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## **Interior Exile, an Ovidian Model of the Novel in the Communist Era**

### **Myth as Literary Method**

*Abstract: In the closed space of communism, the myth as a literary method taught us again the joy to imagine worlds protected by hidden, occult knowledge. The myth as a literary method creates a counterdiscourse about the world re-presented artistically, a couter narrative understood as a survival form.*

*Key-terms: myth as a literary method, interior exile, hidden knowledge*

Undertaken by the novel of the Communist era as a literary method, myth creates a counter-discourse about the world which it represents artistically, a counter-narration as form of survival in an agonizing time. A great part of the Romanian novel in this period remodels the experience of Ovid, who, exiled in a world which he deemed barbaric, transfigures in spirit, in a form of interior exile, his lost country, his forbidden loves, his sacrificed ideals. In this context, the “experiences” proposed by the mythical complexes in the novels of D.R. Popescu, Fanus Neagu, Stefan Banulescu, Eugen Barbu, proclaimed that history was dead. Literature was reinventing history within the plane of the imaginary, suggesting readers, in a mutual consensus, the faith in a world, which, albeit unreal, was possible. In a time of desperation, the faith in the paper god of the literary myth was put forward as a solution. The faith in the artistically represented world was re-proclaimed; this faith was supposed to protect the people that were captive in the Communist regime, rebuilding the lost aims. Literary myth tacitly announced the auroral time, in the era of the most terrible blindness. At the same time, literature healed, reinventing, by means of a counter-

narration, the gods of freedom, the gods of love, the gods of hope. The Ovidian model of the interior exile became the solution of survival, through the formula of myth as literary method.

The myth-creating time was always a time of agony, a wild time, and the mythical narration assumed its role of inventing a world that was incongruous with the dying history of the inimical time. D.R. Popescu, Fanus Neagu, Stefan Banulescu wrote stories of dead people who resurrected and travelled on the earth that would not hold them anymore, of ritualistic hunts, in which the shaman-hunter ancestor was replaced by another hunter, who only spoke about the pleasure of killing, about the inexpugnable joy of spreading terror or of destroying and that, only to save himself in the figure of another prototype of the legendary Cain, who had invented the Biblical world as separate from the powers of the fertile land. Killing had become a ritualistic game, it confused the languages of the world, in an era of chaos. Writing about this world of Cain was as if the authors assumed the exercise of exorcizing, a way of releasing the evil by cold-bloodedly re-living the crime. By contrast, these mythic structures projected a world of the logos, as a bright form of reason and order. As any myth, the text would enclose within the arcades of fiction the solution against the mechanisms which threatened to establish chaos. In a time which had killed dreams, the right to an *ek-staza* experienced in the temple, the re-organization of redemption in and by the word, was supplied by this form of literature as myth.

In the counter-reactionary space, which held us captive in the rigid forms of Communist madness, myth as literary method re-learned the pleasure of the game, the joy of imagining worlds that were defended by a hypo-noetic knowledge. Although shrunk by camouflage, it was still real through the force with which it mangled the silence imposed by the commanded darkness.

The novel which used myth as literary method operated ritualistically, because its regenerating force proved its efficiency, more than ever, through the catharsis assumed by the literary text. As any myth, myth as literary method cured a deficiency. And the greatest deficiency of all, which the hero of history rebalanced in his initiatory trip, was the lack of freedom of speech. The word would be cured of captivity through the technique of myth. The list of those tragic absences which the Communist scenarios would engage as a rule of humiliating submissiveness was undoubtedly so long, that the Romanian novel of the sixties, seventies and eighties, had inexhaustible epic material and maybe this was one of the

causes of its prolificacy. The heroes of this type of novel were eventually confronted with the variants of the greatest rite of passage, death, in this case, the death of history itself.

Either if it was the death of the word, of freedom, of flight, of love, of divinity or of history, it was always a death which had as its purpose the regeneration of a sick time. This redeeming role would usually go to women who communicated straightforwardly with the saps of the earth. And in this sense it was still a compensating form, in the plane of fiction, of avenging the perdition of a world which humiliated the most intimate and natural aspects of prototypical femininity. Through their serenity, these female characters purified the world of bloody sacrifices, for the sake of which men-hunters frantically celebrated crime. In the world of Cain, they would turn to epiphany. Almost mystical characters, Sevastita, servant and prophet at the same time, is the guardian of arcane mysteries, she saw the Devil and God and she seems to have an eternal life, being a form of world wisdom, as in the miraculous fantastic of fairy tales. Another strange character from D.R. Popescu's fiction is Ileana. She has a garden in which flowers sing and laugh, an Edenic garden in a world un-spelled under terror, a projection of a heavenly space, contaminated by the magic of the eros, as a means of salvation, about which myth as literary method can speak in an era in which Communist censorship had fettered the liberating word.

Mythical elements, integrated in the intertwining of the text, especially through the intrusion of dream into reality, form part of the mechanism of the conversion of reality into the soteric fabulous, that which cures the fall. In the world of Cain, women get the keys of the garden's gates. On the other hand, the "gods" of the new world, those who wore the insignia of the assassin brother, were gradually chased away, through a trick, from the stories of the novel which projected its myths in the discourse. A way was found to elude the ethos of a civilization which promised barbarism as its ideal.

Another hidden aim of myth was that of releasing from the captivity imposed by the regime the model of the hero who never gave up the search, and of stimulating another form of participation, another system of values that was challenging and regenerative from a spiritual point of view.

The Romanian novel was forced to reinvent the archetypal images, out of a desperate need to recover the identities that were seized abusively by a regime which it perceived as alien.

Symbolical thought re-updated the lost meaning caught in-between the pages of plena meetings and party congresses, in which almost no one believed, but which continued to alienate, building up an unreal world. Meaning was recreated through these cultural, transnational counter-narrations, in an artistic formula where the imagistic symbolism of Modernism and the surrealist experiment would gather, under the label of *Mythical Realism*.

Myth as literature reacted in solidarity with the lost individual during the time of the great blinds, in the European South-East, re-offering its universal dimension, its human condition. Literature which inserted mythical figures and events in the pulp of the epic subject healed the wounds inflicted by the Communist regime which was developing in parallel, within the historical time. The novel which had assumed myth as a literary method starting with the sixties, must be read from the perspective of its first line of expectation, as a cultural and artistic product of the Communist era. Myth has now got a different function from the strategies that were assumed in the inter-war period or the Romantic period. Although they belonged to the same universal matrix, the redeeming myths of the Communist era particularized their avatars in the same barren time, which was bound to history and unbound from the sky.

In this context, “bounding” and “ascension” can be listed among the most significant mythical complexes which the novel discussed. The myth of binding has got strong reflexes in the symbolical ritualizations of a society which aggressively *binds* consciousness to the spiritually impoverished profane, historicizing it. At the same time, “binding” associates its rites, as a compensation, with the “ascension” in the artistic plane of the novel, the latter showing solidarity with the myths of cosmic rearrangement. In the lack of the forbidden religious discourse, in the absence of mysticism or metaphysics, myth as literary method had the task of rebuilding the archetypal system of collective thought, in other words, of *un-binding*.

Although the pathology of time, the need to fool the vigilance of censorship, camouflaged by degradation the images and symbols of the two mythical complexes, their function to reconstruct the lost unity through the “story”, due to their hierophantic force, was all the more pregnant.

In this case, solidarity with these universal values was achieved spontaneously in the act of reception. And this process could be produced because the texts internalised the amputated dimensions of the ontic condition. What was un-binding from the sacred in the

plane of history, was rebinding in the plane of the literary text, through the strategies of camouflage, which myth instrumented.

In the blackest time of strife, the symbolical images of myth as literary method brought together the wildness of the horde, assuming its hierophantic function: the pathological variants of the religious complexes generally present a *facies mimetic*. The tendency of any historical form to get as close as possible to its archetype seems surer, even when it had been realized in a secondary, insignificant plane: this phenomenon can be certified all over the religious history of humankind. A regular local goddess aspires to become The Great Goddess; a regular village is the “Centre of the World”; a regular sorcerer pretends to be, in the climactic moments of his rites, the “Universal King”<sup>1</sup>.

The distorted variants of the tutorial gods hovered over the space and time circumstances. Literature which had internalised myth as literary method purified the images of the “pathological” discourse under the shelter of fiction. Hence, the literary text re-updates the patterns of primitive thinking, the most profound landmark of identity, in a time of crisis. Both in the novels of Fanus Neagu and in those of D.R. Popescu, the symbolical images of purifying waters, of the lunar body or the local identifications of the female goddess appear as reflexes of the two migratory mythical complexes above-mentioned. The union, at the symbolically archetypal level of the narrated story, of the fire and water elements, uncovers the scenario of salvation, remade in the myths of redemption, of the egress from the schemes of the antagonistic manifestation.

On the other hand, the motif of the island and of the flood, rewrote, at the profound level of the text, the scenario of social reality, identified as fleeting reintegration into the inchoate. The real, corrupted by the Communist ideologies, was revalued in fiction, through the images and symbols used. Myth functioned just like in the beginnings: it undertook the categories of the collective unconscious and it purified, by “evangelizing” the affective forces which images and symbols designated<sup>2</sup>.

The imaginary which had been seized by the oppressive, Communist discourse, was turned back to the collective mind through the cathartic exercise of narrative art. Mythical images stood for a code, were made into an intentional language. Myth

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<sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Imagini și simboluri* (București, 1994), 150-151.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, 199.

would re-become hypo-noetic, giving way to forbidden knowledge, in a contracted form. The narrative strategies undertook metaphysics or the theological discourse on their own.

Regarding the poetics of the mythical discourse, this reveals a certain type of rhetorics, as well as specific instruments of persuasion which interpretation can highlight in the fabric of the story; on the other hand, the narrative schemes and structures model the narration, underscore the contradictory elements, activating the hidden meanings at a first level of reading; the overall image has to highlight the secret intention.

This exegetic model, called by Greisch a hermeneutics of trust<sup>3</sup>, is the only redeemer. Thus, it is not about completely excluding historicity, the space-time coordinates of individual history, nor is it about ignoring mentalities or value systems which function at a given moment in the history of the world; on the contrary, these are defining for the experience of the sacred, which develops in a concrete time.

Much closer to the perspective undertaken by myth as literary method in the post-war Romanian novel, is Mircea Eliade's point of view, who noticed that myth rebuilds the connection with what Georges Gusdorf called, in another context, the second focal point of the ellipse: the sacred<sup>4</sup>.

If Plato, in his *The Republic*, rejected allegories, because they could not be understood correctly by a novice, or this misunderstanding would have eroded the knowledge of the structure of the real manifested by the myth, it is particularly the allegory which captured, for the post-war novel, in an indirect language, truths that were chased away from the City-State by an oppressive discourse. The deep meaning of the real, its underlying sense, its hidden significance, would be reinstalled in the literary text as a hypo-noetic exercise. It could be asserted that the functions of myth were re-updated in the most authentic of ways.

Communism seemed to have established in history a time of the Passions, as well a Christ time, which is why, this imperious need emerged to reinvent myths, including political myths, as in the case of Nicolae Breban's novels. The events of a reviled history were being re-written, at another level. It would be interesting to identify the systemic structure of these mythical images and the semantic

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Greisch, *L'âge herméneutique de la raison* (Paris, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Georges Gusdorf, *Les origines de l'herméneutique* (Paris, 1988).

force which the new images that show solidarity with the matrix system bring. This exercise would be really useful in diagnosing a collective mind divided in its aboriginal forms.

Myth as literary method performs in the esthetical plane the shaman ritual of the temporary renewal of a violently broken communication with a *deus*, turned by decree into an *otiosus* as well. The provincialism of local history<sup>5</sup> was redeemed in universality by myth. The leap into the coherence of cosmic time saved the degraded historical time, while the ontologized time transfigured the dissolute historical events and reopened the cultural context to which they had belonged in the universal dialogue: "What keeps cultures open is therefore the presence of Images and symbols; in any culture, Australian or Athenian, the limit situations of man are perfectly revealed due to the symbols which the cultures in question hold. If this unique spiritual fundament of various cultural styles is neglected, the philosophy of culture will be condemned to remain a morphological and historical study, with no validity for the human condition as such. If the Images were not at the same time a gateway towards the transcendent, we would end up by choking in any culture, no matter how great or wonderful we would consider it. In any stylistically and historically-conditioned creation we can find the archetype."<sup>6</sup>

Genetically speaking, mythical thinking can be traced back to the rupture between man and universe, and implicitly, between the universe and language<sup>7</sup>. It is this very distance that would later engage the aspiration towards the lost integrity. As far as myth as literary method is concerned, it transferred in its stories the power to exorcize the anxieties generated by the ruptures operated during Communist history.

From Schleiermacher to Kierkegaard, religious thinkers revealed the allusive, symbolical dialogue between man and divinity. Starting from the period of Romanticism<sup>8</sup>, to the European mind, revelation, as a divine message conveyed to humankind, is subjected to language, which is always relative. From an ontological point of view, the infinity of God can only be expressed through negation. Thus, one can accede to that *locum* out of which

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<sup>5</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Imagini și simboluri* (București, 1994), 208.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, 215.

<sup>7</sup> Georges Gusdorf, *Mit și metafizică* (Timișoara, 1996), 19-20.

<sup>8</sup> Georges Gusdorf, *Mit și metafizică* (Timișoara, 1996), 212-213.

the latency of the sacred can become manifest, even if transiently. The heroes live experiences that are forbidden to the profane space, while the transcendence of the tragic world and the reconstruction of the lost unity become possible through ritual, never through scientific explanation.

Myth as literary method takes stock of those images whose meaning had been seized and reintegrates them in the collective mind. As any abusive discourse, Communism thought it could seize, reinvent and re-designate the images and figures of the myth. However, their universality would take revenge, by means of myth as literary method, conquering the barbaric provincialism and the limited grossness of the communist ideology, because: “there is no mythical motif or initiatory scenario, which is not present in dreams and in imaginary afabulations”.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, the analysis of the post-war novel which undertakes myth as narrative strategy would be reductionist, to say the least, if we were not to consider this method of epic creation in its specific plane, the artistic one. Nonetheless, we cannot exclude, in the given analysis, the information which comes from the area of the sociology of literature or from the intersections with the depths of the collective mind, being aware of the role that these mythical scenarios would have at a first, “conspirative” reading, in a plane hidden from the eye of censorship. Myth turned the being back to his fundamental structures, in a society which offered as a landmark the sick figures of an ideology generated by hatred, fear, crime, and all these horrors were heralded in the name of a poor good, which should have reformed the world.

These strange narrated histories revealed the structures of the real, as well as multiple manners of being in the world, which carceral society kept under lock. As a result, the false civilizing heroes, promised by the fake myths fabricated in the laboratories of the Communist ideology, such as the Messianic myth of proletarianism, were abolished; they were replaced by universal models of humanity.

The repetitiveness of paradigmatic events, to which the myth alluded, strengthened the conviction that any evil-contaminated history could change: “Whatever may one think about the artistic skills of Marx, it is obvious that the author of *The Communist Manifesto* resumes and develops one of the great eschatological myths of the Asian-Mediterranean world, which is: the redeeming

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<sup>9</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Mituri vise și mistere*, (București, 1998), 10.

role of The Just One ( “the chosen one”, “the anointed”, “the innocent”, “the harbinger”, in our days, the proletarian), whose sufferings are invoked to change the ontological status of the world. Indeed, the classless society of Marx, and the consecutive disappearance of historical tensions can find its most precise precedent in the myth of The Golden Age, which, following multiple traditions, characterizes the beginning and the ending of history. Marx enriched this time-honoured myth with an entire Judeo-Christian Messianic ideology: on the one hand, the prophetic role and the soteriologic function which he gives the proletariat; on the other hand, the final clash between Good and Evil, which can be easily likened to the apocalyptic battle between Christ and the Anti-Christ, followed by the landslide victory of the former. It is significant that Marx takes the Judeo-Christian eschatological hope into an absolute ending of History; by doing this, he is far detached from the other historicist philosophers (for instance, Croce and Ortega Y Gasset), to which historical tensions are consubstantial with the human condition, and can never be completely abolished<sup>10</sup>. The author highlights the paradox of Marxist thought, which, despite vehemently denying the direct and irreversible manifestation of the sacred forced into the profane events, and inevitably, any projection into the social plane of a heavenly order, reinvested the impoverished history with one of the most powerful symbols of the total consciousness, that is, the unbinding from history and the ascension to transcendence in a perfect order, the salvation from the antagonistic plane of the battle and the recovery of the “pearl” from the tumultuous sea, as a token of the redeemed soul.

Therefore, myth as literary method reasserted the confidence into the liberating un-binding from any experienced inserted into the game of mutilated history. Void is no longer universal and history is deprived of ontological validity: this is the lesson. The most rigid structures of thought were undermined and relativized by the force of myth, which was similar in process to generating the epic. The paradox deepened all the more as the one who revealed the meaning of “our mysterious interior journey”, “the other”, was the most abhorrent and faithless of strangers, a person whose race was invented in the laboratories of the Communist experiment. Maybe the end of the Communist period could have been the starting point

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<sup>10</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Mituri vise și mistere*, (București, 1998), 20-21.

of a new humanism, which could have developed “worldwide”, as Mircea Eliade wished<sup>11</sup>.

Out of the desert of debased history, myth as literary method reconditioned “the mythological waste”, its derelict images. As laicised as this image may be, as corrupted the myth, they reveal their permanence, just like they changed and purified the most laic ideology of the twentieth century. In the case under discussion, the figures of myth offered salvation from the tyranny of history, healing the severe self-forgetfulness imposed by Communism. In the contracted time of reading, the reader annulled tragic history. It can be asserted that, in “the middle of a fiery epoch”, in which history was made through false gusto, myth as literary method was experimenting opposition against history.

In contemporary Romanian literature, as a specific aspect, the mythical co-exists with the political, especially in the novels of D.R.Popescu, or, at the opposite pole, it is made into an aestheticizing literature, abstracted from reality, as in the fiction of Stefan Banulescu and Fanus Neagu. Narration fills with symbolical signs, forcing the text to project its discourse on two levels, by alternating the real with the unreal space.

Symbols have the status of signs, referring through their signifier to a secondary signified: history as farce, a dilapidated repository of simulacra, which the myth uncovers. The definition of this frantic time which drew close to its end is offered once again by Moses: “History is like a game, a tango, or a waltz(...) I was standing on the platform of gypsies(...) and I, together with my band of singers, was tipping the drinks(...) and I started to tire out the legs of dancers, to sing them interminable, consecutive tangos, until the power in their thighs fagged out. Until their knees trembled(...) and I made them think that they’re dancing what they want and they’re partying like crazy while this was not the truth. They were my victim, the victims of myself, who got drunk like a pig. And this is the fundamental discovery: they danced, executing what my whim ordered them to do.”

Undoubtedly, the chapter reminds one of Eugen Ionescu’s rhinocerization, or of Camus’s *The Plague*, symbolical texts, which forced the reading into a decoding on several levels, a social one and a metaphysical one, due to its degree of depth, open to the structures of archaic thought, in this case, the myth of hunting.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, 65.

In the compensatory plane of the soteric imaginary, myths about ritualistic hunting have the role of healing human fragility. That's because the dangers through which the hunter has to go through in order to procure life-supporting food, transform hunting into a ritual which solves the fragility of the human condition in transcendence. The hunter got the insignia of shaman power, was capable of travelling to the other world, so as to get back on earth with a power undertaken from the world of spirits. The shaman hunter looked upon its game as an equal, at a spiritual level, and defeating it involved passing to another step of spiritual evolution. In the world depicted by the above-mentioned novel, the hunter is a demon weakened by the world of chaos in which he lives, he is a man hunter, who, by discarding the ritualistic dimension of hunting, transforms it into a grotesque farce in which he imagines to play the role of a director that changes history on a stage fitted with the necessary props. The writer creates the image of the killing hunter, the one who lives from the pleasure of killing, of destroying, the pleasure of terrorizing the world, a prototype of Communist society, or of any tyrannical scenario.

Even violent deaths are mediocre, in a history that is manipulated by buffoons. People learn through myth as literary method, to magically communicate, in the darkest and most laic of eras. The first redeeming lesson is about death, as a new beginning. That one cannot move forward without the experience of ritualistic death.

The imaginary seized by the oppressive, Communist discourse, was returned to the collective mind through the cathartic exercise of the mythical image, which was materialized into intentional language. Myth as literary method released the forbidden knowledge, in a contracted form, during a time of interior exile, when the prohibited country was recovering within the arcana of myth.

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