Myths and Forms of Religiosity in the Work of Mircea Eliade

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L'œuvre littéraire de Mircea Eliade est entré en jeu d'interférences complexes de son temps avec une infusion extraordinaire des symboles et des archétypes. Dans l'art de l'écrivain se sent fort des effets / des échos de la vocation de l'auteur de l'essence moderne.
De même que son œuvre scientifique augmente (la recherche et l'étude des mythes, des formes de la religiosité), on peut parler de l'authenticité de la littérature générée par l'expérience, écrite dans une manière directe, proche des théories esthétiques de Camil Petrescu. Eliade exige la fidélité de l'acte de vivre dans l'art.
L'auteur démontre la possibilité d'une prose essentiellement moderne imprégnée de culture, riche en symboles et résonances archétypales qui rend complexité au sens, aux suggestions.

Mots-clés: symboles, mythes, fidélité, esthétique, archétypales.

The author Mircea Eliade (novelist and short story writer) stands out in the context of his time, even as a youth, above all through a more nuanced and extended approach to the art of this narrative form, from which he requires, like Camil Petrescu, "authenticity" and openness to all important existential experiences, ignoring subjects and intrigues, specific to Balzac's works, for images of a life of consciousness, towards a prose of ideas, of the fantastic etc.

Later, as his scholar work expands (research and study of myths, forms of religiosity), his literary work entered the space of complex interferences with an extraordinary infusion of symbols and archetypes whose irradiation feel strongly in the art of the writer.

Disciple of professor and philosopher Nae Ionescu, Eliade was considered, even early in life, "the leader of the new generation" which included Emil Cioran, Constantin Noica, E. Ionescu, Mircea Vulcănescu, Petre Ţuţea etc., his studies in India played an important role in the training of the scholar. The works published by Eliade before the war, but especially his postwar works, make him a complex personality in the history of religions. (One of the most comprehensive synthesis of the sacred from prehistory to the present is *The History of Religious Beliefs and Ideas, 1976-1983 [Istoria credinţelor şi ideilor religioase, 1976-1983]*).

Another area explored by Eliade is that of the myth, a field where he "resonates" with Lucian Blaga. In his view "the myth tells a sacred history,

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narrating an event that took place in a primordial time, a fabulous time of beginnings." The myth "provides models for human behaviour and thus gives meaning and value to existence". Works such as *Aspects of Myth [Aspecte ale mitului], The Sacred and the Profane [Sacru şi profan], From Zalmoxis to Genghis Khan [De la Zalmoxis la Genghis-Han], The Myth of the Eternal Return [Mitul eternei reîntoarceri]* gave the author an international reputation.

As regards the prose, Mircea Eliade appears in interwar literature with a new vision on the Romanian novel. He advocates for a literature of "authenticity" generated by the experience, written in a direct style, unadorned, thus, coming close to the aesthetic theories of Camil Petrescu. Notably, there is a fidelity of recording the act of living, that writing degree zero Roland Barthes speaks about, a "boiling point" of writing; it's about the degree to which writing explodes and reveals its meaning. Unlike the vast majority of writers, he did not let himself get distracted by the seductions of strictly literary semiology.

The first novels were considered by most commentators as being written under the influence of Andre Gide: "M. Eliade is the most integral and subservient embodiment of Gideism in Romanian literature." (G. Călinescu).

The celebrity of the writer is due to the novel *Maitreyi*, published in 1933, a novel that begins with the same obsession of faithfully recording experience.

The novel *Maitreyi* is rightly considered one of the masterpieces of the Romanian novel. It is a work that falls under the category of "international novel", the image of the confrontation between two cultural bridges that are not only different, but also very far apart. The story of Allan's love for Maitreyi is actually, essentially, that of discovering, with some difficulty, gradually, of another mentality, of a foreign, exotic cultural space: India.

The novelist uses a modern formula of the novel – the journal (especially the references to the sequences of the journal proper), so the "live" transcription of what happens in the development of the love story is set in dialogue with impressions and reflections from that moment (journal), as well as the past (about the original time of the retrospection). G. Călinescu labelled the author as "Gidean" (a follower of Andre Gide) but today, at least in the case of *Maitreyi*, this seems excessive, even unfair.

The art of the novelist focuses in *Maitreyi* on the actual capacity of the novelist to reconstruct in its images the dialectics of a great love, the image of its transformation in time. Maitreyi is no ordinary and conventional beauty, and the male character, Allan, seems even surprised to discover – and not in the beginning – a romantic interest in this female presence that soon comes to take over the whole of his existence. The mixture of naivety and instinctive feminine coquetry, later innocence and sensuality, the association between carnal and the relationship with the mythical universe (Maitreyi's love for a tree), the alternations of the impression of freshness and even childish grace with moments of doubt and jealousy (awakened, for example, by the idolatrous adoration the heroine feels for the great Indian poet Tagore, whom she sees as a spiritual maestro, "the guru") are lines

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along which her portrait becomes clear, but they are also pivots around which is organized the history of the feeling that binds the two, the transformation of the conflict between the two mentalities.

The girl confides in Allan, talking about her love: a tree, tall and proud, yet gentle and comforting. To love a tree is not something childish. It is a pure capacity to communicate with things. It is the form of maintaining a poetic and mythical mentality of one's positions in the world, the cosmic integration. And her pledge of love is imbued with mythology. Maitreyi, speaking to the earth, swears she will forever belong to her lover. The secret engagement of the two, in the exotic nature of Bengal, has the solemnity and incantation of old Indian poems. Heaven and earth are invoked in a pledge of love, like in a magic ritual "Hear me, mother earth [...] my heart shall not tire in my love for Allan, whom Heaven gave birth far away, but you, mother, brought him close to me."

The story of Allan and the Indian girl, Maitreyi, is not only a love story, but also a meditation on the internal condition of Eros, whose limit is the need of merging with each other. The longing to merge is related to passion, but in experiencing love, it is essential to understand the difference/being. Later, this tendency to merge is aggravated by the fact that between the two lovers there are not only differences in sex (male and female), but also the two different spiritual codes: European and Indian. The oriental spirit differs from the European spirit, which is based on the rational. Each of them discovers in the other a new way of thinking, of living and of loving. The novel appears as a journal of discovery of a double unknown. Maitreyi is not an ordinary lover. She is The One Lover of a lifetime. Only through her does Allan discover true love, and, through love, he gains entry into the mystery of the Indian soul. Maitreyi is the reincarnation of the essential spirit of India, another way of living and feeling. Dealing with the European spirit reveals the limits between two ways of seeing the world and existence. Allan, being European, did not suspect that those affectionate and warm relationships aimed the perspective of adopting the other in spirit, which could not violate barriers. The young Bengali warned him: "You do not know one thing. You do not know that we love you differently, (she hesitated and rectified) they love you in a Different way. I ought to love you like that, not the way I love you now." This is the moral, religious code of the Indian world, a Different world. The curve of Allan's feelings for Maitreyi is spectacular, it goes from "I do not love her", "she fascinates me, but I'm not in love" to "no woman affected me so much". Allan can not understand the attitude of Narendra Sen and all family members towards him: the warm welcome, the intimacy of the family atmosphere, the loving care, the appreciation, the respect they show him, and then (even if he change his religion to Hinduism), when finding out about the erotic bond with Maitreyi, they unleash a furious anger without any human indulgence ... which results in the immediate banishment of Allan and the imprisonment of the girl behind the bars of fierce interdictions. Here is a love that must die because of moral and religious barriers: the Oriental moral interdiction to uproot one's own values and the helplessness of

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European rationalism (the interdiction) to "plant" oneself in a garden where one can not discover one's own roots. It is a fusion of the spirits of the two young people that goes beyond the spiritual, moral barriers, overcoming distance and interdictions. It is a lesson about the universality of love, the power of love beyond all spiritual boundaries, beyond any culture and way of thinking. When you love change, you change in relation to the soul of the other. Love is a metaphor of the beloved.

The presence of Maitreyi adds to the difference between masculinity and femininity, the diversity linked to the traditions and the mystery India. It is not just that Allan misunderstands the moral code that makes the members of the heroine's family to receive him into their home as a son and a brother (which ultimately leads to their violent reaction, feeling deceived, because he betrayed their trust), but also the hero's belief that he could truly integrate into the Indian world, by changing his religion, for example. In the end, this experience shows the hero the impossibility of real communication between the two cultures and mentalities.

The novel does not transform this problem into a pretext and object of a novel of ideas, an essay-novel, although there are sequences dominated by hypotheses, interrogations, even essay ideas and tone: but they are always about noting reactions and experiences, with the times of great poetry of sensuality, or sometimes about the mythical experience of the world. It is exactly the synthesis of these various components with the feelings involved and the aspiration to understand that creates the charm of this novel, making it unique in Romanian literature.

In *Introduction to the Work of Mircea Eliade [Introducere în opera lui Mircea Eliade,]* Ion Lotreanu states that *Maitreyi* is a love poem, in which the main characters are metaphors, while Pompiliu Constantinescu argues that Mircea Eliade's work "is heavy with the revelation of a miracle, maybe unique in his literary career".

Compared to the fantastical prose of his youth (*Nights in Singapore [Nopţi la Singapore], The Secret of Dr. Honigberger [Secretul doctorului Honigberger]*), as well as compared to "the formulas" of novels such as *Miss Cristina [Domnişoara Cristina]* (where the effect of the fantastic dominates, followed in crescendo) and *The Snake [Șarpele]* (a work with initiation implications, where the atmosphere is different from that in *Miss Cristina*), in a final stage of his creation, Mircea Eliade wrote a series of short prose, novellas and stories with a great refinement of the symbolic fabric and a complexity of meaning to suit this fabric: *In the Courtyard of Dionis [În curte la Dionis], The Stone Reader [Ghicitor în pietre], General's Uniforms [Uniforme de general], With the Gypsies [La ţigănci]* and others, all along the same line of the interference of the fantastic with the mythical and of the suggestion of signs of the sacred "hidden" in the profane. *With the Gypsies* remains an exemplary text for the special aesthetic formula of this type of prose and the fantastic.

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Gavrilescu, the protagonist of the novella, is an ordinary man, but in whose consciousness and memory there still are all his youthful dreams, the aspiration to become an artist, even if at the present time in the novella he appears as a poor music teacher, forced to give private piano lessons and stay over the summer in Bucharest, enduring the heat of the season. The very first appearance of the character is in "the great heat" of summer in the capital, but gradually the attraction of the shadow (the walnuts from the garden called "With the Gypsies") will acquire a Thanatos connotation, of the need to rest. Signs of wear and tear, aging, memory lapses, obsessive replay of motifs (the thirst of Lawrence of Arabia, the monotonous crunching of the tram) begin to set up an atmosphere which is in deep connection with initiatory adventure that begins when entering the world of "With the Gypsies".

The discussion in the tram about the disreputable place called "With the Gypsies" only suggested the attraction, even if guilty or troubled, this place exercised on quite a number of people. For Gavrilescu, entering "With the Gypsies" is the beginning of getting to know the other realm, of death, as well as an opportunity to review the essence of his existential path. What the protagonist discovers there is not just the failure of his vocation as an artist, and the loss of the love of his life (Hildegard), but especially the deep source of his errors.

The main symbolic moment of his failed attempts to guess "the gypsy" has a general meaning about his whole existence. Why is wrong Gavrilescu when he mistakes in turn the Jewish woman and the Greek woman as a gypsy, whom he fails to identify? Because he is deceived by the misleading signs (clothing and portrait) the women have put on precisely to create confusion. In his youth, he was wrong to take the appearance of being a weak man, who needs to be protected, from the image of Elsa, whom he married forgetting his true love, Hildegard, and now old Gavrilescu is wrong again when he is asked to guess the true gypsy.

Not guessing the gypsy has in Mircea Eliade's novella the meaning of not "guessing" life, moving past it, failing existentially. The laughter of the girls in *With the Gypsies*, the leitmotif of the replies that talk about Gavrilescu's fear, emphasize a nostalgia and an inability to get, in experience, as well as in knowledge, to what is essential, and everything that is related to time and memory in this text amplifies them.

The structure of the novella creates a fantastic initiatory atmosphere through all those details (the old gypsy at the entrance to "With the Gypsies", the unwound clock, the game of the three girls, the shortness of breath and the loss of points of reference) which suggests an ancient and universal topos, the journey to death, and by those successive sliding between space and time in the garden "With the Gypsies" and "the outside".

Especially, the relativization of time is the source of this initiatory fantastic: the change in currency, the disappearance from known addresses of the people whom Gavrilescu had visited, Elsa's departure to Germany 12 years ago, all these take the protagonist by surprise, creating strong feelings of anxiety generated by such a loss

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of the sense of time. The end of the novella, when Hildegard appears – "the guide" – and the other symbolic signs (the team, the church, the flowers, the journey in the night) rounds up what the entire adventure of the protagonist, the chances he had been given to "guess" and understand, which he missed, turning back in time, in memory, the oscillation between the two spaces ("with the gypsies" and the other one, "outside"), had suggested all along: the threshold of the end, of death. It was argued that Gavrilescu lives simultaneously in the fabulous realm and in reality, he oscillates between life and death. In *Commented Romanian Writers [Scriitori români comentaţi]*, Eugen Simion says that in *With the Gypsies* there are many symbols, concealed by ordinary words.

Both as a novelist and as a short story writer, Mircea Eliade demonstrated through works such as *Maitreyi* and *With the Gypsies* the possibility of an essentially modern prose imbued with culture, rich in symbols and archetypal resonances that provides his literary imagination with a great complexity of meaning, of implications and suggestions, but this density of problems does not generate an excessive intellectualization, robbing the literary text of capacity to capture and delight.

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