MIRCEA ELIADE. THE ESCAPE FROM THE LABYRINTH

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Abstract: The sacred space, the symbolic of the centre, of the limit and positive or negative utopia, the sacred time with its specific morphology, the theme of the double, represent thematic invariants that structure Eliade's discourse. The essential feature for Eliade is the theme of the camouflaging of the sacred into the profane, with various textual avatars and representations. The symbolic of the labyrinth is of major importance to Eliade's writing. In fact, he considers that his life is placed, with all the successes and revelations, under the sign of the labyrinth, a sign that confers an organic character, coherence and integrative vocation to events that appear as neutral, random during a lifetime. Writing meant a continuous offering, a fascinating implication into the universal rythms and into the rythms of his own destiny, a tension of the understanding and perfomance, a search for genuine experience and a way to escape from the labyrinth.

Keywords: symbolic, wrinting, centre, labyrinth, sacred, profane

In the structure of Mircea Eliade's polyvalent work, the autobiographic writings have a very special place, considering the features and formal paradigms of this type of discourse. A hermeneutical perspective on Mircea Eliade's works implies certain risks and difficulties, due to its complexity and profundity and to the various fields of approach and manifestation of the imaginary. Eliade's writing variety, doubled by a an encyclopedic spirit, denies a univocal interpretation, opening itself to a plurality of interpretations, to polyvalent readings, able to capture the nuances, the symbols, the representations and figures that are privileged in this 20th century modern work of art.

On the other hand, an analysis of the "syntax of the imaginary" in Eliade's works must deal with two dominant sides: the scientific discourse and the literary discourse, which may be integrated into a unitary interpretation by assuming a transdisciplinary method that would favor, in Edgar Papu's terms, "the synthesis in an organic entity of erudition and sensibility". We may say that, several times, Mircea Eliade's works were investigated through a dichotomist perspective, its two fields – the scientific one and the literary one – being, if not completely separated, at least subjected to a distinct analysis, therefore lacking the benefits of a synthetic principle.

It may be considered that Eliade's syntax of imaginary is marked by two axes, two dimensions: a diurnal one, materialized in the scientific texts and a nocturnal one, featured by the works of fiction. The two types of discourse should not be seen in dichotomy, but as complementary ways of manifestation of the creative spirit, as between them numerous translations and combinations may be noted, sometimes even in the same text. The analysis of such a "hybrid discourse" should be accomplished by a double perspective, following the glides of the diurnal discourse in the space of the literary work as well as the avatars of the nocturnal discourse and its translation in the scientific text, a fact noted by a young researcher of Eliade's work, Nicolae Sera. By such a dual, mirror-like approach of the text, a synthetic, integral perception may be achieved, resulting in an efficient description of the dimensions, paradigms and revelations of Eliade's works.

It is certain that Eliade himself appreciated the role played by imagination in his creative system, not only in the field of fiction but also in that of the erudite text: "*Scientific imagination is not far from artistic imagination. My scientific books are almost always books that express the real dreams of humanity. The two tendencies conciliate very well in my ego*". But imagination also has a very well defined congnitive function, allowing it to configure a type of analogic knowledge, a more supple and dynamic knowledge, able to easily follow the paradoxes and diversity of the universe. Through such a methodic perspective on the interferences, connections and filiations of the two voices of Eliade's writing, the texts with autobiographical features play a mediating and integrating role, appearing as spaces of confluence, of intersection.

A few considerations on the status and finality of the autobiographical texts must be made, as these texts are part of a hybrid literary genre, a "frontier" genre. Thus, it may be said that an ego that continuingly contemplates itself in the mirrors of the autobiographical text receives, by the very act of reflection, a certain distance from itself and a tendency of no longer recognizing itself in its own past or in its own text. From this point of view, autobiographical writing is not the invocation of an ideal image, of a mythical projection of the personal ego, but the evocation of an ego that restlessly searches its own identity. On the other hand, we must underline the fact that the speculation and self-speculation are "immediate" data of autobiographical writings, as the impressions, sensations and perceptions are permanently subjected to a "direction", to a scenery of the present, being, so to say, "presentified".

The diary, the memoirs, as well as the other forms of autobiographical discourse have, beyond any doubt the status of a document, of a de-doubled writing in which the world, with its polymorphic landscape, meets the subjectivity of the writer. From this perspective of revelation, the autobiographical text produces a dual effect – both mystifying and un-mystifying – because, while it imposes a central figure, a character – the ego that objectifies its desires and frustrations, becoming the witness of its own role – the subjective writing nevertheless reveals, in a direct relation to the lucidity of the writer, the imposture of the narrative-self, reducing to their true dimensions its gestures and experiences. The freedoms and servitudes of the autobiographical discourse result exactly from these difficult relations between interiority and exteriority, from the unstable balance on which the autobiography – an impure genre, lacking prestige- builds itself, in an uncertain space where confession and objectivism, the exit from the self, live together beneficially.

We must also underline the fact that the autobiographic text represents an ambiguous literary genre, defined by its condition of authenticity and sincerity that has a somehow decorative form, a conventional, artificial aspect, as between the moment of confession and the moment of the transposition of the contemplation there is an interval of reflection, when random gestures are reorganized. In other words, between the time of confession and the time of existence a relation of inner-determination and even disruption is established. From this point of view, autobiography is more of an attempt of purification than a genuine self-portrait, an invocation of an ideal image rather than the evocation of an ego that restlessly seeks for the degraded contour of its personality in the latest drawn figure. Undoubtedly, the autobiographic discourse is at the same time a document, a writing with depositional features, where the echoes of the world, in their direct reference, meet the subjectivity of the one writing himself in the most direct way. It is obvious that this type of literature has decisively contributed to the revelation of the hidden face of artists, and that it has favored the representation of events, physiognomies, facts and even revealed the mysterious side of famous works.

By gathering speculation and self-speculation in a point of convergence that is somehow transfiguratory, any autobiographical writing proposes an image of the ego and of

the world that is altered by the auctorial intentions of the writer. The impressions, sensations, perceptions of the past are subjected to a direction of the present of writing that distorts, motivates or redraws the facts, giving them an idealizing contour. This process of styling is, in fact, the danger faced by any diary, with or without its author's will. Subjective literature always focuses, in its structure, on the fragility of minor notations and on the benefits of an essential utterance of the self. Autobiographical writing is meant to satisfy some documentary exigencies (about the literary life, the political system, the evolution of consciousness) as well some esthetic exigencies (style, manner of portraying characters, psychological dynamics, etc.). We may even consider that these works are also meant to be mirrors of the exterior and interior existence, documents and substitutes of real and personal life. We must also underline the fact that this mirror often lacks harmony and utopia, being lucid and fragmentary. It is a broken mirror, revealing the most contradictory features of the being and of reality.

In Claude-Henri Rocquet's book of interviews *L'epreuve du Labyrinthe (The Trial of the Labyrinth)*, Mircea Eliade attempts to draw the generative nucleus and, at the same time, the mechanisms on which literature relies and its role in the configuration and revelation of human essence: "*It is known that literature, oral or written, is the daughter of mythology and has inherited some of its functions: to narrate events, to narrate something significant that has happened in the world. But why is it so important for us to know what is happening, to know what happens to the lady having her tea at 5 o'clock? I think that every story, even the story of a common fact, prolongs the great tales narrated by the myths that explain how the world was born and how our condition has become the one we know today. I believe that our interest in the narrative is part of our way of being in the world. It answers our need of hearing finding out what happened, what people have accomplished and what they are able to do: the risks, the adventures, their various attempts. We are not like rocks, unmovable, or like flowers, insects, the lives of which are pre-defined: we are human beings formed by happenings, by events. And the man will never give up listening to stories*"[1].

Trying to decipher the plans and dimensions of his own literary writing, Eliade refers to the components of narrativity, to the particular way of structuring in his texts. Here is how he explains the generative mechanisms and the fictionalizing models of real in *Noaptea de Sanziene*, a novel he considered his masterpiece. We have here, in the contracted lines of his expressions, a Poetics of Eliade's prose: "*I am unable to make a plan. The work always appears around a vision, a landscape or a dialogue. I see the beginning very clearly, sometimes the end and, step by step, during work, I discover the events and the web of the novel or the short-story. For* Noaptea de Sanziene*, the first image was the main character. He was walking through a forest near Bucharest, about the midnight. In the forest, he meets with a car and then with a girl. All these were an enigma for me. Who was the girl? And why was the character walking through the woods looking for a car near the girls? Slowly, I found out who the girl was, I knew all her story. But it all initiated in some sort of vision. I saw all of these, as if I had dreamt them… I was not interested only in the religious symbolism of the solstice, but also in the images and themes of Romanian and European folklore. In this particular night, the sky opens and one may see the world beyond and disappear in it… If somebody sees this mysterious vision, that somebody steps out of time and space. He will experience a moment lasting an eternity… Nevertheless, it was not this meaning of the symbolism that was obsessing me, but that night itself"*[2].

Short-stories and novels are seen by the author from the perspective of a dialectics sacred / profane and of some fundamental themes that are iterated with natural nuances in

[1] Mircea Eliade, *Încrecarea labirintului* (traducere şi note Doina Cornea), Editura Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1990, p.141
[2] *Ibidem*, p.148

almost all his literary works: the coincidence of contraries (*coincidentia oppositorum*), the road to the center, the labyrinth, the attic, the dream, the myth of eternal return, the double, the levitation, etc. An extremely important theme of Eliade's speculative system is that of the coincidence of contraries, a theme originating in Nicolaus Cusanus and also frequented by Jung, from a more psychological point of view.

The considerations about the dialectic relation between sacred and profane, about the symbolic value of the elements acting as vehicles of transition between the sacred and the profane, about the mythical meaning of the hierophant experiences, are mainly based on this duality of hiding and revelation, of coding and decoding, of forgetting and anamnesis, that is a feature of Mircea Eliade's texts. The sacred space, the symbolic of the centre, of the limit and positive or negative utopia, the sacred time with its specific morphology, the theme of the double, represent thematic invariants that structure Eliade's discourse. The essential feature for Eliade is the theme of the camouflaging of the sacred into the profane, with various textual avatars and representations: "*In my novels, I always try to camouflage the fantastic into the everyday life. In this novel that complies to all the rules of the Romanesque novel of the 19th century, I wanted, therefore, to camouflage a certain symbolic significance of the human condition. This camouflage was successful, I think, since the symbolism does not alter at all the epic of the story. I think that the trans-historic is always camouflaged into the historic and the extraordinary in the ordinary. Aldous Huxley was speaking about the vision provided by LSD, referring to it as a visio beatifica: he say the forms and colors as Van Gogh say his famous chair. It is certain that this dark real, this everyday reality, camouflages something else. It is my profound belief. This aspect should also pass into the novel-novel, not only in the fantastic one… In all my stories, the narrative develops on several levels, in order to progressively reveal the fantastic hidden in the everyday simplicity. Like a new axiom revels a new structure of the real, unknown until that moment – or, in other words, establishes a new world – fantastic literature reveals, creates, parallel universes. This is not an evasion, as historicist philosophers claim, because the creation – on all levels and in all the meanings of the term – is a defining feature of the human condition*"[3].

The symbolic of the labyrinth is of major importance to Eliade's writing. In fact, in the same dialogues with Claude-Henri Rocquet, Mircea Eliade considers that his life is placed, with all the successes and revelations, under the sign of the labyrinth, a sign that confers an organic character, coherence and integrative vocation to events that appear as neutral, random during a lifetime: "*A labyrinth is sometimes the magical protection of a centre, of a treasure, of a meaning. Entering it may be an initiation ritual, as it may be seen in the myth of Theseus. This symbolism is the model of any existence that, by passing through numerous trials, approaches its own center, its own self, Atman, to use the Indian term… Several times I was aware that I was exiting the labyrinth, that I had found the way. Before, I felt desperate, lost… Of course, I didn't say to myself I am lost in the labyrinth, but, at the end, I still had the impression that I had conquered a labyrinth. Each of us has known this experience. It must me added that life is not made of a single labyrinth: the trial is renewed… Not once I was certain that I had touched it (the centre, nn, I. B.) and, by touching it, I learned a lot, I recognized myself. Then I got lost again. This is our condition, we are neither angels, nor heroes. When man reaches his centre he enriches himself, his consciousness widens, all becomes clear, significant> but life goes on: another labyrinth appears, other trials, other ways of trial, on another level*". The mythical, archetypal figure of Ulysses is related to the symbol of the labyrinth, a prototype of the politropic condition of the European man, always searching for his own condition and spiritual identity. His adventures at sea may well be assimilated to a symbolic road to the Centre ("Ulysses is for me the prototype of man, not

[3] *Ibidem*, p.151

only modern man, but also the man connected to the future, for he is the type of the haunted traveler. The travel is a road to the centre, to Ithaca, in other words, to himself. He was a good sailor, but destiny – or the initiating trials he had to go through – always forced him to delay his return home. I believe that the myth of Ulysses is extremely important to us. Each of us will have something from Ulysses, searching, like him, trying to get to some place and undoubtedly finding our country, our home, ourselves. But, like in the labyrinth, in any travel there is the risk of getting lost. If you manage to exit the Labyrinth, to find your home, then you become a different being"[4]).

The stature of Mircea Eliade's personality may be understood through his double vocation, as for him the scientific research and literature represented ways of deciphering the signs of the world and of history, privileged hermeneutic approaches. We must underline that literature is not configured as a simple, didactic, demonstrative illustration of the scientific ideas; the two universes explain and illuminate each other's meanings and symbols. Thus, a generative relation is drawn, that is archetypal to Eliade's creative effort: the Hermeneutical relation. On one hand, Mircea Eliade's literature contains various modern elements, on the level of epic construction, fictional representation of the real or formal expression: the insertion of interior monologue, temporal discontinuity, confessions, the presence of essay-like elements, the refined dosage of narration and interpretation, etc.

On the other hand, the role of the symbol in Eliade's work is of great importance, and its unifying and integrative function allows the fragments to unite into harmony. Hermeneutics is, for Mircea Eliade, the methodic attempt that is able to decode and understand the meanings in religious symbols. "*Hermeneutics is the search for meaning, for signification or significations that an idea or a phenomena had in time. A history of different religious expressions may be drawn. But Hermeneutics is also the discovery of the more and more profound meaning of religious expressions. I call it creative from two reasons. First of all, it is creative for the Interpreter himself. The effort he makes to decipher the revelation present in a religious creation – ritual, symbol, myth, divine figure… - to understand its signification, function, goal, this effort enriches the consciousness and existence of the researcher. It is an experience that the historian of literatures, for instance, does not know… Hermeneutics is also creative because it reveals certain values that were not obvious on the level of immediate experience… The Hermeneutic work reveals the latent significances of symbols and their becoming… Hermeneutics creative to the reader because he understands, for instance, the symbolisms of the cosmic tree – and this is also true for people who are not interested in the history of religions – and thus the reader experiences more than an intellectual delight. He makes an important discovery for his life. From that moment on, when he will look at some trees, he will see in them the mystery of the cosmic rhythm. He will see in them the mystery of life that is reborn and continues – during winter – the loss of leaves, than, the spring… This has a totally different meaning than deciphering a Greek or Latin inscription. A historic discovery is, of course, important. But, by this, the man discovers a certain position of the spirit in the world"*[5].

Eliade's *Memoirs* have the fluent form of a story of his own life and destiny, that is textually directed from the dominating perspective of authenticity, a key-concept of his literature. The synthetic feature of the "author's spiritual biography" (Mircea Handoca) is dominant. Respecting the chronology of his own life, the author also performs temporal interferences and mutations of spatial dimensions that play a contextual role in the narrative. Some interior scenes are also memorable, descriptions of spaces familiar to Eliade (the

[4] *Ibidem*, pp.85-86
[5] M. Eliade, *op. cit.*, p.112

famous attic, for instance), as well as the detailed description of events that marked the biographic and artistic destiny of the writer.

On the other hand, some portraits of remarkable personalities, seen in their essential features, with exponential gestures and revealing aspects, are extremely interesting. Nae Ionescu's portrait is very significant, as he is the philosophy teacher that marked the spiritual destiny of many intellectuals between the two world wars. The portrait is accompanied by an introduction into the "context" that is revealing for Eliade's epic talent: "I shall never forget the first Metaphysics lesson I attempted. He had announced a course on "Faust and the problem of salvation". The Titu Maiorescu room was full and I had difficulty finding a seat in the back. A dark, pale man, entered, with black eyebrows and sad bluish eyes of unusual brightness; when he suddenly looked from a wall to the other he seemed to thunder across the room. He was thin, quite tall, dressed in a sober manner, but with an elegant negligence; and he had the most beautiful and expressive hand I had ever seen, with long, thin and nervous thumbs. When he spoke, his hands were shaping the mind, underlining the nuances, anticipating the difficulties, the question marks… He sat on the chair, rolled his eyes to the back of the room and started to speak. An strange silence came, as if everybody was holding their breath. Nae Ionescu did not talk like a teacher, he was not holding a lesson or a conference. He had started a conversation and he was speaking to each of us, as if he was telling a story, presenting a series of facts, proposing an interpretation and than waiting for our answers. You had the impression that the whole lesson is only a part of a dialogue, that each of us was invited to discuss, to confess his opinion at the end of the class. You felt that what Nae Ionescu was saying wasn't to be found in any book. It was something new, freshly thought and organized right there, in front you, on the desk. It was a personal thinking and, if you were interested in this kind of thinking, you knew you couldn't find it anywhere else, that you had to come here to receive it from the source. The man was speaking to you directly, opening problems to you and teaching you how to solve them, forcing you to think".

Writing meant for Eliade a continuous offering, a fascinating implication into the universal rythms and into the rythms of his own destiny, a tension of the understanding and perfomance, a search for genuine experience („*To feel that each written line tears something out of your own life, drinks your blood, empties your brains. To feel how writing drains all the substance in your life. That is the only way it is worth writing*").

Mircea Eliade's autobiographical texts, either diaries, memoirs or his interviews are totally relevant for the stature, methods and Poetics of the writer. We find here, in a fragmentary, concise or, on the contrary, digressive style, the essential data of his spiritual portrait, his unique physiognomy, the landmarks of his destiny and, at the same time, the articulations of his overwhelmingly complex and profound work.

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