Dramatic Elements in Two Novels by Mircea Eliade and John Fowles

Ofelia ICHIM

The novels we have chosen from the works of the two writers are *Nineteen Roses* by Mircea Eliade and *The Magus* by John Fowles. Both of them are perfect illustrations of the writers' delight in bringing performance elements into the narrative discourse as a means of introducing liveliness, as well as a metaphorical and a mythical element. There are many reasons to suspect that they have a common forerunner in theatrical theory, namely Antonin Artaud. Artaud's innovative ideas manifested in many different forms of experimental theatre, like Living Theatre, Open Theatre, The Performance Group, Environmental Theatre are accepted by Mircea Eliade and find their way, with a real enthusiasm for this type of theatre, into the novel *Nineteen Roses* as well as short stories like *General's Uniforms*, *Incognito at Buchenwald*, *Adieu!...* Eliade – the novelist – also theorizes on the essence of performance art in *The Forbidden Forest* (we must not forget that he was also a playwright).

Taking into account the inventiveness and depth of Artaud's conception, Eliade creates examples of experimental theatre in his narratives readily adaptable for a stage performance. Costumes, gestures, lighting, music, scenery challenge the rules of classical theatre and are given their own voice. The return to myth, the direct communication with the spectator who is in the position of being an actor himself are some of the experimental "collaborations" between Eliade and Artaud. John Fowles pushes the reader's imagination further and forces the character, young Nicholas Urfe, to be an actor himself despite his unawareness of this game.

As a matter of fact we must stress on Eliade's concern for setting in short-stories or novels starting from his youth. In 1934 he published his volume of essays, *Oceanografie*. There is a very interesting text there, namely *Apology to Setting*, that might be called a quintessence of his opinion regarding this aspect of life. As he points out, the harmony of colours, lines and shapes is a sort of magic that influences one's mind and character. An actor could be the best messenger of the inner comfort created by the setting. There are certain cultural climates – he continues – where the setting has always been a marker not of the exterior world but of the subtle, interior self. It happens like that in the Oriental climate where inner life is so deep and silent, in contrast to European life. Daily gestures have their ceremony: for example, in India, young girls have different ways of walking according to certain circumstances (if they are accompanied by their mother, or by their father, by a foreigner, by an old person etc). The same attitude is met in Japan where inner life is a row of emotions produced by the kimono with symbolic values, by the meals, or the tea ritual. Young Eliade speaks of an obvious contrast between Occident and Orient in this respect. The Occidental man is unable to appreciate the decorative and ceremonial elements in the Oriental life. He

Philologica Jassyensia, An II, Nr. 1, 2006, p. 129-134

BDD-A771 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-26 23:10:48 UTC)

confesses he had met some smart Europeans who could not understand why Orientals are so happy, why they have a wealthy inner life, they enjoy the sunshine, the birds' song, they understand nature better – in spite of their flaws, ignorance, laziness and illnesses. He speaks about the importance of knowing how to transform obscure and rough life into magnificent ceremonials and settings. Mental and sensitive life acquires new meanings. The soul becomes a special vessel into which the Almighty pours wonders.

Another important essay written by Eliade on the same subject is *Clothes and Symbol*, published in *Fragmentarium* (1939). Here he stresses the subtle meaning of a mere *batik* cloth specific to Java. Each *batik* strip has its own significance: the labyrinth drawing has a special symbolism for a Javanese: each sign is a symbol. A Javanese understands immediately the character of the passer-by out of the clothes he is wearing: if he is rich or poor, if his home is in the mountains or at the seaside, what his parents' jobs are, who is his fiancée etc. All the festive "occasions" or events can be "read" in those polychromatic labyrinths. Man does not want to hide anything while he integrates himself to a certain super-individual order. And all the symbols, allegories drawn on a *batik* strip are intended to integrate man in an order that transcends him. As this symbolism is known to all the members of the community, it becomes the means of creating perfect ties among the members of a community. One can say that the English "introducing someone" is no longer necessary. The symbolism of the clothes speaks by itself and it addresses everybody: a child as well as an old man, a scholar as well as a peasant. There is no privacy in a society founded on tradition as all man's gestures speak of a prior and lost lasting meaning. In Orient, feeding, this profane gesture, becomes a ritual, that is, it acquires a meaning beyond its organic function; the same happens to all human gestures that integrate in an order that transcends not only the individual level but the whole society. The individual is integrated into an order that transcends even society. If the individual is integrated into society by thousands of "permanent rituals", it means that society is integrated into the cosmic order. Thus man belonging to traditional cultures is not alone; but this does not mean that he is not alone in society (as might happen due to Luciferic Occidental societies), it means he is not alone in the Universe. Such people do not have secrets as these are not necessary to them. Their whole life is bound to the Cosmic huge mystery.

Ieronim Thanase, a character who appears very often in Eliade's short-stories reaching a climax in *Nineteen Roses*, is assigned the "role" of both an actor and a stage manager in the short-story *General's Uniforms*. He works in an experimental theatre where he will play both Hamlet's father (a ghost) and Hamlet. As he himself admits – using Artaud's ideas – he gives up everything he has known about the type of performance practised up to that moment and he returns to the primitive unselfconscious origins of magic: "I have recreated the performance, I have reinvented dramatic art", he says.

Setting is an actant in the process of integrating performance into the primordial memory. One can notice some nucleus-setting elements in Eliade' short-stories and novels: the mirror in *General's Uniforms*, the hall with puppets in *In Dionysos' Courtyard*, the stains on the walls and the painting from *Incognito at Buchenwald*, the forester's house in *Nineteen Roses* etc.

A setting element, with a special symbolism is the mirror. In *General's Uniforms*, the old mirror reveals a real fairy scene, a flow of harmonious colours and images from the depth of the sea. In spite of some opinions that endow the mirror with

BDD-A771 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-26 23:10:48 UTC)

the symbolism of death, we believe that the world within it represents the primordial world. The huge mirror is covered with heavy curtains symbolising the impossibility of the profane to understand the sacred. The very moment the curtains fall from the mirror, the hall is flooded with light. All those in the hall are nothing but grotesque and scared silhouettes in contrast with the clear and serene truth of the primordial time. In the deep world of the sea with its caves and other beautiful and mysterious elements there are realities among which Ieronim, the magic child of the theatre world, feels himself at ease. While he dances and recites, his voice seems to come from beyond the profane world; he is in a sort of trance; his complexion, his voice, his gestures are transfigured, imbued with the joy of living in the matrix space and time.

Actors benefit by inner freedom. The dramatic performance enables them to transmit this freedom to the audience, too. The individual who gains inner freedom becomes a Boddhisattva who, irrespective of the circumstances of his death, will be free. As one of the characters in *Incognito at Buchenwald* asserts, the actors have concluded that it is only through theatre, namely by performing (including mimes, choreography, choir) that they could manage to show that, although enclosed, they, as well as their contemporaries from other countries, are not like entrapped mice.

In *About Balinese Theatre*, Artaud grants the stage manager full power, he is seen as a „magician" who recreates reality by abolishing profane time for the benefit of sacred time and sacred reality. Pursuing this idea we try to define the concern with the theatre expressed in Fowle's *The Magus*. The title of the novel offers a double and antithetical position that might be assumed by a stage-manager: that of a magus, someone who plays and leads others' lives but who misleads them, at the same time. The tarot card called „the magus" is a hint at the omnipotence assumed by the stage manager in the novel but, since a playing card is a mere playing card, nobody can take upon himself God's part in order to guide someone's life. The whole setting in the novel seems conceived to fit the purpose of a huge stage. The Greek island is an ideal place for what Professor Urfe, an Oxford graduate, had felt on leaving England: "I needed a new mystery", he confesses. Phraxos island is the perfect setting for the mysterious games played with Urfe's life. In Eliade's novel the group of actors rehearse in the mountains; the place must not be revealed to strangers and it seems to be a conspiracy to protect Romanian history from intruders or invaders. It is evident that such remote and closed terrains as the island or the mountains offer the illusion of escaping routine life, of living in *illo tempore*; Nicholas Urfe's first impression of the island is significant: "It was the world before the machine, almost before man. (...). Fear had never touched the island. If it was haunted, it was by nymphs, not monsters." Yet, he himself confesses, „It was an illusion." The gesture of the rich owner who lives on this Greek island of burning the old theatre where he and his friends used to perform plays from the classic repertory is very suggestive. It resembles Artaud's programme for the new theatre from *The Theatre and Its Double*. The new type of performance is tested by Conchis directly in the young English teacher's life. The scenery in the villa, the pantomimes played in the huge garden dealing either with Greek mythology or with Conchis's past, the costumes used at the so-called trial where each actor is the image of a tarot card, the music, the cinema used in order to create an atmosphere of so-called authenticity of something fictional are some of the techniques used by the person who assumes the responsibility of conducting a fragment from the young teacher's life. In contrast with the aura of magic that is

BDD-A771 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-26 23:10:48 UTC)

characteristic of the actors in Eliade's novels, in Fowles the mystery is dispelled by the powerful intrusion into Urfe's life instilling a feeling of fear: as Nicholas confesses, "The fear I felt was the same old fear; not of the appearance, but of the reason behind the appearance. It was not the mask I was afraid of, because in our century we are too inured by science fiction and too sure of science reality ever to be terrified of the supernatural again; but of what lay behind the mask. The eternal source of all fear, all horror, all real evil, man himself."

After the fashion of Artaud's conception, Conchis tells the newcomer that during the war he had tested a new type of performance: the conventional separation between actor and public had been abolished. They did not take into account the traditional division of the stage, the notions of forestage, stage and audience. The narrative and the plot were differently perceived; they developed between two fixed points: the starting point and the previously established dénouement. The „actors" invented the action between these two points. Conchis got into the spectator-actor's life playing the part of the Almighty. The allusions to the three famous names – Artaud, Pirandello and Brecht – show Conchis as deeply convinced of his unlimited power, believing that he had done for the theatre more than they did.

The traditional quest reveals a new dimension of reality by setting one's conscience free. Unwillingly, Urfe seeks his real ego; he does this because he is compelled by Conchis. At the same time, the trials he has to go through – real initiatic trials –offer him the "chance" to examine his conscience himself. Thus he understands his real feelings for his beloved; after several temptations he finds himself very near as well as very far away from her.

Fowles is sceptical enough; one of his characters who, together with Conchis has initiated the play imitating God, says that no fiction is necessary in real life although their belief is that everything is fiction in real life. In spite of the sufferings brought about by the diabolic Conchis, without the terror practised by this absolute stage manager, the young professor feels disappointed by finding himself in front of the curtain fallen down forever. Without the spell of the show, his life resembles the blind windows of an abandoned house. We remember Artaud's thought that it is here that the theatre must find its real meaning, in this performance of a temptation in which life has everything to lose while the spirit has everything to gain.

Returning to Artaud's conception on theatre, we remember that he said that the theatrical language must be a sort of „incantation", as words have become a cemetery for the spirit. The origin of the Balinese theatre is language before words had been uttered. Artaud perceives a syncretism in modern theatre, whose final aim is to regain the old magic forces, namely the idea of the total show.

We remember that René Guenon stated about *kali-yuga* that it suggests a period of confusion and of darkness whose beginning is represented by the Babel Tower and the languages tangling in the Biblical symbolism. As *kali-yuga* is the last decade of a cycle representing destruction, the bindings with the spiritual centre of the world were broken and that is why tradition was lost. Yet there is one more chance. This is what Artaud meant by the "birds' language" or the "angels' language". Their correspondent in the human world is the rythmic language with a hint to the sacred beginning of theatre, of literature in general.

BDD-A771 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-26 23:10:48 UTC)

Dance is a very old form of magic, states Heinrich Zimmer. Through self suggestion the dancer becomes a demon, a god or any other existence he is performing. Dance has a cosmogonic function as it awakens all the sleeping energies that can shape the world afterwards.

It is possible that Eliade may have been familiar with *Nātyaśāstra*, the old Indian book about performing art. Anyway, we are sure that during his journey to India he assisted to traditional performance shows and he understood their meaning.

Like Fowles' *The Magus*, Eliade's *Nineteen Roses* is the framework of a play in an attempt to demonstrate the reality of anamnesis and of catharsis. The theatrical performance acts as a catalyst for the anamnetic effect. Everything that happens on improvised stages has the aim of reintegrating daily life into the sacred revealing essential facts from life in *illo tempore* as well as forgotten feelings. The character Anghel D. Pandele, a successful novelist who had written just one play long before, is helped by performance art to remember completely forgotten facts as if he had been suffering from amnesia. Living among the actors led again by the stage director Ieronim Thanase, he rediscovers his vocation for writing plays. As if obeying to Artaud's stimulus, Pandele writes in the actors' camp, under the influence of their innovative art.

What happens in *Nineteen Roses* is a projection both towards the Oriental origin of the theatre and to the experimental performance. Niculina and Laurian Serdaru, the most important actor-characters are always wrapped in a spell: very little is revealed of their identity; they ceaselessly act new parts on imaginary stages. The two young actors express their message and art by intricate dances and by the inexplicable gift of changing clothes on the spot, like a metamorphosis. At first sight, Niculina's stage dress seems old fashioned and worn out yet attractive. Both the famous writer Anghel D. Pandele and his secretary are surprised by the inexplicable changes in Niculina's and Laurian Serdaru's clothes and complexion. How could Niculina take off her dress so quickly and wear t-shirts of different colours one after another as if they transformed their colours on the spot? At a certain moment she was wearing many scarves, the next moment they disappeared. How could Laurian Serdaru change his hair colour at the same time, seeming both grey and red?

Memory belongs to the sacred as it is the path towards the primordial. We refer to the mythical memory that surpasses the everlasting space and time of myth. Mircea Eliade's work is a retrieval of the mythical memory; two possibilities of reaching the primordial reality are religion and the theatre performance. It is with the help of the theatre that the profane man rediscovers the sacred dimension, the cosmic order. In Eliade's thought, memories bring escape from the present moment in order to allow man penetrate into the genuine world untouched by profane time.

The theatre performance is a sort of a catalyst for obtaining the anamnesis effect. Everything that happens on the stage is aimed at reintegrating the routine life into the sacred, thus revealing some essential moments from *illo tempore* or forgotten feelings. Eliade meets here Artaud's conception referring to the deep function of the theatre: to confer theatre vivid and essential power of communication through shapes, gestures, noises, sounds, colours – by doing this, it returns to its original purpose: to enact religious and metaphysical aspects and to reconcile man with the universe.

While in Fowles the dramatic elements eventually reveal the ugliness of man's selfishness confronting him with his own self in a sort of quest, in Eliade's novel the

BDD-A771 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-26 23:10:48 UTC)

actors' presence and performance help retrieve the past and complete one's personality by catharsis in order to integrate into the sacred rule that can be revealed in our routine existence; profane people usually fail to rediscover it.

Bibliography

Artaud, Antonin, *Teatrul şi dublul său*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Echinox, 1997.
Chevalier, Jean, Alain Gheerdbrant, *Dicţionar de simboluri*, vol. 1-3, Bucureşti, Editura Artemis, 1994.
Eliade, Mircea, *Drumul spre centru*, Bucureşti, Editura Univers, 1991.
Eliade, Mircea, *În curte la Dionis*, Bucureşti, Editura Cartea Românească, 1981.
Eliade, Mircea, *Nouăsprezece trandafiri*, Bucureşti, Editura Românul, 1991.
Fowles, John, *The Magus*, London, Pan Books, 1988.
Guénon, René, *Criza lumii moderne*, Bucureşti, Editura Humanitas, 1993.
Guénon, René, *Domnia cantităţii şi semnele vremurilor*, Bucureşti, Editura Humanitas, 1995.
Guénon, René, *Omul şi devenirea sa după Vêdânta*, Editura Antet, 1995.
Guénon, René, *Regele lumii*, Bucureşti, Editura Rosmarin, 1994.
Guénon, René, *Simboluri ale ştiinţei sacre*, Bucureşti, Editura Humanitas, 1997.
Zimmer, Heinrich, *Mituri şi simboluri în civilizaţia indiană*, Bucureşti, Editura Humanitas, 1994.
*** *Nātyaśāstra*, Bucureşti, Editura Ştiinţifică, 1997.

Elements dramatiques dans deux romans par Mircea Eliade et John Fowles

L'auteur choisit les romans *Dix-neuviémes roses* de Mircea Eliade et *Le magicien* de John Fowles pour démontrer qu'il existe un liant commun entre ceux-ci, exprimé par la théorie dramatique d'Antonin Artaud.

The "A. Philippide" Institute of Romanian Philology, Iaşi, Romania

BDD-A771 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-26 23:10:48 UTC)