) and purple, the colour of the third, a mix of blue and red, represents the continuous rebirth, the eternal transformation of everything and the passage between life and death.

To conclude, the approach to *Youth without Youth* highlighted the way in which the myth language translates and absorbs different archetypal and symbolic

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models meant to unveil the profound structure of the life of the individual who comes across different labyrinths in his attempt to discover his centre as a reflexion of the sacredness in the world. Dominic Matei, the main character, positions himself outside history and even against it, but he still remains in the world, experiencing hardships that will gradually reveal sacredness to him, after he climbs the steps of initiation. These "steps" are organically linked with certain archetypal models (*regressus ad uterum*, *descensus ad inferos*, the double), which appear at the crossroads of different symbolic or/and sacred elements: the church, the cave, the rose, the island, the tree etc.

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Abstract

This study aims at identifying the myths, archetypes and symbols which stand at the basis of Mircea Eliade's novella *Youth without Youth* and create a unifying pillar for the polyphonic architecture of the narrative discourse: the myth of time and that of the labyrinth, supported by different archetypes and symbols – the double, *regressus ad uterum*, *descensus ad inferos*, the cave, the rose, the island, the tree etc.

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