WASTELAND –IMAGINARY CHRONOTOPE IN THE WORK OF IOAN ALEXANDRU[1]

Abstract: *In Ioan Alexandru's work we can often note imaginary structures that go beyond the mere activation of those common topoi and create magnificent complexes amazing by the grand construction, the insistence on details besides the overview, the transition from pagan mythological motifs to Christian symbols. This rhetoric is especially evident in the poems in which the wasteland motif is used and ambiguity joins clarity, just as much as the imaginary joins mimesis.*

Key words: *Ioan, Alexandru, wasteland*.

The work of Ioan Alexandru deals with various themes such as the childhood in the patriarchal environment of the native village or cosmogony, all being centred on two key coordinates: millenary tradition and Christianity.

Emphasis should be given to the fact that in view of the religious feeling the poet's work may be divided in two periods: the period of the secular poetry that corresponds to the first three volumes, and the period of Christian poetry, and between these two periods the volume *Vămile pustiei (The Wasteland Customs)*, the title of this volume being reminiscent of the Christian tradition of the IVth century B.Ch.

The poetic discourse of this volume focuses on the *Wasteland*[2] motif, that is seen in different perspectives, a significant poem (*What is the Wasteland?*) being the one that attempts at outlining this space and begins precisely by asking „what is the Wasteland?", hubris-question as it unleashes the force of nature („What is the Wasteland/ The poet has asked/ The thunder in the mid of the night/ And by lightning the thunder answered"[3]). The answer has elegiac notes because defining this space means secrecy and abandonment, it is thus a topos of mythification placed between the *Spring* signifying dynamism and becoming and the *Sea* – symbol of motionlessness and of origins („Oh, alas the Wasteland! – parchment of the skies/ Outstretched between Spring and Sea/ The rivers flowing underneath/ Full of secrets and abandonment"[4]).

The Wasteland also has characteristics that remind of the ancient myth of Sisif with the difference that the movement is not the effort to push up the stone, but the effort to overcome the daily difficulties symbolised by millstones („We are built on the Great Spring/ That up and down always runs/ The Wasteland lies between us and it/ With the huge millstones"[5]). Evocation of a character from the ancient Greek mythology besides Christian symbols is characteristic of Ioan Alexandru's whole work, starting with this volume.

> *Wasteland Customs* means, in the context of Ioan Alexandru's poetry, an attempt to reduce the world to essence as well as a meditation on the human

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[2] George Alboiu argues that in this volume „the poet suddenly adopts the idea of *wasteland*, aiming at achieving a concept-metaphor" (Alboiu, George, 1979: 104).

[3] „Ce este Pustia/ Poetul a întrebat/ De tunet într-un miez de noapte/ Şi tunetul cu trăsnet a răspuns".

[4] "O, vai Pustia! – pergament ceresc/ Întins între Izvor şi Mare/ Sub care fluviile umblă dedesubt/ Pline de taină şi de renunțare".

[5] "Suntem clădiți pe Marele Izvor/ Ce urcă-ntruna şi coboară/ Pustia se întinde între noi şi el/ Cu uriaşe pietrele-i de moară".

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> condition. Oedipus, Sisyphus and Job, three stances of the human in the previous volumes meet here in a common experience[1] (Alexiu, Lucian, 1977: 45).

Another characteristic of the Wasteland is ubiquity, as it overwhelms the matter, the space by its magnitude („The Poet and the Wasteland, brothers forever/ Set out in search through the Wasteland/ Their mother is the Wasteland and embarked are they/ On a ship stuck in the Wasteland"[2]). By the Poet's incorporation in this space, as the lines quoted above suggest, the *Wasteland* acquires the attributes of a topos of creation. However if the creation referred to in these lines is literary, in another poem, *Marea Moartă (The Dead Sea)*, the Wasteland is crossed by *anchorites* whose creation is spiritual and is formed of the deeds of faith gathered in the jug wetting the divine tree: „The anchorites of the East lining up in the Wasteland/ Pass a jug from hand to hand/ In which the Dead Sea is closed/ under the burning sun//[…]//In the middle of the Wasteland a tree/ That feeds on the dead water/ Coming from the edges of the world/ And even farther"[3]. Thus the poet and the anchorites coinhabit the *Wasteland*, both poetry and the Christian belief having as foundations *love,* as Ioan Alexandru himself argues in an interview in 1976:

> Poetry is call and ministration. It originates from love. Love is the empress of all virtues; by love the man knows deeply the most terrible, often unspeakable, beauties and realities. Fruit of the joy of love is *poetry,* a state of grace and celebration even in suffering (Corbea, Florescu, 1976: 10).

A striking characteristic of this volume is the plasticity of the Wasteland acquired by the force given to this word by the poet. This force is achieved by the various roles in which the Wasteland appears in the poet's discourse.

Thus the Wasteland is sludgy as in *Uncreated Light (Lumina necreată)* the mud being an obstacle to crusaders, or in *The Ascension* (Ascensiunea) in which the atmosphere itself becomes thick („And this darkness is suffocating as never felt/ Such a cerement over the world endlessly spread and thick"[4]). A higher step of the Wasteland materiality is its capacity of incorporating the mineral, of dominating even the stone as in *What is the Wasteland?*, where, as mentioned above, the being is nullified being ground in „the huge Millstones".

Fire is another element associated with the symbol of the Wasteland (*Ego sum via*), however being evoked for its purifying function („The path is lost. The cries have darkened it/ Until this fire angle came from the Wasteland/ And laid foundations in the middle of the crossroads"[5]), the association with the Christian symbols being obvious,

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[1] „*Vămile pustiei*, înseamnă, în contextul poeziei lui Ioan Alexandru, o încercare de reducere a lumii la esenţe şi o meditaţie asupra condiţiei existenţiale a omului. Oedip, Sisif şi Iov, trei ipostaze ale umanului în volumele anterioare, se întâlnesc, aici, într-o experienţă comună".

[2] „Poetul şi Pustia, pururi fraţi/ Porniţi în căutare prin Pustie/ Maica lor e Pustia şi ei sunt îmbarcaţi/ Pe-o navă-mpotmolită în Pustie".

[3] „Asceţii Răsăritului înşiraţi în Pustie/ Îşi dau din mână-n mână un urcior/ În care Marea Moartă-i închisă/ sub soarele dogorâtor//[…]// În miezul Pustiei e un copac/ Ce se hrăneşte cu apele moarte/ Care vin de pe margini de lumi/ Şi mai de departe".

[4] "Şi bezna asta-i înăduşitoare cum nu s-a mai văzut/ Un astfel de linţoliu peste lume lăţit şi gros la nesfârşit".

[5] „Calea se pierdu. Strigătele o înnegurară/ Până când veni acest unghi de foc din Pustie/ Şi se întemeie în miezul răspântiilor".

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because the phrase „angle of fire" reminds of the phrase „the stone that is the head of the corner" of which Christ speaks before the scholars and pharisees, other elements such as the „stag", and the „Groom" is found in next verses („No going up or down any longer/ Nobody knows what has been/ Near the springs the stag brought down becomes a golden ring/ On the Grooms's writing"[1]).

The relationship between the Wasteland and fire is also present in the poem *The Dead Sea* where the „core of the Wasteland" („When in the core of the Wasteland the jug/ is emptied and sent back") reminds of the „fire core" occurring in some poems of Ioan Alexandru, of which we shall only quote *Ascensiune* (*Ascension*) („The voyage of yours/ And not of somebody else, your road across big waters, / To that fire core"[2]), both expressions metaphorically veiling the idea of divinity whose first attribute is universal harmony yearned for by those initiated by transcension.

The Wasteland is also anthropomorphic as sight is assigned thereto and thus it watches over the rivers („The eye of the Wasteland watches/ Eternal lights coming down/ Below the midday fire"[3]), this attribute being associated with the symbolism of fire.

The poem „Black Butterflies" is another important poem of this volume, being structured in two parts and crossed by antonymies, the „coincidentia oppositorum" motif being employed at large. Thus we find out that „in the Wasteland everything stays, in the Wasteland/ Everything becomes. There is no beginning, nor end"[4], thus it is a space of becoming but also of standing stone-still, which gives it the status of uncreated. In this space the ontological liminality is cancelled by the impossibility of birth and of death („In the Wasteland nothing can be born/ In the Wasteland nothing can die/ What it is will remain forever/ Everything is closed and forgotten"[5]). The presence of the Wasteland may be a catastrophe, but its absence is a sorrowful lack for „the people to which it was given".

The Wasteland is obviously a mytheme of Ioan Alexandru's poetry, symbolising by the particularities identified above a space beyond the daily, a chronotope different from that of the contingent humanity, an additional defining attribute being that it is inhabited by "*the anchorites of the East*" (*The Dead Sea*), those fathers of the Christian belief, living in the first centuries after Christ in seclusion, far from the world, movingly invoked by the poet in the referred poem by the significances acquired by the text. Thus we find out that the „anchorites of the East lining up in the Wasteland/ Pass a jug from hand to hand/ In which the Dead Sea is closed/ Under the burning sun", the Wasteland being thus crossed by a line of anchorites passing their good deeds one from another, such passing can be placed in the paradigm of Christ archetype. The Dead Sea evokes the episode when Moses liberated the Jews from the Egyptian bondage, the crossing of the Sea during the exodus being the prefiguration of the Christian baptism. By such occurrence Ioan Alexandru sets a relation between the liberation of the Jew people and the saints' fight for liberating manhood from the slavery of sin permanently under the threat of the *burning* temptation.

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[1] „De acum nu se mai urcă nici coboară/ Nu mai ştie nimeni ce-a fost/ Lângă izvoare doborât cerbul devine inel de aur/ Pe inscripţia Mirelui".
[2] "Călătoria ta/ Şi nu a altuia, drumul tău peste apele mari,/ Spre miezul acela de foc".
[3] „Ochiul Pustiei veghează/ Lumini eterne coborând/ Pe dedesubt din focul din amiază".
[4] „în Pustie totul stă, în Pustie/ Totul devine. Nu există început şi sfârşit".
[5] „În Pustie nu se poate naşte nimic/ În Pustie nu poate muri nimic/ Ce este va rămâne în eternitate/ Totul e-nchis şi lăsat în uitare".

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We should also emphasise that the Wasteland symbol is constructed not only on the visual, but also on the hearing level, by the roars which accompany it in *Joy* („behind howls the wasteland”[1]) or in *Ascension* („To roar the large wastelands coming here laying waste”[2]).

References

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[1] „îndărăt urlă pustia”.
[2] „Să urle marile pustiuri ce vin încoace pustiind”.

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