The Image of Greece in the Romanian Poetry

Bogdan Mihai DASCĂLU*

MOTTO
"For the poet, history is a vehicle
to embody his opinions and ideas".
(Friedrich Hebbel)

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The relations between the Romanians and the Greeks were permanent, but over the years there were distinct periods, each with a characteristic dominant feature: *religious* in the Byzantine era, *political* in the times of Phanariot reigns and *cultural* in the modern age. These relationships have been maintained and consolidated through *travels* and through *cultural dialogue.*

In essence, we are dealing with two distinct situations.

The *simultaneous* relationship between the SELF and the OTHERS, carried out within the relationship between HERE and THERE. This is the object of the *illusionary* research of the *spatial* type, to the extent that the birth of the image is conditioned by the *journey* of the SELF to THERE.

The *delayed* relationship between a SELF and ANOTHER, which is conditioned by the difference between NOW and THEN and is dealt with by the *imagology* of *atemporal* type, interested in the images produced within the cultural relationship between the SELF and THEN[1].

Romanian literature contains many texts regarding journeys to the Greek territory, as evidenced by the excellent anthology of GeorgetaFilitti[2], which allows me to postpone the discussion of geographic voyage and to refer here only to the cultural-imaginary one, more precisely the *literary and poetic* journey. To be able to [3]keep the time allotted, I will focus only on five of the most important Romanian poets: the romantic Mihai Eminescu, the expressionist Lucian Blaga, the hermetising Ion Barbu and Nichita Stănescu, who cannot be categorised. They cover a century and a half of poetry, a long enough period to come to conclusions of greater generality.

The aesthetic differences between them are particularly noticeable at the level of poetic *discourse*, but they sometimes fade completely regarding the *motives.*

* The Romanian Academy, Timişoara Branch, the "Titu Maiorescu" Banat Studies Institute (bmdascalu@yahoo.com).

[1] From the rich literature of the subject, I mention here Brenner 1990, Todorov 1985, Pageaux 2000, as well as my own study, Dascălu 2006.

[2] Filitti 2004, in which 40 authors are presented, about which extremely useful comments are made in the *Preface* of the work.

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One of the recurrent reasons in their work is that of *ancient Greece*, a cultural space grasped in its moments of grace that defines the later European thinking, to which it offered models and solutions still valid up to this day. The poets I refer to evoke this space mostly through some *characters* (Artemis, Caryatides, Euridice, Galatia, Oedipus, Orpheus, Pan, Ulysses) and *mythological animals* (the Trojan horse, the centaur), but also some *artistic and scientific personalities* (Anacreon, Euclid, Heraclitus, Ptolemy). They have the advantage of a great notoriety and, additionally, are at the centre of myths or events of general human significance, so that their mere presence in the text or even only in its title keeps the meanings that accompany them in the subtext.

The semantic aura that surrounds them imposed on the Romanian poets the location in a diachronic perspective of literary extraction and exploitation of a structure capable of continuously gaining new meanings, which are characteristic of subsequent historical moments. Therefore, it can be said that, along with the proclamation of Greece as *imago genitrix* of the poetic text, the feeling of unavoidable *temporality*[4] was imposed, with the precise role of connecting Hellenic Antiquity to a present ever farther away from it.

In the lines I will comment, temporality occurs either as a *cyclic* movement of an inexorable history of progress and producing *pessimism*, or as a *linear* move, resulting from the opening of the circle and its transformation into a continuous straight line, generating confidence in progress.

The idea of a circular movement in history is not new, it appears in Antiquity already[5]; it can be found at Giambattista Vico, who made the famous *teoria dei corsi e dei ricorsi storici*[6] that was later developed by Oswald Spengler[7], a follower of an organicist vision, according to which the cycles have an identical course: *birth-flowering-decadence*[8].

In Mihai Eminescu's poetry, the ideas of Arthur Schopenhauer can easily be recognised[9] and especially the idea about the *eternal present*, which generates an inevitably pessimistic thinking close to the idea of *decadence* at Nietzsche and of *decline* at Spengler.

The great poem *Memento mori* (or *Panorama of Vanity*) that was written in 1871, thus during the Berlin studies, but that remained among the posthumous manuscripts, is of interest for us. We have here a *sui-generis* history of the world, where the poet emerges explicitly as a follower of the *cyclical* conception, which he sets out in the preamble of the text, in his own way and in original terms. Each cycle follows an ascending-descending trajectory (*From magnification to fall, from fall to magnification*), at the end of which the poet proposes a reflexive moment. Stopping *the wheel of history* at this point, he offers the opportunity to find out that the new

[4] Determined by *the cultural gap* in which the respective authors are located.

[5] In the *Vede*, as in Hesiod (*Munci și zile/ Work and Days)* the ages of an increasingly degraded history appear.

[6] In the *Scienza Nuova*, 1725 (second edition, 1730), where he distinguishes three historical cycles: primitive (divine), poetic (heroic) and civil (human).

[7] He describes the history of humanity as a succession of 8 cultures: ancient Egypt, Babylon, India, China, Greek-Roman antiquity (Apollinic), Arabia (including Jewish) and Aztec culture, each of which constitutes a cycle of one thousand years.

[8] Acc. to Spengler 1918 and Spengler 1921.

[9] The ones from Schopenhauer 1819; Schopenhauer 1843.

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cycle only identifies with the previous one, in an eternal movement. For him, history is movement, but a movement on the spot.

In the poem, 7 cycles are evoked, of which 5 overlap with those analysed later by Spengler[10].

The episode dedicated to *Greece*[11] begins with the genesis of this culture: *Thus Greece is born of the dark sea*. Its fundamental feature is the symbiosis between *faith and art*. The connection begins to deteriorate when scepticism towards their own creation appears, be it either about the *thinker* who no longer believes in the sign he propagates, or the *sculptor* who, being blind, can no longer control his work, or, finally, about *Orpheus* who, being disappointed that *the wind deceives him and the waves lie to him*, throws his harp into the sea that, *in pictures of billow praises Greece's fall*.

Going through the same stages, the cycles are repetitive, where from the belief arises that the future is just another hypostasis of the past. Under these conditions, knowledge also enters into an inevitable circularity: *If you want to know the future, turn back to the past,* where from the feeling of frustration and historical pessimism emerges. The future is unpredictable only for the ignorant, for the wise man knows that, by turning to a perfectly cognoscible past, he will, implicitly, know the only seemingly enigmatic future:

> The future and the past/ Are the two sides of the page:/ He whose knowledge is vast/ Sees end as an initial stage.

The same twilight sentiment can be found also in Lucian Blaga's work, in the cycle called *Pan's Death*, but also in other poems in which the same mythological protagonist appears, not at all by chance. His choice is explained by at least two reasons. He can always be considered an *alter ego* of the poet, given his condition of *musician*, who has built the *pan flute* to endlessly wail the suicide of the nymph Syrinx, who turned into a reed in order to escape his insistence. Secondly, the destiny of Pan, who is the god of both the forest and the flocks, is suitable to illustrate the entrance into an irreversible decline, being the only god contaminated by earthiness, that is mortal, as suggested by the lower part of his body, that of a goat.

In a poem by Blaga, Pan is *blind and old,* in another one he is *sad*,somewhere else he is *alone* and closes *the coffin of his eyes*. If in Eminescu's work the history carries in itself the repetitive and therefore inevitable destiny as a sign of the inability to evolve, Blaga offers a plausible explanation for Pan's death: the great culture of Antiquity is declining with the emergence of Christianity, which has discredited the faith in gods: Pan is sad because of the fact that *he is upset by the sparkle of a cross*, because he sees *the shadow of Christ in the colour of the moon* passing by or because he discovers that his only friend, the spider, *has a cross on its back*. The downfall of the god causes the *pan flute of elder to remain unfinished*, so the task of completing his work has to be taken over by the poet. Pan's disappearance, therefore, ends a cycle and modern artists will inaugurate another one. However, we do not know if it will be

[10] Babylon, Egypt, Palestine, Greece, and Rome (adding to them Dacia and the Walhalic North).

[11] Broadly commented by Vianu 1963: 579–583, in the chapter *Imaginea Greciei antice în Memento Mori de Eminescu.*

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better or worse than the previous one. In another text, *Heraclitus by the Lake*, Blaga only *seems* to go beyond the cyclical blockade of history: irritated by the immobility of the lake and substituting himself to the *Darkness from Ephesus* but also to *Jesus*, he throws the thorns (of the crown!) into the lake, imprinting the movement to it and at the same time spreading it in concentric circles, the permanent reverberation of which announces a revival of art.

For Ion Barbu, the poet-mathematician, the renewal of poetry, in order to be authentic, must mean the return to the values of Greek antiquity, which he has assiduously evoked in the lyrics from his youth[12]. However, the requirement is formulated and explained in articles and interviews in the press of the time[13]. He vehemently disputed the opinion of contemporaries who claimed that he was a modern or even modernist poet, saying he considers his roots to be part of the ancient poetry, towards which the poetry of his age is an insult:

> The relevant forms of poetry lie further, in the memory of a clear humanity: of Greece, an ingenuous and rare edging enclosing a sea. /…/ In this Delos of high poetry, be it new or old, Modernism sounds like a profane evocation.

He takes over the responsibility to revive this tradition as a mere seemingly modern poet:

> What could be considered to be modernism in my poetry is nothing more than a conjunction with the farthest past of poetry: *the Pindaric ode*,

and the musicality of the verse does not have to cover its true posture:

> As I cannot appear in front of my fellow citizens like the old poets with the lyre in my hand and the flowers on my head, I coated my verse with as many sounds as possible.

From this position, Ion Barbu renews Pan almost ritually, evoking *the mourning of the Old Age* when a voice was heard over the sea: *The great Pan is dead* (*Homegas Pan tethnēke*). The immediate effect was a sadness that covered everything: "closed – the glades of the forests; drained – the gorges of water; endless – the play of the mist; broken – the syrinx of reed; the leave choir of the Oceanids grieving for ever!" The poet continues by saying that,

> the rumour has turned out to be a lie ... So, if we need poetry in our time, it should be the ancient one, the poetry of the fairy tales of the forest. It is more justified and healthier than all kinds of grandiloquent sorrow of prematurely despaired young people (Barbu 2000: 91).

[12] For the great Eleusinas, Dionisiac, Pythagoras, Hierophant, Ixion, the Last centaur.

[13] "Evoluția poeziei lirice" după E. Lovinescu; Cuvânt către poeți; De vorbă cu I. Valerian-Poezia nouă; F. Aderca. De vorbă cu D. Ion Barbu; Zece ani de poezie, in Barbu 2000: 30–34; 90–91; 133–138; 139–144.

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Stating that Pan's death was just a rumour, Ion Barbu legitimates the return to the old poetic tradition of Greece, the only one that can ensure the continuation of an authentic tradition.

Greek antiquity gives also Nichita Stănescu the opportunity to use mythological[14] or historical[15] characters; most of the time, they are assumed as initial motifs, that the poems developed from them still maintain only allusive semantic relations with. The things are different in *Laus Ptolemaei,* a volume published in 1968 and consisting of 23 quasi-convergent texts around a character[16] who, challenging the *heliocentric* model of Aristarchos of Samos[17] and of Seleukos of Seleukia[18], develops its own model, the *geocentric* one, which will then be permanently disputed. Here too, as well as at the poets discussed before, the *cyclic* theme appears, but in the variant *life – death – life*. First phase (When Ptolemy was born,/ The Earth was of no kind) is the one in which a hypothesis has emerged that gives the Earth a central place (*Center mundi)*, be it unusual, as confirmed by stage 2 (When he died,/The earth was straight like the palm). In the last stage of the controversial posterity, the poet asserts Ptolemy's survival vocation, precisely because of the endless line of those who have denied him:

> But he is all times/ Because all the time/ There will be someone/ Who tells a truth/ Defeating him/.../ He is necessary at all times,/ Because he is the best to be defeated.

Ptolemy becomes the beneficiary of the paradox according to which the eternally defeated one is in reality invincible, since the struggle against him never ends but must always be resumed from its original point:

> Without him there nothing is possible,/ For without the lie/ The Truth would have no purpose.

Moreover, this perpetual war assures him a permanent notoriety:

> ... his name/ Has become much/ More famous/ Than the name/ Of anyone who has defeated him.

So the posterity of Ptolemy is a necrophagous one, its vitality depends precisely on the appetite it has. The conclusion, if there is one!, is that the past cannot be defeated, since any dispute is the affirmation of what is denied.

In closing these comments, it is difficult for me to say whether the vision of an active temporality has been best expressed by the image of Greek antiquity, or whether the obsession with these images has led to the use of the theoretical arsenal of ever-changing history.

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[14] In *Artemis*, *Către Galateea*, *Chiron, părintele centaurilor*, *Euridice*, (To Galatia, Chiron, the Father of the Centaurs, 11 elegies – one is dedicated to Daedalus), *Orfeu în vechea cetate*, *Delphi* (Orpheus in the Old City, Delphi).

[15] *Laus Ptolemy*, *Certarea lui Euclid*, *Panta Rhei*, *Euclid și soldatul latin* (Euclid's Scolding, Panta Rhei, Euclid and the Latin Soldier).

[16] Claudius Ptolamaeus (100–160 d. Chr.).

[17] Greek astronomer (310–230 BC).

[18] Greek astronomer (2 BC).

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Regardless of the solution we accept, the attraction of some of the great Romanian poets for ancient Greece, its fabulous mythology, but also personalities that marked the evolution of art and science is unquestionable.

The image of Greece is kaleidoscopic in Romanian poetry, meaning that it is divided into epochs and generally known spaces, but also because our writers perceived it differently according to their aesthetic orientation and their historical vision. Taking into account both perspectives, one can say that ancient Greece is a constant of this literature, to which Romanian poets report as an appropriate cultural vehicle, in which they express their own conceptions and ideas and render them to their readers. Michelangelo said that "there is a statue in every block of marble". Paraphrasing him, I say that in every Greek myth as many poems are hidden as poets had the talent to discover. Among them, also the Romanian poets.

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Abstract

This article presents the instances of the image of Greece in the Romanian poetry, during one and a half century. There are comments regarding texts of important poets such as Mihai Eminescu, Lucian Blaga, Ion Barbu and Nichita Stănescu and there are pointed out the aesthetic and stylistic differences in using some common motives such as antique Greece, historical decline, the god Pan, the plentiful error (Ptolemy). Being marked by these strong poetic personalities, the image of Greece in the Romanian poetry is kaleidoscopic.

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