

THE LITERARY EXILE OF MIRCEA ELIADE

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Abstract: The article „Eliade's Literary Exile” evokes the significance of the Romanian literary exile, focusing on the writer Mircea Eliade. Being at the centre of our study, we will analyse both the experiences he had on the territory of his motherland and those he spent abroad, where he was forced to adapt to new challenges. As the writer himself evokes, exile can be a complex, labyrinthine area, which involves transcending obstacles in the hope of finding oneself. Moreover, exile does not have positive valences, but designates the option through which one can achieve finding oneself. In this context, it is fair to compare the writer's adaptation with the way in which Ulysses made his way to Ithaca. We find the significance of this landmark in the experience of each person, because in deepening human consciousness, we will always find points or values that we are aware of or are barely discovering. The writer's preadaptation in exile, according to the comparison I illustrated earlier, denotes that this phenomenon must be treated rigorously, and the suffering caused by alienation must be capitalized upon. For Eliade, as well as for other cultural figures of his generation, exile represented the only way to avoid major harm to one's career or personal life. Therefore, we observe that exile can be classified into two categories: imposed exile, as a coercive factor, or voluntary exile, in which one voluntarily chooses the path to freedom from one's own determinism.

Mircea Eliade, a complex writer, cannot be analysed from a single perspective, but from different angles, which each time evoke new and different aspects. The author has multiple interests regarding his literary approaches: first of all, he is concerned with the place of the sacred, the profane and the valences of the fantastic on the human being, later, dedicating himself to spirituality, philosophy, themes that we will find integrated in his work. Eliade's scientific writings are constantly correlated with his political involvement, without taking into account the contexts that determined the author's sympathies. In general, the idea is presented according to which the Romanian is a good artisan of myth, and the most suitable for this theory is Eliade himself. In his entire career, the author proves an inexhaustible power over creation ex nihilo, and the entire literary heritage is founded on a broad, mythical structure. The writer's universe is not easy to understand, it is not revealed to the reader all at once, but is suggested through multiple processes, symbols, and in order to penetrate the Eliade mystery, an engaging, efficient capacity for understanding and decoding the message is needed. In order to be able to analyse the phenomenon of exile as a whole, I resorted to analysing Eliade's Memoirs, which is a fundamental source through the multitude of experiences related, of his own comments on his destiny, which represent the best corpus of information about the writer, being evoked by his own person.

Keywords: Romanian literature, exile, identity, memory, cultural hybridity

The texts written during the period of exile reflect the author's opinion on the particular features of Romanian identity and their role in shaping the European space. He starts from the existence of authentic traditions and the Romanian diaspora as a vehicle for the modern dissemination of pastoral transhumance, as well as for native authenticity.

We shall detail the period during which the author Eliade discovered India—a realm that had aroused his interest since adolescence, sparking both his curiosity and thirst for knowledge. He ardently wished to deepen his understanding of Orientalism, the history of religions, and alchemy. For Eliade, India represented more than a space for academic development; it became a pivotal stage on his path towards complete, spiritual growth. While in India, he was preoccupied with yogic techniques and dedicated himself to academic evolution, becoming increasingly aware that his vocation lay in the realm of creation and

culture. Upon his return from India, he earned a doctorate in philology and philosophy and later became a university lecturer at the University of Bucharest. In his role as a professor, Eliade was admired both by his students and the broader public, who were captivated by the lectures delivered by the author of *Maitreyi*¹.

The years spent in India would prove to be defining for the maturing of the young Eliade, a period during which he assimilated essential lessons that he would later transpose into his scholarly works, bringing him the recognition he deserved and securing his place in literary circles.

Together with emblematic figures such as Emil Cioran and Constantin Noica, Eliade advocated against political involvement. However, the year 1930—when he published certain articles that expressed agreement with some of the principles of the Iron Guard regime—led to his political association and alignment with the far-right movement.

In 1934, Eliade identified the intentions of cultural figures who sought to ascend through political power, intentions which he condemned and refuted with the argument that the intellectual elite was vastly superior to politicians.

The human being can only be truly understood by observing their reactions and manifestations, which are particular and unique, shaped by their beliefs, their attraction to the unseen, and their reception of mystery as a labyrinthine journey.

We may affirm that the trajectory of a writer, or the evolution of a character, can take the form of a labyrinthine journey. The labyrinth is one of the principal motifs found in the works of Mircea Eliade, as space is limited, exits are difficult to identify, and the protagonist is doomed to wander extensively, in search of his own identity. On the other hand, the labyrinth is not merely a symbol of inner quest but also a deepening of the mystery within each human being, reinforcing the concept of life through multiple meanings and layers of significance.² From preadolescence, Eliade began to feel the taste and fascination of spiritualism and the history of religions, also developing a passion for alchemy. He dedicated himself to the study of languages, learning Hebrew and Persian, drawn by the richness of cultural diversity—a drive that ultimately led him towards India in search of the world's deeper essence.

Eliade's attentive concern for culture stemmed from his desire to break free from the confines of already popular work, those that gleam with a false brilliance, and instead uncover and deeply analyse the universe of myths. His aim was to delve beyond the surface and explore their profound meanings.

To fulfil his dream, he decided to write to the Maharajah, who agreed to his intention of studying in India alongside Professor Dasgupta. He was subsequently supported by the teaching staff at the University of Bucharest, as well as by members of the Ministry of Finance. With all responses favourable, Eliade began to prepare for what would become the most important journey of his life³.

His Indian itinerary would prove to be far more than a mere academic path—it became a terrain upon which multiple internal conflicts and labyrinthine trials would unfold, shaping and refining him. His initiation into the labyrinth began as early as secondary school, where he embarked on a quest for truth, particularly in the spiritual and universal domains. In *The Trial of the Labyrinth*, Eliade notes that the significance of human beings within this vast universe cannot be truly understood without drawing parallels to each individual's religious experience. The yearning to aspire towards a free yet culturally chameleonic universe granted the author the opportunity to depict a new model of the universal human. Among his first undertakings in

¹ Romanul prezintă povestea sa de iubire cu fiica profesorului Dasgupta și poate fi o modalitate prin care abolește trecutul tumultuos din India.

² Mihaela, Chiribău-Albu, *Itinerare labirintice*, disponibil la <https://www.esoterica.ro/2017/03/itinerare-labirintice/> (accesat 25.03. 2025)

³ Mircea, Eliade, 1991, *India*. București: Editura pentru turism, pp. 6-7.

India was a marked interest in the hermetic philosophy characteristic of the Italian Renaissance. By the end of 1928, Eliade arrived in India, a realm he likened to a mystical, fabulous space, where long, vast, and deserted galleries unfolded. All the experiences he lived in this exotic setting would grant him the chance to study life at all its levels; beyond the purely philosophical and religious concerns he had originally sought to investigate.

As for the construction of his labyrinthine path within the cultural sphere, it was at times disrupted, arduous, and incoherent. This led the historian of religions to learn Sanskrit, to write, and to attentively analyse human typologies. He was especially drawn to intellectuals who had mastered a particular field of knowledge in its entirety.

Eliade possessed extraordinary working power, driven by the ambition to attain absolute understanding. Within the literary realm, he began composing two of his most significant works: *Isabel and the Devil's Waters* and *The Light That Fades*⁴.

The lack of material resources disrupted his path, destabilising him emotionally and prompting him to choose the road to spirituality—particularly, the creation of a life within a monastery, where he would once again rediscover his inner strength and spiritual balance. Professor Dasgupta proved to be a complete supporter, becoming the young Eliade's guide and helping him uncover the essence of Asian culture. The professor's encouragement further fuelled Eliade's ambition, making him strive to become one of his best students, even though he often succumbed to despair and felt the urge to give up.

The path to success—the pinnacle Eliade so dearly sought—is frequently referenced in his work and is depicted through certain individuals who had a profound influence on him. Chief among them is the professor from Presidency College, who offered him unconditional support and taught him a vital principle of life: that there must be perfect harmony between thought and action, if one is ever to attain their envisioned ideal.

Eliade was deeply affected by many conflicting emotions: he ardently wished to become Indian, yet at the same time, considered this desire a temptation—one that might alter him spiritually. India captivated him entirely, but this journey resembled a double-edged sword, threatening to annul the very essence of his soul.

Although he adapted swiftly to his new life, his thoughts often turned homeward, and he maintained frequent contact with his family and friends.

The year 1930 marked his move into the home of his teacher, Dasgupta, in accordance with Indian tradition. This event brought Eliade a sense of peace, particularly from a financial standpoint, but also granted him the opportunity to observe Asian culture from within. The young Eliade worked and studied with great fervour, integrating himself into Bengali circles, improving his Sanskrit communication skills, and experiencing a true sense of belonging to a family.

It was within the professor's household that he would encounter his great love—an experience that, regrettably, would end in heartbreak. Maitreyi, the daughter of Dasgupta, became the writer's constant companion; they exchanged ideas and knowledge, unaware, as Eliade would later note in *Memoirs*, that they had fallen in love⁵.

Although there were many hesitations and resistances, the love between the two grew deeper, yet it was never fully realized: Maitreyi informed her parents of their relationship, leading to the young Eliade being expelled from the house and the subsequent severing of his connection with his mentor.

As a result, love became an obstacle in his labyrinthine journey, yet it was also a crucial occasion through which Eliade, the man, came to understand his own emotions. With the loss of Maitreyi, Eliade felt it necessary to distance himself from India, as everything that had once drawn his attention now became forbidden.

⁴ Mircea, Eliade, 2007, *Încercarea labirintului. Convorbiri cu Claude-Henri Rocquet*. București: Humanitas, pp. 27-28.

⁵ Mircea, Eliade, 2004, *Memorii 1907-1960*. București: Humanitas, p.188.

He then devoted himself to study, though still haunted by the experiences he had lived. In 1931, at the request of his father, he returned to his homeland to complete his military service.

The writing of the novel *Maitreyi* served as a means of detachment from his turbulent Indian past—a way of transforming reality into fiction and liberating himself from the powerful temptations of India. The novel would bring him immense recognition and resounding success. At the same time, the author felt the need to move beyond the dramatic experience in India, dedicating himself entirely to literature—his only salvation from the lingering obsession with India. In the Asian sphere, he had written at least one hundred essays, which he intended to present in his homeland, where he would go on to establish an Institute of Oriental Studies⁶.

In India, he wrote *Isabel and the Devil's Waters* in 1930. The book is grounded in the writer's authentic experiences, incorporating real-life details into the unfolding of the narrative. This work is significant because it integrates narrative techniques specific to fantastic prose and includes the great Eliadean themes: the crisis of the intellectual elite, the yearning for escape and freedom, and the eternal struggle between Heaven and Hell. The main character, the doctor, is a complex figure who despises his homeland and finds himself in a fierce battle with time. Although he is in search of eternal life, he simultaneously longs to be forgotten by all who have ever known him.⁷ The main hero, the doctor, is a complex character who hates his homeland, engaged in a fierce battle against time. Although he is in search of eternal life, he wishes to be forgotten by all his acquaintances.

In contrast, *The Fading Light* is a novel written in 1934, but it did not achieve the desired success. It is a work that includes the interferences of Eastern and European cultures, where the fantastic and experiential elements prevail.⁸

The major strength of this novel is that it highlighted the pure literary core of Mircea Eliade, beyond the shortcomings of its structural particularities. When the relationship between Professor Mircea Eliade and Professor Nae Ionescu is viewed in the historical context of the collapse of "positivism," it is important to consider the dynamic of creative acceptance both by the student (Eliade) and the professor (Ionescu). The major ideas of their dialogue are directed towards the depth of life. Throughout his work (as described in the preface to *Roza vânturilor*), he sought to evaluate his own personality. During his lectures, he constantly urged the people in the university amphitheater to seek their own paths to reach the truth, which, according to the master, was already present in the consciousness of every person.

Mircea Eliade, on the other hand, wrote in *Solilocvi*, shortly after his tumultuous experience in India, about "the violent errors of originality, about the limits of the physical vision of spiritual experience," and emphasized the autonomy of human thought. In the Editor's Note, Eliade maximizes the power of the soul, which has the major role of guiding a generation through the value of the "Socratic function," a concept he borrowed from Nae Ionescu, through which students, people, can free themselves from the burden of dogmas and have confidence in surpassing human limits.

Eliade identified in his professors, due to their full knowledge, the path through which young people can recover their existence. Thus, an authentic relationship is created between the historian of religions and Nae Ionescu, aimed at the value of paradox and the tumultuous knowledge of the soul. In this sense, Eliade shapes his theories about human evolution in accordance with the ideas expressed by Master Ionescu.

Regarding the theories of the sacred and spirituality, Eliade continues certain concepts presented by S. Kierkegaard, in which the turmoil of creation and the condition of the creator in relation to the universe are found. The young Eliade would come to think differently from

⁶ Mircea, Eliade, 1991, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

⁷ Mărioara, Dobrinescu, 2015, *Despre fantastic în operele lui Mircea Eliade*. București: Rovimed Publishers, pp. 42-43.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p.43.

his disciple, being a seeker of spiritual freedom, with the goal of becoming aware of the manifestation of existence beyond the created world. On the other hand, Nae Ionescu problematizes access to transcendental information, being convinced that only through full spiritual knowledge can both suffering and happiness be given meaning:

*“[...] since the Crucifixion, the world knows that it is not pain and pleasure that determine our suffering and happiness, but the attitude that our spiritual personality maintains towards them. If suffering serves a purpose and has a meaning that leads to salvation, then suffering itself can become a source of unlimited joy”.*⁹

The principles regarding spiritual integration, adopted from Nae Ionescu, can be found in Eliade's reflections, published in *Universul literar* in March 1940, shortly after Nae Ionescu's death. According to Eliade, Ionescu succeeded in embracing the tragic nature of human existence in the world:

*“[...] the tragedy of man, continuing from Adam, Nae Ionescu found it all in this episode. That is why only the saint can approach God and know Him. Because only the love of the saint approaches absolute love.”*¹⁰

Nae Ionescu's views on Orthodox mysticism and the drama of salvation led Eliade to become aware of the magnitude of his inner turmoil. The young writer often experiences the feeling of wandering on the edge of religious experience, but precisely through confrontation with himself, he understands that the problem of the sacred must be studied within a much broader framework than that offered by a single tradition.

*“I specialized in philosophy, but I studied the philosophers, the great philosophers, and I felt something was missing. I felt that without knowing the archaic stages of religious experience, it was impossible to understand the destiny of man and his particular way of being in the universe.”*¹¹

His relationship with his mentor was maintained through frequent correspondence, allowing them to understand each other while living and experiencing all the negative events in which despair increasingly took hold.

After his Indian experience, Eliade dedicated himself to studying the signs of the sacred, but did not abandon the Faustian theories of relating to the power of creation, through which the awakening of the younger generation could be assured, thanks to the twelve feuilletons of *Itinerarul spiritual* (The Spiritual Itinerary).

The young people mentioned by Eliade in this work have the mission to create freely, accelerate the path to knowledge, and open new spiritual horizons that had been previously inaccessible.

In this context, the author promotes philosophical dilettantism, which encourages knowledge through intuition, pluralism of the world, and its meanings.

In the fifth book of *Itinerariile spirituale* (The Spiritual Itineraries), the author, like Nae Ionescu, focuses on the existential dimension. This dimension lays the foundations of deep consciousness in the face of the world's dynamism, creating a context for implementing new deeds.

⁹ Nae, Ionescu, 1990, „Juxta crucem” (1927), în *Roza vânturilor*, București: Roza vânturilor, p. 401.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 57.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 57.

According to the author, all those who try to harmonize the substance of consciousness can expand and develop in the cultural sphere by assimilating multiple ideas from most fields of knowledge.

In the study *Folklore as an Instrument of Knowledge*, published by the Royal Foundation in 1937, Eliade brought back to the forefront the theories he tried to decipher in the area of cultural philosophy, which must go beyond the standard boundaries of knowledge. The author tries to evoke the search for norms and principles through which to explain life in all its forms.

In this sense, Eliade distanced himself from the dilettantism of traditional thinking, giving up correlating religious reality with the unity of traditions, “which form the basis of the Orient, the American Indians, Western civilization, and even national cultures.” Thus, Eliade accepted the opinion of the author Ananda Coomaraswamy, as the Romanian scholar recalled in a book review published in 1979.

In 1943, in his comments on the *Legend of Master Manole*, Eliade evoked the necessity of recovering the meaning of *homo universalis* in the process of perpetuating creation through sacrifice. Also in that year, he considered that Romanian ballads are far superior to those of other Southern European countries, amplifying their mythic, mystical, sacred, and metaphysical content. Eliade was pleased because the Romanian elite had succeeded in integrating the fundamental myth into numerous folkloric creations.

“[...] here we are talking about an archaic conception of death, which our ancestors not only shared but also sang so perfectly that I wonder if they did not find in it all their desires and all their sacrifices, if this ritual valorization of death, the only fulfillment of creation, is not the central myth of Romanian spirituality.”¹²

The author’s major scientific achievements, including autobiographical writings and literary works created during exile, are placed within the realm of universality and continue to promote the cosmic principle included in all events of our lives.

These principles are borrowed from Nae Ionescu, filtered through the knowledge sphere of the historian of religions, which marked the uniqueness and diversity of his writings regardless of the era.

Mircea Eliade is one of the greatest professors of our time, admired, read, and appreciated by many generations of students in Romania, France, and the United States, and the character, kindness, and at the same time vitality he possessed were transmitted in his work, which he brought to life.

The historian of religions, through the close relationship with Nae Ionescu—also illustrated in the previous subchapter—from the perspective of the influence of his work, became involved in editing the only volume published by Nae Ionescu, namely *Roza Vânturilor* (The Rose of the Winds).

The time he spent close to the Professor, within the chair of metaphysics and logic, marked a moment of full maturation, both as a writer and as a historian of religions. Moreover, Mihai Şora, one of Eliade’s closest students, considered both his disciple Eliade and Professor Nae Ionescu as two master’s alike.

In 1933, Eliade was focused solely on his teaching career, without political involvement. Later that year, he identified as a democrat, but starting in 1937, he began to shift his political orientation, as noted by Ion Petru Culianu. From the publications of the magazine *Vremea*, his affinity for the Iron Guard emerges.

The Legionary Movement in our country was not seen merely as a political movement but as a spiritual revolution. For this reason, the movement attracted many intellectuals, who

¹² Alfons, Adania, 1993, „Mircea Eliade la Universitate”, în *Rampa*, nr. VI, 30 noiembrie, p. 1.

participated in its events and published significant articles supporting the structure that was to save Romania.

Most intellectual personalities believe that Eliade's closeness to the Legionary Movement was possible through Nae Ionescu's fierce involvement, who, since 1933, became an official member of the Iron Guard.

The strong relationship Eliade consolidated with Ionescu put him in danger, risking both his freedom and career, as he was labeled a legionary:

"If Nae Ionescu had not existed (or, more precisely, if the Professor, in his increasingly radical opposition to King Carol, had not approached Nazi Germany), I would probably have remained in the country, a university professor until around 1946-1947; then I would have shared the fate of many from my generation."¹³

As mentioned earlier, Eliade was not the only intellectual attracted to far-right principles. In his case, it was not political ideology that drew him, but the importance attributed to spirituality and the initiation of a revolution within the Christian sphere. Although Nae Ionescu was admired by the historian of religions, Eliade did not fully identify with his intentions and principles, believing his mission in life was to create and ennoble culture, not to make false impressions in the political arena.

Between 1932-1933, Eliade focused on restoring and improving Romanian cultural heritage. In his view, intellectuals were the only force capable of producing significant works due to their intelligence and innovative vision. Also, the revolution that was to happen was to be carried out by a fully developed person, not by indoctrinated political members blinded by power.

His relationship with Nae Ionescu facilitated his closeness to the Iron Guard¹⁴, publishing articles supporting the Legionary Movement. These events took place between 1937-1938, which earned Eliade labels such as legionary and anti-Semitic. He often defended himself, stating his political involvement was limited to articles written due to the theme of spirituality.

Naturally, these sympathies, whether cultural or political, generated hatred from opponents. Both communist members and their sympathizers turned against the writer, launching attacks and numerous ironic accusations starting in 1935.

All these unpleasant events led to Eliade's exclusion from the academic environment, and around him a turbulent storm formed, joined by the press, opposition parties, and members of the social elite. Unfortunately, beyond the position of writer, scholar, and teacher, Eliade the man was also attacked, mocked, minimized, and unjustly accused. The publications where these attacks appeared included *Dacia nouă*, *Lumea românească*, and *Faclă*.

In 1940, after all incidents subsided and following Nae Ionescu's passing, Mircea Eliade found exile the appropriate path, where he began a diplomatic career as an attaché in Portugal.

He never returned to his country, going through multiple experiences and cultures that marked both his scientific career and helped him reach the peak of spiritual knowledge. On the other hand, his love and appreciation for his country were not hidden but rather nuanced and illustrated in his *Journal*.

Mircea Eliade is a personality who, although subjected to countless historical trials, looked back with longing wherever he was, far from his homeland—a term constantly used by Emil Cioran, another emblematic figure of Romanian culture forced to choose exile. Cioran did not try to convince Eliade to give up promoting Romanian values, and Eliade wrote in accordance with the Romanian literary spirit.

¹³ Mircea, Eliade, 1991, *Memorii*. București: Humanitas, p. 426.

¹⁴ Mihaela, Gligor, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-197.

Once abroad, trying to adapt, he was motivated by his inner creative goal—the impulses of creation itself, namely, to write.

Although exile can be associated with decline, chaos, or wandering in external and internal realms, Eliade preserved in his conscience his belonging to Romanian culture and spiritual specificity.

He found conviction in understanding exile as a means of initiation and maturation, after which a person can be reborn and rediscover themselves in relation to the universe and the outside world.

Regarding inner exile, it can manifest even before the external one: from the moment someone feels constrained, censored, they no longer have the capacity to freely express their creative talent, can no longer be themselves, and are forced to conform to social standards. In this case, the most fitting example is the situation of writers who were deprived of their freedom of expression. Eliade, at the moment he feels attacked, chooses with great difficulty to leave the country.

In our opinion, Mircea Eliade can be compared to a traveller who discovers new destinations, where he adapts, fully understands himself, asserts his identity, and builds his success wherever he arrives; what is sad is that our traveller never returned to the homeland that raised and shaped him.

The fact that the author's involvement and merits are recognized regardless of the place where he lived speaks volumes.

Eliade would achieve success through his own efforts, be appreciated by the great elites of his time, and his thinking and behaviour would remain positive attributes in the memory of all who met him.

Mircea Eliade left Romania before fully establishing himself in the scientific-literary field, due to the restriction of his freedom and multiple attacks aimed at his political orientation. The experience of exile is transformed into a path of self-knowledge, being compared to Ulysses' journey to Ithaca, but this aspect does not diminish his belief in the major importance that the Romanian homeland holds in his soul.

From his point of view, only those who are unworthy of the act of creation will be completely lost in alienation, while true creators, craftsmen of creation, will continue to develop and work in the national spirit.

India, Portugal, France, and America all represented different stages in the development of the Romanian writer, while Romania designates only the environment where he was born and where his foundations were laid.

The positive aspects that Eliade's exile presents are: scientific research, impressive teaching activity, hard work, the power of readaptation, and meeting his great love. In India, the author managed to quench his thirst for Eastern principles, the particularities of another exotic culture, and the mythical universe. In Paris, considered a prolific environment for cultural development, a center of purification, Eliade, alongside Emil Cioran and George Dumézil, reached the peak of his scientific creation: *Treatise on the History of Religions*, an emblematic work that still attracts attention worldwide today.

America is the final destination of our traveller, where he lived until his death; there, he held the chair of history of religions at the University of Chicago, representing a major fulfilled dream for the Romanian author.

Speaking about Mircea Eliade, we must observe how he understands exile as a space of initiation, where he confronts mysteries, transcends his profane condition, and reaches sacredness. These two aspects are very often encountered in the writer's works.

The sacred space is seen as the centre of the universe, and these two dimensions, these two ways of being, are the means through which any person and any researcher can understand possible dimensions of human existence. He is an intellectual capable of assuming his

condition, regardless of the risks of this attitude, and through his ability to create and distance himself from the restrictive political system, he becomes free and master of his own vocation.

Throughout his life, the writer had the courage to face the obstacles that made his existence difficult, without avoiding them, assuming responsibility for the decisions he made, always carrying the national spirit within himself. He did all this even though he was rejected by the Romanian environment, which had become impossible for most intellectuals during the difficult communist period. What his compatriots rejected was warmly welcomed by the West, also on foreign soil, where he found his end.

Aware that he would never return to the country where he was born, Eliade chose to be cremated—in this way, his body would not be forgotten or abandoned in a foreign land.

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