

MIRCEA ELIADE'S CREATIVE EXILE AS FORM OF ANTI-COMMUNIST RESISTANCE

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We, who are outside the Iron Curtain, free and safe, have the duty to keep and continue the Romanian cultural tradition. It is the only intelligent political action we can take. (Mircea Eliade, *Împotriva deznădejdi*¹ 66)

Creation is the response one can give to fate, to the 'terror of history'. (Mircea Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth* 94)

Myth and exile dominated Mircea Eliade's work and life. While myth occupies a large portion of his scholarship and is suspected to have crossed the boundaries into his personal life, his self-exile defined a condition that nurtured the writer's ambition to build a space of anti-communist resistance through cultural creation. By following, in Eliade's case, the problematic issues pertaining to the exile condition that criticism of exile writing generally examines – identity crisis, time/space perception, language estrangement, homeland, I intend to show that he valorized his condition and creatively transfigured it, fighting a battle whose victory would be that despite communist censorship and ideology Romanian culture continued to be connected to universal values. Eliade himself tried not to follow Ovid's nostalgic writing but chose instead to emulate Dante's creative exile.

The outline of Eliade's exile starts in the post World War II Paris of 1945 and ends in April 1986 in the US. References to exile abound especially in his *Journals*, *Autobiography* and essays published in various periodicals of the Romanian diaspora, but also in interviews and correspondence, that contain the material for an investigation of Eliade's exilic experience.

Exile by definition is painful whether it is self-imposed or forced as banishment, but what is important is what the exile writer does with the pain. An immediate distinction that critics of exile writing operate is between the writer's perception of exile as a space of freedom and creativity, or as a space of captivity, generator of nostalgic reminiscences. Claudio Guillén in

¹ All quotes in English from this volume are my translation from Romanian.

his study “On the Literature of Exile and Counter-Exile” places exile writings at two poles, under the following categories “exile” (“nostalgic”), and “counter-exile” (“creative”) (cf. McClennan 15). Let us note that creativity implies action, being itself a form of opposition or resistance. Sophia McClennan follows Guillén’s theory which he further developed to describe exiled writers as “solar”, looking up to the sun and stars, like Plutarch, and “looking within”, like Ovid. In between the look-up to the sun as part of the one world in its light, and the look-down, to a foreign land, McClennan finds an “irresolvable tension” (15). She identifies this “dialectics of exile” in several texts by Latin American exiled writers.

On the contrary, Eliade finds “no contradiction, no tension even, between the world and the homeland” (*Ordeal by Labyrinth* 100). As the religious person, *homo religiosus*, strives to live in a sacralized space, organized around a center that is taken to be the Center of the world, likewise for the exile orientation is crucial. Not necessarily geographically posited, the Center of the foreign world may become one’s existential center. It is then that the exile ceases to feel alien. Eliade speaks from his personal experience: “Exile helps you to understand that the world is never foreign to you once you have a central stance in it. I have not merely understood this ‘symbolism of the center’ intellectually: I live it” (*Ordeal by Labyrinth* 100).

In my opinion, in every exile there are both an Ovid and a Dante, and the exile oscillates between the two inner states. This was a challenge for Eliade also who often had to “transcend” what he called “repeated failures and melancholic, hopeless sufferings”. He recorded in a *Journal* entry on August 27, 1946:

I understand that they represent, in the immediate, concrete sense of the word, a *descensus ad infernum*. Once you ‘wake up’ realizing that you are wondering in an infernal labyrinth, you feel anew, tenfold, those spiritual powers you considered long since lost. In that moment, any suffering becomes an *initiatory ordeal*. (23)

As Eliade would apply theses from his scholarly work to life situations, because things have to have meaning, he would see in exilic suffering an initiatory pattern capable of producing spiritual transformation in exiles, not so much unlike the ones produced by rituals of symbolic death and resurrection in shamans, yogi, neophytes in traditional cultures, or envisaged in the New Year regeneration ceremonies, or in aquatic symbolism of death and rebirth. The basic idea is that descending has to be followed by rising. Christianity holds its own example of the fall-rise pattern and of redemption. Eliade insists on the initiatory quality of exile, as initiation implies transcendence, while suffering also may reveal to the self superior realities, inaccessible otherwise.

In the *Journal* entry dated November 22, 1951, Eliade elaborates some more:

I sensed in my soul this revelation: our exile from homeland is a long and difficult initiatory ordeal, destined to purify and transform us. The distant, inaccessible country will be like a paradise to which we return spiritually, that is “in spirit”, in secret, but *really*. (145)

How real is one's land? The reality of homeland is reminiscent of Eliade's concept of the reality of the sacred. To the religious humanity, the sacred is real. It is an inherent human perception, and despite critics' ongoing debate on the ontological status of the sacred as the real, in Eliade's system of thought religiousness is a fundamental feature of human nature. Although modern secularized humanity has lost the capacity to sense the sacred, the need for it is unconsciously still there, religiousness being camouflaged in various cultural forms.

Pondering on the exilic condition, Eliade writes in his *Journal* on November 22, 1951: “I had thought much of Dante and his exile. It makes no difference whether we ever return physically to the homeland. We must take Dante as our model not Ovid” (145). Elsewhere, in one of the articles published in exile periodicals entitled “Între Tomis și Ravenna” (Between Tomis and Ravenna), Eliade finds in the longing for the lost country the element that differentiates the two poets. Ovid could not let go of his memories of the splendors of imperial Rome, and could barely survive. Dante, however, found strength and inspiration in the pain of his exile in Ravenna where he wrote *Divina Commedia*. Dante mastered his fate bravely. “He too suffered to the depth of his being the split with his Country, but accepted no compromise to return. Exile did not bring him down, didn't even lessen his spirit” (*Împotriva deznădejdiei* 133). On the contrary, he was a visionary who could accept the idea of political autonomy of Florence, of the unity of Italy, and even of the unity of Europe. Wondering where the poems of Romanian exiles are heading, Eliade would not mind some new sweet Tristias, but would hail the verse that projects longing for homeland to the angelic heights reached by Dante Alighieri.

“It would be truly catastrophic if writers and artists in exile were to let themselves despair only because they are cut off from homeland,” notes Eliade in the article entitled “Shepherds, haiduks, nomads” of 1956. “On the contrary”, he insists, “we have the duty to make our creative efforts tenfold being aware that our free cultural creation continues and enhances an old glorious Romanian spiritual tradition (*Împotriva deznădejdiei* 187).

Out of the same sense of duty, Eliade decided (as recorded in his *Autobiography* in 1953) to lecture on behalf of Romania at the *Recontres Internationales de Geneve*, where Francois Mauriac and Paul Ricoeur were

also speaking, because “in that era of savage Stalinism, Romanian culture was completely absent in the West, since men of culture were either in prison or, at best, condemned to silence” (165).

Relationship with the Country assumes religious dimensions. Nostalgia for the far-away inaccessible homeland resembles the nostalgia for Paradise. Exiles may enter the “celestial prototype”:

Our Country starts being like the ‘Jerusalem in the Sky’ of the Jews in captivity: a city not less real than the other Jerusalem, the terrestrial one, but of a totally different nature. Let us remember that this is how the ‘Jerusalem in the Sky’ came into being, the true spiritual center of post-exilic Judaism: from the tears and yearning of the Jews taken captive, but seen, understood, and explained through the genius of an elite, first of all of the prophets”. (*Împotriva deznădejdii* 134)

Physically displaced, “deterritorialized”, to use the Deleuzian term, exiles “create” an ideal state that opposes the authoritarian one. Exiled from the space of the native country, they are exiled from its time too, more specifically from the historical present of homeland. According to Sophia McClennan, “such a condition heightens the exile’s remembrance of the past and creates a great nostalgia” (58). If deterritorialization breaks linear time, by revisiting the past, exiles have a sense of cyclical time long abolished, as Eliade notes, by Judeo-Christian exchatology.

Deterritorialized, exiles become the “wandering people” of Homi Bhabha’s *Location of Culture*. In Eliade’s view, exiles continue the nomadic condition of the shepherds of the old which is making exile part of the Romanian destiny. And if products of Romanian pastoral transhumance like the ballad “Miorița” survive in Romanian literature, so will literary productions of exiles, making Eliade conclude: “The experience of exile will not be wasted for the Romanian culture” (*Împotriva deznădejdii* 187). And it has not, a proof of which is the post-1989 recovery and publication in Romania of diasporic works, including Eliade’s, amongst which the volume I am quoting from in the present paper, *Împotriva deznădejdii*.

At the end of WWII, Eliade made the hard choice of exile, and with it there would be other hard decisions:

But the choice had to be made: despair or hope. And I am always against despair of that kind, political and historical despair. So I chose hope. I told myself that it was simply one more ordeal that had to be gone through – we are only too familiar with the ordeals of history – we Romanians, Yugoslavs, Bulgarians, all of us – because

our existence has always been between empires. (*Ordeal by Labyrinth* 78)

Beyond this resigned acceptance of his exilic condition, beyond space and time considerations, Eliade went through a double identity crisis known only to exiled writers: finding no use for the mother tongue and losing the audience for the writings in that language. Although he was able to produce his scholarly works in French and later on in English, Eliade suffered for not writing fiction. After three months of exile in Paris, he noted in his *Journal* on December 16, 1945: "How can I write anything in a language I don't know well, one that resists me as soon as I try to 'imagine', 'dream', 'play in it?'" (11).

Indeed, we can only inhabit our own language. In an interview with Claude-Henri Rocquet, Eliade identified homeland with Romanian: "the language in which I dream and also write my journal" (*Ordeal by Labyrinth* 100). Focusing entirely on his works in comparative mythology and history of religions, Eliade denied himself what he called the "nocturnal regime" of his creativity. However, while working on "Le Chamanisme", he was 'possessed' by a story to such extent that he had to start writing what was to become "The Forbidden Forest", a novel that took five years to finish. Eliade wrote all his fiction in Romanian, despite the absence of an immediate audience. A significant portion of it was translated into French, English, German, Spanish, and other languages. Fiction writing in Eliade's case had also a certain function: to help him reconnect with the distant homeland.

In order to serve his country during the totalitarian regime, he contributed articles to periodicals of the diaspora that he wrote in Romanian, being fully aware of this politically subversive act. Cultural creation was for Eliade a political weapon that he used to help Romanian culture continue, and to fight communist censorship. In the end, he recognized the value of exile that saved his life and his freedom. As he wrote in his *Journal* on August 28, 1959, in his identity quest he finally understood that he was "a writer who can write and publish what he thinks" (57).

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