A Maze of Mazes

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The paper entitled *A maze of mazes* aims at identifying different types of labyrinth within the novelette *Pe strada Mântuleasa* (‘*The Old Man and the Bureaucrats*’), emphasizing the fact that it really represents “the most complex of all Eliade’s narrations”, as Eugen Simion stated.

Pe strada Mântuleasa reveals itself, from the first read, as a maze of mazes: mythical, narrative, spatial and temporal, linguistic etc. Re-reading it does not lessen the number of mazes, but challenges the reader to discover different ones or even create one of his own, in which he will remain captive or from which he will escape, depending on his own ability to equivocate from the meaning and the magic of the text or to penetrate and be penetrated by the two, unveiling to himself as many of the “knots and signs” of this prose as possible.

The first maze we enter is the narrative one: the tale has a dendritic structure, with eleven chapters which can be associated with the eleven circumvolutions of a Chartres maze. Each chapter has a realistic core and many others, realistic or not, which tend to invalidate the first:

> Pe același arbore există planta realistă, arborele propriu-zis, dar și o plantă parazită, produsă tot de arbore, ca și cum un stejar ar produce el însuși iedera care să-l sugrume [‘On the same tree there is the realistic plant, the tree itself, but also a parasite plant, grown by the tree, just like an oak would grow itself the ivy that would choke it’] (Strochi 2003: 178).

Based on the frame story technique, the novel is a matryoshka which makes it difficult to differentiate the biggest from the smallest doll, because the actual dimension of a story does not automatically confer it the status of the central narration. In the maze of the stories narrated in the eighth chapter, for example, the story that has the value of a *centrum*, the one which glorifies the ones around, is the one in which the tale of beautiful Arghira is told: she has poor eyesight and uses the eyes of her mind, of her sensitivity, of the ones surrounding her:

> Deși îi plăcea să citească și iubea cărțile, nu le putea citi cu ochii ei, ci doar le lua între degete, le mângâia, le apropia de obraz, ca să le poată descifra titlurile, și apoi le trecea doamnei ei de companie, o grecoaică, să i le citească [‘Although she liked reading and loved books, she was not able to read them with her own eyes, but

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> she only took them with her fingers, caressed them, pressed them against her cheek in order to decode the titles, then passed them to her accompanying lady, a Greek, to read them to her'] (Eliade 2007: 557−558).

Arghira replaces the world she lives in and that she cannot visually perceive with another one, a world of spectacle, of theatre that can be created and manipulated according to her own wishes: "îi plăcea să inventeze costume în culori tari, spectaculare […] căci culorile le vedea chiar fără să se apropie" ['she liked inventing costumes in bright, spectacular colours […] because she was able to see colours even without getting close'] (Eliade 2007: 558). Miraculously cured (Zamfira, a peasant, advised her to wash with the water she brought in order for God to give her her eyesight back − an obvious implication to the water of life, which has sacred powers), Arghira gifted to her saviour the places where "s-a croit mai târziu strada Mântuleasa" ['Mântuleasa street was later cleaved'].

Why did I consider this story the centre of the narrative maze of the eighth chapter? Because the moral of Arghira's story is this: in order to perceive the world as a spectacle and to understand the spectacle in the world, the eyes of the soul are needed more than the eyes which capture the sensuous. Arghira "sees" and understands more than those who have eyes, as opposed to Fărâmă's investigators or all the others who read her stories without understanding their deeper meanings:

> Povestirile dumitale au trecut prin multe mâini și le-au citit chiar oameni de mare răspundere, ca să nu mai vorbesc de atâția scriitori de seamă, tineri și bătrâni ['Your stories have passed through many hands and have been read even by people who bear great responsibilities, not to mention all the great writers, both young and old'] (Eliade 2007: 555).

Many of those people only read through the surface of these stories, not being able to shirk from the acts of the maze which belong to a reality that is political, economic, and historical. The story of Arghira and Zamfira is transformed by Marina into an exemplary narration, this being considered an avatar of the girl that redeems the light of the eyes, because "oamenii sunt aproape orbi", "nu mai știu să vadă, să privească în jurul lor, și toate relele și păcatele de acolo se trag" ['people are almost blind, they don't know how to see, how to look around them, and that is where all the bad things and the sins derive from']. Anca Vogel cannot "see" either, implicitly not understanding the world that Fărâmă invents. Unlike the other investigators, she does have an understanding of the sacred, because she wants to take a stroll on Mântuleasa street with Fărâmă, so he can *show* her, probably along with the hope that she will understand through the story the worlds that fascinated her: "[...] să-mi arăți și mie școala dumitale și cârciumile și casele cu pivnițe adânci..." ['you should show me your school and the taverns and the houses with deep cellars…'] (Eliade 2007: 561).

The narrations are progressively created to explain Oana's story, as Eugen Simion observes: „evaziunile lui Fărâmă încep să se concentreze asupra unui personaj mitologic" ['Fărâmă's escapes begin to concentrate on a mythological character'] (Simion 2006: 254), Oana – "grozavă femeie" ['a formidable woman'],

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over two metres tall, "voinică, spătoasă și frumoasă ca o statuie" ['strong, robust and beautiful like a statue'].

Through Oana's story, we dive entirely in a mythical maze, because the character, due to her condition, but also to the series of adventures in which Fărâmă puts her, seems to appear from the antic myth of the Cretan labyrinth. She imbricates in her being some of the characters from the mythic complex of the most famous maze: she resembles Pasifae who lives the bliss of the wedding with the bull ("[...] și rămâneau așa, împreunați, vreme îndelungată, cu taurul în spinarea ei, mugind și scăpărând din copite" ['and they stood like that, together, a long time, with the bull at her back, bellowing and clattering its hooves']) (Eliade 2007: 541), like Minos caught in a curse due to a cozenage ("Blestemul lui Selim acesta a fost: pentru că îl trădase prietenul lui cel mai bun, omul căruia îi scăpase viața, l-a blestemat ca neam de neamul lui să le fugă nevestele, iar fetele lor să se împreuneze cu dobitoacele" ['This was Selim's curse: because he had been betrayed by his best friend, the man whose life he had saved, he damned his entire bloodline so that their wives leave them, and their daughters couple with animals']) (Eliade 2007: 564), a state of the Minotaur itself ("Dumnezeu m-a greșit când m-a făcut" ['God did wrong when He created me']), of which people are amazed and terrified, which is unable to find his place in the world and chooses to isolate from it, cringing in a protective space, the mountain or the sheepfold where he "devours" the herdsmen, devitalizing them. In a modern inversion of the antic myth, Oana can also envisage herself as Tezeu willing to fight his own primary instincts, the inner Minotaur, ritually begging Mother Nature to offer him Ariadna's thread in order to escape the maze of his soul in which he struggles:

> Mărită-mă, Cucoană Mare, spunea Oana ridicându-și brațele spre lună. Găsește-mi bărbat pe măsură că mi s-a urât de fetie ['Marry me, Great Lady, said Oana raising her arms to the moon. Find me a man cut out for me, as I am tired of virginity'] (Eliade 2008: 538).

This redeeming thread, that will pull her out of that maze of passions which caused her misery, is Cornelius Tarvastru, a teacher of Romance languages at the University of Dorpat.

The myths raid into the story and transform everything into a labyrinth. As Eugen Simion says, the short story masks several myths: "[...] unul este acela al coborârii în infern, altul este acela al schimbării, înnoirii identității" ['one is that of the descending into hell, another is that of changing, renewing an identity'], and the first that appears in the reader's mind "citind povestirile încurcate ale lui Fărâmă, este acela al Șeherezadei" ['while reading the puzzling tales of Fărâmă, is the one of Scheherazade'] (Simion 2006: 250–259). Let us take them in turn.

All the characters descend into hell, even though, at a first read of the text, the one who truly experiences a *descensus ad inferno* is Fărâmă, captured in the basements of Securitate. In order to get out and save himself, he appeals to Scheherazade's "golden bough" – the story. The inner and the external hells in which Oana infiltrates I mentioned above. Her predecessors also descended into

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hell, because all of them (her father, her grandfather) were caught under the stigma of Selim's curse, from which they liberate themselves through Oana's suffering. Iozi, the rabbi's son, miraculously disappears in an abandoned basement, next to the Church with Lindens, after he says goodbye to all his friends and actuates a real inferno for the family who seeks him. From a mythical perspective, diving into water is equivalent to an initiation, therefore to a necessary death which follows the descent into hell. The water which floods the cellars of Iorgu Calomfir's houses, Arghira's husband, terrifies the one who tries to reveal "a morbid truth" – how one can arrive in the country of the Blajini, which is located underground. This truth could open the way to a metaphysical, superior knowledge, marked by interdiction:

> [...] cine izbutește să-i înțeleagă tâlcul nu numai că află pe unde se poate coborî în lumea Blajinilor, dar înțelege în același timp toate celelalte taine pe care Biserica nu are îngăduința să le dezvăluie ['whoever succeeds in understanding its moral not only reveals the way to the country of the Blajini, but simultaneously understands all the other secrets that the Church does not have the mercifulness to reveal'] (Eliade 2008: 550).

But, being unable to discover it, Iorgu, and after several years, Lixandru, driven by the same obsession, immerses in a hell of searches and fears, in a real inner maze. Marina has magical powers; she manages to manipulate "the great pass" on a biological level, having the appearance that she wishes. The secret of biological rejuvenation is much more than a "tehnică specială pe care o avea Marina de a-și schimba înfățișarea după voie" ['special technique that Marina used to change her appearance as she wishes'] (Eliade 2008: 575). It is a modality to teach the ones around her to distinguish the essence from the appearance: "tot ce i-am spus era doar ca să-l pun la încercare, să-l învăț să nu se mai lase vrăjit de aparențe" ['all that I said to him was in order to test him, to teach him not to be charmed by the surface'] (Eliade 2008: 576).

The myth of the survival through a story or the one of Scheherazade seems to interconnect all the others and highlight the double function of the story:

> Povestirea (ca formă orală a creației) are, dar, o funcție dublă: dă individului comun perspectiva sacrului și, totodată îl apără de violența istoriei. "A povesti" este într-un anume sens, a supraviețui. Dar a povesti nu este, oare, și o tentativă de a umple golul lăsat de amnezia istorică a omului? ['The story (as an oral form of creation) has, though, a double function: it gives the common individual a perspective of the sacred and, at the same time defends him from the violence of history. "To tell a story" is, somehow, to survive. But isn't telling a story, maybe, also an effort to fill the void left there by the historical amnesia of man?'] (Simion 1981: 623).

By telling the story, the character covers the ticklish road to the centre, in a natural nostalgia of a more or less distant future which he recovers through Logos. The stories have a natural flow, they exist in the character, they must only let themselves be revealed; pouring them on paper proves to be a difficult itinerary: "În ziua aceea Fărâmă nu scrisese aproape nimic. Rămase mult timp, cu mâinile la tâmple, în fața hârtiei" ['That day Fărâmă did not write almost anything. He stood for a long time, with his hands on his temples, in front of the paper'] (Eliade 2008:

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556). Dumitrescu thinks he has a handwriting that is "difficult to read", a phrase that could be interpreted in several ways: illegible ("grafia lui anevoie descifrabilă" ['his calligraphy is hardly decipherable'']) or difficult to understand. And, what is difficult to read is written with monumental efforts, because Fărâmă constantly feels the need to look back on the narration, loses the narrative line, not being able to control his own stream of memories. Anca Vogel thought he was "teribil de prolix" ['awfully prolix']. Sometimes he forgets if the tale has been written before or he considers it extremely important and comes back to it, practically telling the same thing over and over again, permanently willing to reach the point that is situated at the origin of all affairs:

> Știa că, fără voia lui, revenea necontenit asupra întâmplărilor care i se păreau esențiale, dar nu-i era teamă de inevitabile repetări, ci de confuziile la care puteau da naștere variantele aceleiași narațiuni prezentate în perspective diferite ['He knew that, unconsciously, he would always come back to the happenings he thought essential, but what he was afraid of was not the inevitable repetitions, but of the confusions that the versions of the same affair, presented from different perspectives, would trigger'] (Eliade 2008: 555).

These "confusions" and "different perspectives" reveal a new type of labyrinth, which we will name, paraphrasing Eugen Simion again, – a maze of "knots and signs". It is the maze in which the reader is supposed to search, amidst the bearings of meaning of the narration, for those "knots" and "signs" which unveil deep significances and "uncurtains the profound structures of the real" on terms of the most egregious platitude, as one of the characters of the short story *Podul* reveals.

The first of the knots that must be untied is the political *scenario* the writer used in order to create other scenarios which are mysterious, fabulous, of mythic principle. The critic Wolfgang Koeppen, when the German translated version was published, situated the text in the category of political ones:

> […] o alegorie a setei de dominare din interiorul partidului, povestit cu mijloace din *1001 de nopți*. Fuga de temniță și de moarte îl conduce pe cel anchetat într-un labirint de comunicări începoșate ['a similitude of the avidity of domination inside the party, told with methods from *One Thousand and One Nights*. Running from incarceration and death drives the one who is investigated in a maze of foggy communications'] (Băicuș 2009: 178).

Everything related to the politics is undoubtedly transformed when the essence of the mythical world penetrates into the perimeter of the present (Anca Vogel and Economu are arrested). Sprung from the innocence of a story teller who is himself seduced by the story, the narrations fascinate some of the investigators, confuse and exhaust others, change their destinies and incite them to find hidden meanings. Even though the investigators ask him to provide information about people who are presumed to be dangerous, Fărâmă recreates a world, restructuring it mythically. Therefore, through the word, he liberates from the hypogeal mazes of the memory a world that immortalizes the myth, and, unassailably, the sacred masked hidden in the world:

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> Fărâmă este un tip eminamente profan care, prin narațiunile lui, creează o lume ce supraviețuiește prin semne (un semn este și povestirea ca atare). Zonele nu sunt distincte, orice individ poate fi, în definitiv, purtător de mituri. Numai că unii cred în realitatea acestei lumi (Fărâmă, Oana, Lixandru, Leana ș.a), alții nu. Cei din urmă au propriul cod ['Fărâmă is a man entirely profane who, using his narrations, creates a world which survives through signs (a sign is also the story itself). The areas are not distinct, any individual could be, essentially, a myth carrier. But some believe in the reality of this world (Fărâmă, Oana, Lixandru, Leana and so), and some do not. The latter have their own cipher'] (Simion 2006: 250).

It is the eidetic cipher of the novella, which presents intransigent investigators, the long galleries of the Securitate; Fărâmă gets arrested and must offer the data that the representatives of a political system await. Due to his wish of returning to certain days (the ones when he was the principle of the school on Mântuleasa street), Fărâmă enters a system of ciphers and signs which is not familiar and becomes doubtful. Through a series of coincidences, he will blame other characters; through his stories, he constantly escapes the present, taking the tales, the investigators and the readers in another time. Investigators try to leave the temporal maze in which they are thrown by Fărâmă's stories by finding the cipher of the narration, on which basis they subject everything to a rational understanding, through "[...] demascarea mitologiei create de Fărâmă; o golire a povestirii de conotațiile ei inițiatice" ['the unmasking of the mythology Fărâmă created; a draining of the story of its initiating connotations'] (Simion 2006: 262). And the narrations let themselves deciphered according to the investigators' code: the mentioned cellars and Oana's dream build a "sign" which leads them to the Polish treasure hidden by Economu, only needing to examine "cu rigoare necesară aceste episoade periferice ca să găsim cifrul prin care pot fi identificate acțiunile, personagiile, ideile pe care voiați să le țineți secrete" ['with a necessary rigour these peripherical episodes in order to discover the cipher which can help identify the actions, the characters, the ideas that you wanted to keep hidden'] (Eliade 2007: 571).

On another bypath of the maze we find Fărâmă's "signs", which talk about another reality, the mythical, sacred one, concealed in stories which flow from one another, in an attempt to reach the story that could make the listeners understand it all. Each of these old histories contains a "piece" of the general truth. Zaharia Fărâmă knows that the signs are correlated, the interpretation of one of them being infinite, sometimes even dangerous; this is why he inserts in the narration the clues which create a strange relationship with the sacred hidden in the stories: the warmth, the restlessness, the forgetfulness. The motif of magical warmth is recurrent in Mircea Eliade's prose, always having the same meaning – a test of passing the initiation ritual to the spiritual condition. Whoever manages to pass the test can reach this condition, midday being the favourable time for entering the sacred time. Mircea Eliade considers 14 or 15 o'clock a secret, occult time of the day because the shamans have power over the sacred fire, the magical warmth. So the time of midday coincides with a test: it is the time of passing to the spiritual condition.

Besides the initial signs, the text also contains symbolical, conventional signs determined by the interpretations of the reader: the street, the elevator, the cave, the

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arrow, the flight, the cellar etc. The teacher cannot stand the elevator and chooses the stairs, because his part is to find the exit, to walk up the stairs towards eternity. The elevator, unlike the stairs, is a closed space that does not offer the possibility of escaping, in which the control over reality is lost, one being unable to know how many flights to ascend or descend. The cellar is another sign – of passing to a different world, of climbing down in the essential history. Iorgu Calomfir descends in the cellar to find a crystal with miraculous powers, but being seduced by the popular beliefs, he thinks he could also discover an entry to another realm. He fails, renounces and goes abroad, but the fascination of the signs in the cellar continues to make victims and transform young people such as Lixandru into searchers:

> […] dac-or găsi vreodată o pivniță părăsită, plină cu apă, să caute nu știu ce fel de semne și, dacă găsesc semnele toate, să știe că în pivnița aceea e loc vrăjit, că pe-acolo se poate trece pe tărâmul celălalt [if they were to find an abandoned cellar, filled with water, they should look for all kinds of signs and, if they find all the signs, they should know that the cellar is a magic place, that you can enter another realm through there] (Eliade 2007: 513).

The novella *Pe strada Mântuleasa* reveals its statute of macromaze also through the fragments which highlight an authentic spatial maze. The building the teacher Fărâmă enters in his search for major Borza I. Vasile is "o clădire cu mai multe etaje" ['a multi-storey building'], which resembles the mazes of the antique world. The second spatial maze is the headquarters of the Securitate itself:

> Îl conduseră prin câteva coridoare lungi (…). Au ieșit pe ușa din partea opusă și au pornit pe un coridor întunecat (…). Au coborât apoi câteva scări și au pătruns într-un alt coridor, care parcă n-ar fi făcut parte din aceeași clădire (…). Au pornit din nou ocolind tot coridorul, care parcă trasa un lung semicerc (…) ['They took him through some long galleries (…). They exited through the door on the opposite wall and entered a dark hallway (…). They walked down some stairs and entered another hall, which seemed not to be a part of the same building (…). They moved again detouring the entire hallway, which seemed to draw a long semicircle'] (Eliade 2007: 508).

Projecting itself at:

> [...] intersecția a două realități, care țin de structura operei: narațiunea propriu-zisă, adică faptele narate și aventura limbajului, cel care, prin realizarea sa concretă, dirijează, direcționează și, ceea ce e mai important, vectorizează faptele ['the crossroads of two realities, which have to do with the structure of the work: the narration itself, namely the narrated acts and the adventure of the language, which, through its own realization, conducts, directs and, mostly, vectorises the facts'] (Strochi 2003:179),

the novella also reveals a linguistic maze which invites the reader to penetrate the rigours of the administrative style and the liberty of the fictional one, the concentric circles of the tenses (although the acts belong to the present or to the past, the language adventures itself into the future tense).

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Fărâmă "crushes" the narration and, concurrently, the language, reinvents the story, offering it a different arrangement and, at the same time, reinvents the language. The reader is forced to oscillate and to make connections between the sacred and the profane, between denotation and connotation, to replace, to convert, and to integrate the profane into the sacred. Fărâmă creates a text in which he projects himself and he projects his own reading strategy, similar to the strategies which are specific to myths, in which the sacred is revealed and also becomes occult. In order to penetrate its meaning, one must sense a certain language, a certain rhetoric. Fărâmă constantly recreates the text, which gives him the statute of exegetic narrator, because to recreate means to interpret.

The strictly denotative Fărâmă's deciphering of the language cannot allow penetrating the esoteric content of the text. This is why the investigators, which only update the speech superficially, cannot penetrate the blazing level of the story, cannot access the cipher of the language in which the narration is told and written. The tales are perceived differently, and the versions and perspectives make "the figure in the carpet" be different for readers too. The narrator is under the impression that he walks "never on the same road", and the reader, implicitly, is caught in a maze of interpretations that he can associate with this "scrieri complexe, cu mai multe scenarii (nivele) epice, o capodoperă de limbaj aluziv" ['complex scriptures, with several epic scenarios (levels), a masterpiece of allusive language'] (Simion 2006: 264).

Therefore, *Pe strada Mântuleasa,* a short story with a realistic *scenario* which conceals a mythical one, gradually reveals a bundle of mazes which talk about the general, moral dimension of a maze – that of showing the man his mythical origins. Although he struggles in a mediocre world, the modern man is a carrier of signs. Entering the maze of these signs, he has the chance of saving himself, of touching his centre or converging towards it, revealing from behind Maya's veils the sacred disguised in history. The narration merges in a therapeutic and redeeming Ariadna's thread. "Pentru a salva ființa trebuie s-o povestești și s-o înveleşti într-o povestire" ['In order to save a being you must story it and wrap it in a story'], wrote Eugen Simion. Fărâmă becomes the prisoner of the narrative maze which he creates, and what impresses is the fact that he does not want to leave the maze. Why? Because he has not yet touched the centre, he has not managed to tell the narration that could be the key to all the others; but maybe he is afraid to come out, because he infers a different "maze-like attempt" (the ending of the novella reveals a curious symmetry with the beginning: the warmth, Borza I. Vasile), even though finally he appears as an initiated who "knows a sum of things".

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Abstract

The novelette *Pe strada Mântuleasa* ('*The Old Man and the Bureaucrats*') reveals itself, from the first lecture, as a labyrinth of labyrinths: mythic, narrative, spatial and temporal, linguistic and so on; re-reading it does not diminish the number of labyrinths, but provokes the readers to discover new ones or to create their own labyrinth in which they could stay captive or set themselves free according to their capacity to escape from the meaning and the magic of the text or to go deeper into it, to let themselves be lured by it, grasping as much as they can of "the knots and signs" of Mircea Eliade's text.

The paper entitled *A Maze of Mazes* aims at identifying different types of labyrinth in the novelette *Pe strada Mântuleasa* ('*The Old Man and the Bureaucrats*'), emphasizing the fact that it really represents "the most complex of Eliade's narrative texts", as Eugen Simion stated.

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