

ȘTEFAN BORBELY*Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca****The Literary Pursuit of a Historian of Religions: The Case of Ioan Petru Culianu***

Going into intellectual exile from an Eastern Communist country, the historian of religions Ioan Petru Culianu brought along a whole series of inner obsessions, that of being constantly monitored and controlled by voracious political and hermeneutic “systems” becoming the major structure of his literary fiction, where players act within or against coded plots or “riddles”, built in a more or less metaphysical manner. If you interpret politics in terms of the controller and the controlled, that is as a cat-and-mouse play between an instance that exercises power and an entity who feels caught inside the complex network of control, you get a perfect binary combination, which involves both the controller and the victim. Ioan Petru Culianu’s lifelong obsession was to escape binary relationships by generating alternative realities or hyper-realities by magic, eroticism, ecstasy, shamanism, dreams, Tantra techniques or journeys into the otherworld. The paper examines their occurrences in Culianu’s fictional writings, aiming to demonstrate that the great majority of these texts are versions of an eschatological thinking.

I must confess I did not intend to lend a political interpretation to Ioan Petru Culianu’s prose writings because I did not want to be suspected of attempting to narrow down the topic. One can understand politics in a social or historical way, as a system of state control and victimization, or in a broader sense, in terms of constructing a power network which alienates the individual by limiting his creativity and his access to personal freedom. In this latter sense, politics can be also metaphysical, because it ultimately expresses the complex power relationship between the Creator and his Creation. According to this interpretation, the Creation becomes a very complex program of generated reality, functioning inside the will and control of the Creator. If one interprets politics in terms of the controller and the controlled, that is, as a cat-and-mouse play between an instance that exercises power and an entity that feels caught inside the complex network of control, one gets a perfect binary combination, which involves both the controller and the victim. Ioan Petru Culianu’s lifelong obsession was to escape binary relationships by generating alternative realities or hyper-realities through magic, eroticism, ecstasy, shamanism, dreams, Tantra techniques or journeys into the otherworld. As Ted Anton says in *Eros, Magic and the Murder of Professor Culianu* (1996), Culianu’s almost irrational obsession of being controlled (or “programmed”) and the way to avoid entrapment led to the first big crisis between him and Hillary Wiesner.¹ Culianu imagined anti-programs: not only literary or scientific, but metaphysical ways of escape, within a cat-and-mouse game whose field was cosmos itself, or what was left of it after the structures de-structured themselves.

If one interprets Creation in terms of the binary relationship between the Controller and the controlled, one arrives at a scheme saying that Creation is nothing else but eschatology.

¹ Ted Anton: *Eros, magie și asasinarea profesorului Culianu*. Revised and improved Romanian edition. Translated by Cristina Felea. Preface by Andrei Oișteanu. Bucharest: Nemira, 1997, pp. 191-192

By asserting this, Culianu is closer to the Hebrew understanding of the creation rather than to the anthropological perspective adopted by Mircea Eliade. In Eliade's structural understanding, cosmos appears as a binary relationship between the sacred and the profane. By living within the profane, the individual is exposed to the so-called "terror of history" and heals himself by finding his way to the sacred. In such an understanding, life itself is nothing but epiphany, as the profane is a way of revealing the hidden structure of the sacred. Accordingly, man is guided by the sacred, as the hidden generator of his existential choreography, of which he is not always aware.

That is why - the most striking example is *La țigănci* - Eliade's fictional protagonists are somewhat somnolent, acting out on a sort of inexplicable lack of common understanding and lucidity. On the contrary, Culianu's fictional heroes are all active, driven by the will to vividly live the hermeneutical complex they are involved in, and to understand its mechanism. They exercise hermeneutics as personal liberty; that is, they generate symbols, paradoxes and hyper-realities in order to survive, in a life-and-death game whose deepest understanding is acting against the logic of Creation itself, which is eschatology. While in Eliade's fictional works, characters search death as a solution to the profane "terror" exercised by history, in Culianu's prose the protagonists act against death within history, since Creation implies the very logic of their personal extinction. They are trapped in existence, as it happens in the Bible, where life extends in between the Genesis and the Apocalypse. If our approach is correct, the Book itself is nothing else but eschatology, because when the Lord generates the first forms of being and traces their future destiny, his goal is to entrap being in an endless game of generational transformations, whose outcome is extinction, or even death. As such, Culianu's prose writings are eschatological transformations: an art of generating alternative realities in order to avoid the imminent logic of extinction, since the life-and-death game is, in itself, nothing but a new binary combination, assimilated to an entrapment.

Let us take a short walk into the realm of twentieth-century literature, in order to grasp the profile of creation and of the hero who inhabits it. The word we are interested in is *anti*: to act against the determinatives of the system the hero lives in, to behave differently, as an errant figure or as a trickster. In George Orwell's well-known *1984*, state control is everywhere: it is made possible by a vast and elaborated system of TV-sets, through which Big Brother generates a simplified ideology and watches everybody, as a secret and almost godly embodiment of power. If you want to escape the inhuman control network, you must be atypical: you have to act errantly towards the system, within a narrow range of limited possibilities, which do not allow full individual liberty, but only *hypotheses* of plausible existence, which define the individual as a calculated entity of programmed escapism.

In Salinger's famous *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield feels trapped in a society of common logic and conformity, whose aim is to subdue the young individual and to transform him - in Herbert Marcuse's words - into a "one-dimensional man." For instance, Holden recalls a structuring technique they were accustomed to while having their classes of literature: each boy was asked to tell a story, and when the colleagues felt that he went into too many details, they shouted "digression" in order to punish him. While growing up, Caulfield progressively understood that if he wanted to escape the coercions of the system, he must act as a "digression": he must generate life acts and gestures which do not belong to the very core of the socially accepted behavioural code, but are completely different, original, or unexpected. He understood that if he wanted to be a little bit free, marginalization was not enough, since he must act paradoxically, by making conscious alterations of the system.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud had proved to be one of the major prophets of the new era, by saying that history could be conceived as the malady of myth, as a form of metaphysical alienation, which implied both structure and its continuous or projective alteration. According to this understanding, human life and liberty prove to be a very subtle way of *controlled illness*: while you are ill, the paradoxical liberty you gain by this frees you from the restrictions of the system and from the very strict network of accepted and limitative social and existential codes. In Thomas Mann's *Magical Mountain*, malady and eroticism go together and provide Hans Castorp - a very limited engineer-to-be at the beginning of the novel - with an unexpected access to liberty, despite the fact that liberty means, in this case, death. In William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the protagonist has a deadly chip implanted under his skin, through which he is both controlled and doomed to death, since the chip's program is conceived in such a way that the only outcome of his existence will be biological disorder and finally death. Since the hero cannot get rid of the chip and cannot make it stop (by which his life resembles eschatology), the only chance he has is to *alter* its electronic program by continuously generating false realities and electronic tracks in order to trick the original program and stay alive.

Let us go beyond particular fictional cases, and investigate how the system works on a larger scale. As I have mentioned before, Creation itself as a "program" is nothing but eschatological development in the cultures where the chance to escape time and go back into the realm of the timeless "paradise" does not function, or is irrelevant. God sets the initial structures, fixes the men's place in a cosmological system of going towards death, and leaves them as such, while time is nothing else but a continuous flow towards extinction. The only chance to smoothen the pessimism of the process is to act *against the Creation*, which means to act *against God himself*: to conceive life as a counter-creation. In Paul Valéry's *Eupalinos, or the Architect*, Socrates experiences this adventure in the afterworlds, while being dead in Hades, when he says to a disciple that if he was put in the situation of starting life again, he would not suppress "phenomena" in order to get to the ideas by thinking, but he would build an "anti-Socrates," including in his new existence many plays of the senses he had previously thoroughly eliminated in order to become what we know Socrates is according to Plato. In a famous novel of the same paradoxical modernism, in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, Adrian Leverkühn, the composer (who is, by the way, Nietzsche in the author's hidden understanding) writes a composition *against* Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, suggesting that the only valuable artistic creation is anti-creation, oriented against the existing order, just like the new creator can be only the Devil, the great lord of the liberty that is gained by destroying existing structures and orders.

Let us examine now the Romanian roots of Ioan Petru Culianu's prose writing, more specifically, its two dimensions. Culianu left Romania in 1992 and never returned. Previously, he wrote and published some sketches and short stories, gathered later in a rather slim volume entitled *Arta fugii* (*The Art of the Fugue*²). The significance of this title is twofold in the Romanian original: it means, of course, the musical form of repetitive counterpoint, used by Bach and others, and it also suggests a wish to escape, to run away, since "a fugi" means "to run" in Romanian. We should examine the two aforementioned dimensions of Culianu's cultural attitude back then. The first one concerns the evolution and typology of the Romanian prose writing at the time Culianu started to publish. Is there disruption, or continuity? Does

² *Arta fugii. Povestiri. Cu cinci desene ale autorului*. Preface by Dan C. Mihăilescu. Iași: Polirom, 2002

his later fictional work go back to an original domestic trauma, or is it entirely different in shape and consistence? The second dimension concerns Culianu's fictional intentions as related to Mircea Eliade's fictional writing: what is - we may ask - the role and place of fiction in the economy of a scholarly-centred historian of religions? Are there similarities between Eliade's and Culianu's fictional writings, or are they totally dissimilar, governed by completely different intentional structures?

In the years when Culianu was a student and started to publish in several Romanian literary magazines, the pressure of history and of official ideology drove many Romanian writers into a sort of aesthetic defensive, in which the split between ideology and art was converted in a twofold representation of fictional characters and space. A good critic, Nicolae Oprea, labelled it as the literature of the "imaginary provinces" (*literature provinciilor imaginare*). Several writers (Mircea Ghițulescu: *Omul de nisip*; Eugen Uricariu: *Vladia*; Ștefan Bănuțescu: *Cartea Milionarului*, etc.) conceived a sort of remote and marginal fictional geography, in which not only history ceased to function, but also all ideological or political pressures. The protagonists of these almost utopian spaces were strange and hieratical figures, interested in the secret sciences, in the art of esoteric learning and in religions far beyond common human understanding.

The topic had even its black utopia (A. E. Baconsky: *Biserica Neagră: The Black Church*), where beggars and underclass people govern a society turned upside down, in which power and control are distributed through the dark corridors of filthy chivalry and delinquency. In Matei Călinescu's *Zacharias Lichter (Viața și opiniile lui Zacharias Lichter)*, the fictional geography of the "imaginary provinces" gets its grotesque prophet, whose tools are social cynicism, black humour, manipulated ecstasy, calculated marginality and laughter. By doing this, within a literary trend which gained much support in Romania at that time and even later, the writers wanted to suggest that mankind evolves on two separate generative flows: one belonging to history - and, therefore, permeated by political ideology or by state control manifested through alienation; and the other pertaining to a different mechanism of time and social evolution, whose essence is quality, residual (but improved) mankind, and liberty. Moreover, several symbolic aspects of the Romanian cultural life confirmed the utopia of purification through self-assumed marginality: an outstanding intellectual of the period, Constantin Noica (a friend of Mircea Eliade and of Emil Cioran) secluded himself in the high-altitude mountain village of Păltiniș (Sibiu County), starting an informal school of philosophy, based chiefly on the resurrection of ontology and on Heidegger's works. Many leading intellectuals of today's Romania belonged to that circle.

By being interested in chiefly strange, hieratical fictional characters, Culianu continued, in his *Art of Fugue*, the tradition of charting alternative intellectual geographies. His protagonists are strange mystics, Tantric sages, who believe in the transmigration of the souls and in the active force of generating simultaneous existences, in order to avoid entrapment and social or political control. In the small piece entitled *Fugue I – The Numbers (Fuga I – numerele)*, from the same volume, the protagonist wants "to build an Art of running out of the world, an art of escaping to an empire of pure sounds and triangles, outside time, beyond the mountains." Apart from what Eliade or some authors interested in fantasies have attempted, Culianu experiences his escapism as a technique of getting to a point where being becomes a generative mechanism of endless logical possibilities. The negative target is identity (*principium individuationis*), as defined by Nietzsche (in *The Birth of Tragedy*) and later by Freud, in his psychoanalysis: that is, the "fault" to select, from the virtually infinite

possibilities of your being, a specific and limitative one, which makes you prone to control and, as such, vulnerable. The technique was also described by Goncharov (in *Oblomov*), by Valéry (in *Monsieur Teste*) and especially by Robert Musil in his unfinished *The Man Without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*). The intention of this paper does not allow us to go deeper into this topic.

The ontological force of multiplicity has always interested Călianu, explaining both his fictional writings and his interest in magic and the Gnosis. Aside from regression into the sacred, heralded by writers like Mircea Eliade, Călianu imagined a mechanism of an infinite projection of simultaneous alternative realities, all of them explaining being as virtual multiplicity. In his seminal *Game of Dice* (*Jocul cu zaruri*), a part of the already mentioned volume *The Art of the Fugue*, the protagonist starts a life technique which makes him superior, by promoting an essential “indifference” to the outcome of the game. Derived obviously from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the technique of getting to a point where multiplicity really works as a metaphysical insertion into cosmos presupposes freeing himself from two ultimate binary complexes: the future (which means freeing himself from the obligation to live as a “project”), and identity, that is, the burden to conceive himself within the dichotomy of Being and Non-Being. As Krishna puts it in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, people are pre-determined by the will to oppose life to death; when you get rid of the dichotomy Ego/Anti-Ego, as the protagonist of the *Game of Dice* says, you realize that your life is a source of endless, multi-dimensional self-projections. Moreover, you can generate alternative forms of reality by - Călianu will realize later - magic, ecstasy, eroticism, dreams, journeys into the outer worlds or even: literature.

In a book published in 2003, dedicated to the “Gnostic complex” of Mircea Eliade’s fictional works,³ I demonstrated that hermeneutical regression (similar to the reversion from the profane to the sacred) does not explain, by itself, many of Eliade’s fantastic writings, since historical projections, made through cultural and symbolical permutations, are at least as important in his books as the will to step out from the uncertain profane in order to gain the certainties of the sacred. It is so, I said, because of the Gnostic complex involved in Eliade’s writings: unlike many philosophical schools based on regression, the Gnostics worked both regressively and historically, conceiving history as a tool of transmitting and generating both random and essential cultural values. Accordingly, culture becomes both play and hermeneutics, Eliade saying that there is no use to “decipher” each “hidden” meaning and symbol inserted in his texts, since there are symbols which really count, and others that do not, similar to the famous “tree of Gnosis,” which has both “essential” branches and branches which grow randomly, in vain. Surprisingly enough, in the volume *Interrupted Dialogues*, which presents the collection of surviving letters that were exchanged between Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Călianu,⁴ I was happy to come across the same idea, in a letter Eliade sent on January 17, 1978: “It is true,” he said, “my prose writing proves to be more and more cryptic. The only possible hermeneutics would be to ignore the meaning (or the ‘symbol’), and to consider each story a ‘parallel universe,’ having its specific structures, morphology and language.”

³ Ștefan Borbély: *Proza fantastică a lui Mircea Eliade. Complexul gnostic*. Cluj-Napoca: Biblioteca Apostrof, 2003

⁴ Ioan Petru Călianu: *Dialoguri întrerupte. Corespondență Mircea Eliade – Ioan Petru Călianu*. Edited and notes by Tereza Călianu-Petrescu and Dan Petrescu. Preface by Matei Călinescu. Iași: Polirom, 2004, p. 125.

I liked very much Grazia Marchianò's term for such a literary and mental construction: "mathemagics,"⁵ a combination of mathematics and magic, involving "mind games" and an endless generation of cultural and cosmic values, based on the epistemology of the "fourth dimension," as derived from Uspenski (*The Fourth Dimension*, 1909) and Rudy Rucker (*Mind Tools. The Five Levels of Mathematical Reality*, 1987). It is not my intention to get into further details concerning these books, but I want to reveal a dimension which goes deep into the heart of Culianu's life, conceived as transformative art: the role of the trickster. I certainly believe that in conceiving his role as a Western scholar and as a professor of the history of religions in Chicago, Culianu perceived himself as an atypical and errant intruder: a tricky spot in the system, a very vivid figure coming from the Counterculture of the Sixties, prone to act within the academia not only as a professor who taught religion as an objective scientific subject, but as a man who taught students to existentially penetrate religion, to be part of it, becoming, as such, parts of a metaphysical projection whose secret was not only to interpret phenomena, but also to generate endless combinations of ontological values within them. A metaphysical victim of the metaphysical system, born as part of an existing network, whose essence is – as I have said – eschatology, Culianu wanted to emerge as a victor. In a period of sceptical post-Romanticism, his effort was purely romantic: to come out as a "demiurge" within an oppressive system, by using the reactivation of some of his residual values and techniques: magic, alchemy, Gnosis. These are, like all the symbols he used in his writings, allies from the past, not ingredients of the future, and my understanding is that if he had lived beyond 1991, he would have fully used the possibilities provided by the Internet in order to achieve his goals related to an errant *ars combinatoria*.

The programmed logic of extinction governs both major literary works written by Culianu: the novels *Hesperus* and *The Emerald Game (Jocul de smarald)*. Both are eschatological texts. *Hesperus* sets up a post-apocalyptic plot: in order to improve mankind, several scientists conceive a universal program of human rehabilitation, whose aim is to fix people into limpid structures by eradicating all "shadowy" values of life, like uncertainty, anxiety, sufferance and even love or aggressiveness. Property is eliminated, demography is thoroughly controlled, and memory represents nothing else but plausible history programs run by computers. The key value of the new civilization is "Effortless liberty," with processes governed by hardship and pain being eliminated.

In a true and very subtle Marxian way (I mean *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, which define "reification" and "alienation," and not *The Capital*), Culianu demonstrates that the starting impulse of the new civilization lies in the conversion between work (as control) and leisure (as liberty): as necessity diminishes, larger and larger amounts of population pour into the realm of leisure, which activates suppressed dimensions of their being, driving them to act "ingeniously" and "chaotically." Some scientists believe that they can use this unexpected "happiness" by establishing elitist "reservations," containing the core of future human improvement. In a purely countercultural perspective, the "reservations" are the sound alternatives of "states," which generate only misery, delinquency, terrorism and killing. In the year 2382, an intergalactic ship, *Hesperus 1*, is launched towards Venus (the planet), in order to gain space for the purified, new civilization. Two years later, a nuclear catastrophe occurs in Greenland, apparently killing all the people who remained on earth, but several of them still survive, leading to a confrontation between

⁵ Ioan Petru Culianu: *Omul și opera*. Volume coordinated by Sorin Antohi. Translated by Corin Popescu, Claudia Dumitriu, Ioana Ieronim, Cristina Ionică, Tereza Culianu-Petrescu. Iași: Polirom, 2003, p. 336

Hesperus, as the realm of “perfect human minds,” and *Hyperboreea*, where residual human values still exist, such as the primitive sense of community, fear or anxiety, and even understanding and love. It is also important to mention that the new reality is, on both sides, liberated from any form of belief in idols or religion: God is absent from the new system, which does not function as a “cosmos” (or as an organized, harmonious structure), but as a mere chaotic reality, which nevertheless has its logic: the antagonism between perfection and incompleteness.

Acting as a God substitute, or as one of the “Gods of revenge,” the “brain” of the *Hesperus* expedition, Dennis Horton, threatens mankind with the so-called “Art of Transformation,” which consists in the power to generate “paradoxical phenomena, illusions,” which penetrate “the latent possibilities of the human psyche” and destroy all certainties humans are accustomed to, like “space, time, the causes of nature, the physical and chemical composition of the universe, the structure of the atom, etc.” On the other hand, Horton controls the dreams and the desires of the humans, generating hyper-realities and “life tricks,” which make humans feel powerless, reactionless.

Culianu shows that in spite of the tremendous generative power, which turns the conflict between *Hesperus* and *Hyperboreea* into a clash of “mind games,” *Hesperus* has a weak spot in its very hyper-intellectualization: by reaching the intensity of perfection and by becoming “paradise,” it cannot evolve, being doomed to fixity and sterility. As such, the only way of surviving for *Hesperus* becomes *antagonism* itself, violence as a weak paradox of perfection. There is also another meaning that drives Culianu closer to the Counterculture of the Sixties and to the forthcoming postmodernism: the novel asserts that only *imperfect systems* can last, survive and evolve. It’s a “soft” understanding of culture and history here, which marks a sharp post-structural approach. Structuralism was Culianu’s main intellectual enemy: compulsory in the realms of his specific scientific community (Eliade himself was a “structuralist” by promoting the binary antithesis of the sacred and the profane), it was overcome by Culianu in his understanding of life as a caption of ecstasy, magic, shamanism and transformative love.

To come back to *Hesperus*, if the “perfect civilization” cannot evolve, the less perfect one - of the humans - can. The clash between the two types of systems, as found in the novel, is similar to the solutions provided by Zamyatin (in *We*) or by Orwell (in *1984*): “impure” memory (encapsulated in history) and “impure” gestures (meaning especially love and eroticism) can regenerate the system. They are, for the time being, old fashioned, belonging to an old code of existence, similar to magic or ecstasy (or shamanism) in the era of triumphant rationalism. Nevertheless, in the novel, Dennis Horton’s powerful “Art of Transformation” has a leak, since he detects on Earth the secret presence of a so-called “Mutant” (or trickster...), who cannot be controlled by the “Art of Transformation” because he generates “counter-arts” or counter-programs. In the end, the humans who fight Horton start searching for the “Mutant” themselves: nobody knows him, but everybody realizes that if they want to avoid the powerful control network set up by Horton, they must step out of the already accepted “codes” of civilization, and to act errantly, as tricksters used to do.

Starting from Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, the novel *The Emerald Game*, written together with Hillary Suzanne Wiesner,⁶ is similar to a Mediaeval *ludibrium*, which is an enigma turned into a game. In mediaeval times and even later – for instance in 1616, when

⁶ *Jocul de smarald*. A novel. Translated from English by Agop Bezerian. Iași: Polirom, 2005

Johann Valentin Andreae claimed to find *The Chymical Wedding of Charles Rosenkreutz – ludibrium* was believed to be a “divine comedy”: a game played with humans by God himself, who offers them the world as a riddle and invites them to uncover its secrets. Accepting it like that, *ludibrium* becomes a game of life and death, which turns *The Emerald Game* into an eschatology: a young “trickster,” Thomas Anglicus (a trickster, because he has no professional or intellectual identity, being investigated as a potential wrongdoer by the Italian authorities) comes to Florence to visit a friend, Pietro degli Ecati, and finds himself in the middle of a very elaborated and sophisticated serial killing, executed according to the logic of planetary conjunctions. The killer uses the old Chaldean system of planets and moving stars, in which The Moon is followed by Mercury, then by Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, in an order which reproduces the ancient will of God. Since Creation provides life, the assassinations are, as one of the protagonists says, a metaphysical “counter-show” (or counter-spectacle) aimed at destruction. The perplexity is eventually deepened when the enigma hunters (Doctor D’Altavilla, Thomas and Vittoria Pitti, the first victim’s fiancée) discover that many threads lead to Botticelli’s *La Primavera*, a painting related, in one way or another, to each victim. The complex plot of the novel is based on the logic of the anti-Creation, whose fundament is love as an eschatological attitude. Since Florence is governed by Savonarola (considered by many to be the Antichrist), civilization is saved by love, whose embodiment is Marsilio Ficino’s Academy, protected, as a cosmic seal reproducing planetary conjunctions, by Botticelli’s *La Primavera*, and having Mercury (or Hermes) as its key figure. Aiming to destroy the Academy, the killer activates several defenders of the existing order, whose mission is to preserve and protect. In order to achieve this, they must enter the logic of the “anti-Creation” and act errantly within it, by generating alternative life values (or hyper-realities) that de-structure the system by simply going beyond its rules