

REFLECTIONS ON PROFANE AND SACRED TIME IN THE NOVEL *FORBIDDEN FOREST* BY MIRCEA ELIADE

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ABSTRACT

One of the existential anxieties met in the novel *The Forbidden Forest* by Mircea Eliade is that of time. The characters of the novel become carriers of messages, and the place of their action becomes a real labyrinth under the division between the sacred and the profane. Ștefan Viziru's belief that historical events conceal profound spiritual significances refers to a period in the author's life, the period of his European exile, an initiation quest, an attempt to decode the lines of his destiny. Through interpreting some contemporary national events, one can discover in Mircea Eliade's novel new symbolic meanings, a philosophy of the relationship between personal destiny and the history of the Romanian people. Through the complexity of its theme and its obsessive quest for the sacred in

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a modern desacralized world, the novel becomes a challenge. It helps us find answers related to the meaning of human existence.

Keywords: *The Forbidden Forest*, sacred and profane, initiation quest, Eliade

One of the existential anxieties captured in the novel *Forbidden Forest* by Mircea Eliade is that of time. The characters of the novel become carriers of messages, and the place in which the action takes place forms a maze determined by the division between the sacred and the profane. Ştefan Viziru's belief that historical events conceal profound spiritual significances refer to a period in the author's life, the period of the European exile, an initiation quest and an attempt to decode the line of his destiny. One can find new symbolic meanings in the novel by interpreting contemporary national events, a philosophy of the relationship between the destiny and history of the Romanian people.

The novel, through its theme complexity and its obsessive search for the sacred in a modern desacralised world, becomes the scene of a challenge to find answers to the meaning of human existence.

REALITY VERSUS MIRACLE

It is essential that we should mention that a chapter in Mircea Eliade's "Memoirs II" starts with the events following his arrival in Paris on 16 September 1945. The chapter is entitled *Incipit. Vita Nova*. The moment is considered a crucial time point, a *climacterium tempus*¹. The novel is written later, after decantation and a careful analysis of the events that happened in Romanian life during a decade, an evaluation of his own *time*. Not incidentally, the historian of religions pays attention to the myth of cyclic periodicity and his creative aspiration is that of integrating *historical time* into *infinite, cyclic, cosmic time*². The events at European level and mainly at national level, manifested as a political crisis, seem to offer hope of regeneration, outlining another perspective, a renewal through another vital cycle.

In Eliade's novel, *Forbidden Forest*, three motifs also found in Romanian fairy tales are presented: the motif of the unrecognisable sacred (present in the fairy tale *Prince Charming and the Golden apples*), the motif of eternal search (this reminds us of the fairy tale *Youth Everlasting and Life without End*), and the motif of intangible love (frequently met in fairy tales with Ileana Cosânzeana).

Folk stories might have had an early influence on the writer's imagination. They had an initiation element and were projected as an anticipation of his desire to

1 Angelo Mitchievici, *Ieşirea din timp: Încercările labirintului*. Scurtă introducere în tehnica inefabilului, în capitolul *Timpul „pierdut” și timpul „regăsit”* în Mircea Eliade, *Noaptea de Sânziene, vol. I*, Prefață de Angelo Mitchievici, Jurnalul Național, București, 2010, p. 19.

2 Cf. Matei Călinescu, *Despre Ioan P. Culianu și Mircea Eliade. Amintiri, lecturi, reflecții*, ediția a doua, revăzută și adăugită, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2002, pp. 105-113.

abolish time, a desire so strongly manifested in his novel. The main character of this novel approaches the time issue, confessing his agonies towards the impossibility of rationally understanding mystery. Therefore he has to admit that he feels overwhelmed by this difficult issue that triggers so many hypotheses: “I tell myself that the experience I am living is of a different kind, it is not rational and therefore it does not belong to human experience which takes place in Time, but a different kind of experience, I would call it ecstatic, and it takes place beyond Time...”³ He takes up this idea again as a utopian aspiration: “For many years I have been wondering if there is indeed no way to escape Time, at least to live discontinuously and eternally...”⁴ He motivates his desire with a childlike hope: “Because I do not want to die! [...] I do not want to grow old, to get mineralized spiritually and die one day. I want to live forever young as in our fairy tale *Youth Everlasting and Life without End*. I believe I have this right: to ask for my share of immortality.”⁵

Preoccupied by the importance of the *sign* (analysed in the chapter *A Meaning of Signs*) and by the significance of the *symbol* (commented upon in *Analogies and Symbols*),⁶ Mircea Eliade builds on these opinions both in his fiction works and in his theory about the division between the *sacred and the profane*. Ştefan Viziru, the main character, stands out among Eliade’s characters as being capable of seeing beyond appearances, trying to understand *signs*, one of “the hermeneut characters taken along different interpretative trails which permanently crisscross their destiny line”⁷.

STARTING POINT AND EVOLUTION OF THE ISSUES IN THE NOVEL

The issue of the relationship between man and symbol is presented obsessively in the novel. There stands the author’s attempt to detach the main character with reminiscences of archaic anthropocosmic symbolism,⁸ from the contemporary historical turmoil, but without taking him out of history. Ştefan Viziru sees beyond appearances and tries to understand *signs*, analysing destiny in relation to the interpretative route. The method suggested by the author for escaping the daily monotony (profane time) is either action or contemplation, which to Ştefan Viziru means cultural acts. Having been in London during the World War II bombings, Viziru confesses that he reads anything, even if it is not up-to-date, in order to

3 Mircea Eliade, *Noapte de Sânziene*, vol. II, ..., p. 46.

4 Mircea Eliade, *Noapte de Sânziene*, vol. II, ..., p. 46.

5 Ibidem.

6 Ambele articole sunt incluse în volumul *Fragmentarium*, 1939.

7 Angelo Mitchievici, *Ieşirea din timp: Încercările labirintului. Scurtă introducere în tehnica inefabilului*, chapter *Noduri și semne*, in Prefață at Mircea Eliade, *Noaptea de Sânziene*, vol. I, Prefață de Angelo Mitchievici, Jurnalul Național, București, 2010, p. 22.

8 Cf. Angelo Mitchievici, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

evade war. He even wants to remember his wife, his son and his country, either remembering events from the past or projecting them into an imaginary time. This attitude helps him preserve a minimum of freedom. Reading becomes a real shield in his endeavour to preserve freedom. “If they sound the alarm and I am on the underground train or in a shelter, I start reading. Thus *I refuse* to be present at a petty historical event. Reading Shakespeare, I evade the present moment, a moment meant to capture me, to terrorize me.”⁹

The hero of the novel senses the presence of the sacred, of meaning and miracle in the world, and its manifested form has, most of the time, the ordinary, common form of the profane. “But I still think that there is *something else* beyond Time and History, Ştefan added fervently, and that we can meet that *something else*. It is only that for this we are asked a very great spiritual effort.”¹⁰ The pages of the novel repeatedly offer clues for the sacred that take the forms of the profane. Analysing the Eliadean creations, Petre Țuțea says the following: “Mircea Eliade as a hermeneut – initiated? and seeker – moves historically through time and space, through the sacred and the profane, both in archaic and modern cultures, preserving the opposition of the two states of the universal spirit”¹¹.

The feeling that the sacred cannot be identified dominates the epic discourse, and the main character seems to be assailed by devouring thoughts in his search for some signs. For those around, the arguments used to signal the presence of the sacred become reasons for considering that he approaches an infantile attitude. When he talks to Biriş he confesses his desire to *evade time*. He remembers with satisfaction a moment from his childhood: “Once when I was a little boy, I was coming back home in a cart of hay. This was happening at our vineyard in Râmnicu-Sărat. I had fallen asleep, and I suddenly woke up alone in the cart of hay – and above me there were only stars. It was as if everything had stood still, as if time had stopped flowing. There were only stars”¹². But Eliade chooses to take his character out of time, which means experiencing the sacred. The acknowledgement of the presence of this moment constitutes the climax of the novel, when Ştefan Viziru decides which route the car will take in the Bois de la Bologne.

THE RELATION BETWEEN HUMAN AND SACRED IS MANIFESTED THROUGH THE CHARACTERS’ ATTITUDES

The quest for knowledge and salvation is directed towards the exit from history: “... time can erode and devour not only the memory of events that it conceived by

9 Mircea Eliade, *Noapte de Sânziene*, vol. I, ..., p. 314.

10 Mircea Eliade, *Noapte de Sânziene*, vol. II, ..., p. 263.

11 Petre Țuțea, *Mircea Eliade*, Ediție îngrijită de Tudor B. Munteanu, Eikon, Cluj-Napoca, 2007, p. 17.

12 Mircea Eliade, *Noapte de Sânziene*, vol. I, ..., p. 299.

itself, but the memory of events time gave birth to and, consequently, doomed to be wasted and forgotten because of the passing of the time itself. However, time can attack even the revelations which come beyond it, it can attack them, soak them slowly and eventually destroy them just like the memory of an ordinary event.”¹³ The inner conflict of the characters, and to a lesser extent the exterior one that appears in discussions and often seems to tackle parallel topics, will be deepened, ignoring a certain space, with the hope of abolishing time. Ştefan Viziru considers writing to be an opportunity to open a window on another world, outside common time, and his friend Biriş believes that a writer can live inside history before and after finishing a book, but he cannot be a part of everyday life while he is writing his book. Another character, Ciru Partenie, without being interested in existential issues, wants to enjoy life without giving up creative work.

In Eliade’s fictional work, some characters, through their quest for knowledge, choose the ideal of evading history by abolishing time. These characters’ spirit, the balance of the human and the eternal that makes up the universe, is connected to Chronos: “If I had been a painter, I think I would have tried to understand that: could you keep in a painting a time favourable to revelations, a certain qualitative moment different from the moments that make up the cosmic Time?”¹⁴ This idea of the relationship with Cosmos is usually taken up again in his discussions with his friend Biriş: “And as for modern societies the world means less and less Cosmos and more and more History. Do you realize what repercussions this inner lack of balance outside us can have?”¹⁵ The debates between the two focus on an exhaustive analysis of the relationship between historical time and sacred time.

TIME COORDINATES IN THE NOVEL

The decisive moments in the architecture of the novel are connected to the solstices: the Baptist’s night (June, 23rd to 24th, close to the summer solstice), Christmas night, Saint Stephan, and New Year[meaning unclear] (close to the winter solstice). The theme of the novel, the conflict between sacred (primordial) time and profane (historical) time justifies the presence of elements belonging to solstice mythology. The sacred time is presented by Eliade as cyclic, reversible, recoverable time. “The annual repetition of cosmogony ensures the return *in illo tempore* to the beginning of beginnings, when each thing gets a shape”¹⁶ and constitutes a regeneration of time.

13 Mircea Eliade, *Noapte de Sânziene*, vol. II, ..., p. 263.

14 Mircea Eliade, *Noapte de Sânziene*, vol. I, ..., p. 114.

15 Mircea Eliade, *Noapte de Sânziene*, vol. II, ..., p. 267

16 Ioan Petru Culianu, *Mircea Eliade*, Ediție revăzută și augmentată. Traducere de Florin Chirițescu și Dan Petrescu. Cu o scrisoare de la Mircea Eliade și o postfață de Sorin Antohi, Editura Nemira, București, 1995, p. 93.

Such an experience can be lived on the occasion of festivities when, theoretically, man becomes contemporary to the initial events filled with sacredness. Nature, as an obvious place for sacredness to manifest itself, is represented by primordial elements (celestial sacredness, water, earth, vegetation) around which a great number of hierophants gather. Vegetation becomes the symbol of the entire life. Regeneration at multiple paces turns the forces of vegetation into an epiphany to cosmic life.

TIME AND PARADOX IN THE NOVEL'S ACTION DEVELOPMENT

A first characteristic is the presence of a starting time, which is followed by the chronological sequence of events. The writer gives increasing attention to descriptions of the daily atmosphere. Details are mentioned so that truthfulness may be conferred upon the epic text. In most cases the characters have predictable evolutions. What ensures a specific mark is the discontinuance (breaking off) and exploration of the characters through observation of the logic of the myth (dream).

The events presented in the novel occur within a period of twelve years, and the transitions from one time to another are frequent. The beginning and the end of the novel are marked by the religious holiday, The Birth of Saint John, the Baptist (24 June). The first part of the novel ranges from June 1936 to January 1942, while the latter refers to events happening from March 1944 to June 1948. There is a discontinuity between the two parts of the novel, which can be found between chapters as well. "... these breaks on the one hand underline the expression of the duration and, on the other hand, suggest the relationship between cause and effect, by joining events remote in time."¹⁷ In the chapters there are periods of silence, on average three months in the beginning, then gradually longer in order to point to the speeding of the story. Actual time in the novel is not real but imaginary. The historical events mentioned in the novel increase the pressure of history on characters. The presence of the car in the novel has an archetypal role, realising changes in the economy of the epic text.

The myth tells about a sacred event, an event that took place during the time of "origins,"¹⁸ and the master novel values *the myth of eternal return*. The idea that regeneration is preceded by chaos is present in the novel, and Ştefan Viziru's disappearance when he passes into another world is preceded by a disastrous war.

17 Myriam Luppi, *Le temp dans Forêt Interdite* în ***, „Dosarul ” Eliade XV (1984-1985) Personalitate fascinantă. Cuvânt înainte și culegere de texte de Mircea Handoca, Curtea Veche, Bucureşti, 2013, pp. 247-248.

18 Ibidem.

THE CHARACTERS' HYPOTHESES ON EVADING TIME – STAGES IN FICTIONAL LIFE (ȘTEFAN VIZIRU)

The main character's manifestation through action is realised through the imagining of room Sambô, a hotel room that he kept after marrying Ioana, but that did not cut him off from the world as noises were heard from the next room, where Spiridon Vadastra lived. Another initiative could be practising painting, which appears to be only a refuge in an unexplainable world of colours. He escapes the daily monotony by watching shows, but he does not succeed in detaching himself from the reality of events. Another challenge is to approach the creative act of writing, which soon proves to be a utopia. Even the fusion with history turns out to be an illusion.

Another stage in his search for answers is represented by contemplation. The issues analysed by Viziru are love, understanding holiness and knowing cosmic time. During the bombing in London, Viziru, being detached from events, says: "These non-historic hours enable me to bear the rest of the time, the terror of history. Eventually, the terror reaches me, too: but, at least I have the satisfaction to have been integrated into events automatically, like a slave who moves and rests to his master's orders."¹⁹

NOVELISTIC EFFECTS

In the novel the character's traditional unity is disturbed, and one can identify sudden transitions from one perspective to another as well as changes of identity. One also notices a strategy used by the writer where the character's obsessive themes are taken over by secondary characters. Ștefan Viziru speaks passionately to his wife, Ioana, as well as to his friend Biriș and other acquaintances, conu[meaning?] Misu, Catalina and sometimes even Vadastr about the monk Anisie. Much to his surprise, he finds out that the issues tackled in his discussions with these people are also presented in an article published in *The Romanian Life* by the writer Partenie Ciru, Ioana's ex-fiancé, a man he has often been mistaken for: "You should read the novella," Biriș went on. "It's exactly your story. The only difference is that the character named Partenie is not from Sighișoara but from the Moldavia mountains. The author tells how they met one evening and talked till late at night. About two weeks ago, I read everything you had told me about in Partenie's novella: about the episode with the spine accident and the refuge in the country, about the technique of integration into the cosmic time, about everything."²⁰

In the development of the work there appear bizarre multiplications or decompositions of the self (Mrs Zissu from Bucharest, Stela Zissu from Portugal,

19 Mircea Eliade, *Noapte de Sânziene*, vol. I, ..., pp. 311-312.

20 Mircea Eliade, *Noapte de Sânziene*, vol. I, ..., pp. 120-121.

Ştefan Viziru, who seems to be an alter ego of Ciru Partenie, and Ileana, who seems to be another, spiritually more complex hypostasis of Ioana.

THE CHARACTERS' HYPOSTASES

The characters of this novel are mainly intellectuals preoccupied with knowledge and involved in bushy and entangled actions, crossing mazes that are so frequent in the writer's prose. Characteristic of this novel is the fact that: "...each of the characters tries to surpass their human condition, a slave of their own identity"²¹. Of the types of character evolution, a first category would be that of opaque characters – they make everything descend into the profane – the priest Bursuc, Biriş's aunt, Catalina, the actress, Spiridon Vadastra, Stela Zissu (Viziru's *vamp*-like mistress), Mrs Zissu, the dressmaker Dan Bobicescu, the actor, Gheorghe Vasile, the teacher, Irina etc.

A second category is guided by knowledge and marked by the quest for possible significances conferred on the events they live through. They ask themselves questions, find similarities, search for explanations, relate themselves to historic time, and try to confer on the dialogue an ideological content by approaching serious capital matters. The characters that are being initiated belong to this category. They talk about love, about death, about war and the possible destruction or salvation of the universe, about participation in the events of contemporary history, and often about evading time. In their evolution, revelation coincides with the possibility of a level rapture (confusions, wanderings, time differences turned into fulfillment at a transcendental level. We can mention some characters belonging to this category: Biriş, Ileana Sideri and Mihai Weissmann.

The quintessence of the philosophical ideas about the sacred and the profane is reflected by the characters, who know how to escape their profane existence. The passing from one level to another is done by means of vehicles considered to be psycho-pump. The characters belonging to this category are the monks Arsenie and Ştefan Viziru.

TIME LOST AND TIME REGAINED

The nostalgia for time abolishment is also analysed in the writer's philosophical treaties. The relationship between man and history is the issue that comes out. It was Eliade's intention to follow a permanent relationship between modern and archaic man: "...if the archaic man, whose tendency is to oppose history understood as a sequence of unpredictable phenomena with autonomous value by framing them within predictable paradigms with constant value (founded on events originally fulfilled by mythical beings), thus succeeds in *bearing* historical catastrophes, how

21 Cornel Ungureanu, *Mircea Eliade și literatura exilului*, Editura „Viitorul românesc”, București, 1995, p. 53.

can modern man find a reason to withstand history as history gets a more and more coercive and sometimes absurd character?"²² An echo of these concerns is illustrated by the main character's statement: "if man knew how to remember, completely, certain revelations, he would escape History"²³.

In Eliade's fantastic creations the place *selva oscura* is frequently met. Ştefan Viziru met Ileana Sanderi on the eve of Baptist's Day in such a place in Băneasa forest, and as a counterpoint their end, namely their passing into another realm, happens in a similar place, in the Bois du Boulogne, in a car, as a psycho-pump.

Because of its theme complexity and the search for the sacred in the modern desacralised world, the novel becomes a setting for the challenge of finding answers to the meaning of human existence. In order to value the time dimension in relation to theoretical order the writer confers fantastic, inestimable possibilities, obtaining unexpected artistic effects.

Analysing time and fantastic strategies in Eliade's works, Ion Lotreanu concludes: "... Eliade's best fantastic prose pages operate spectacular overturns on time matter, but, artistically, the whole process remains in the sphere of authenticity. This is a performance achieved by very few."²⁴ And Petre Țuțea says that "Mircea Eliade surpasses literary exercises, dominating the mystic, purifying moment, which his complex themes submit to".²⁵

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23 Mircea Eliade, *Noaptea de Sânziene*, vol. II, ..., p. 263.

24 Ion Lotreanu, *Introducere în opera lui Mircea Eliade*, Editura Minerva, București, 1980, p. 196.

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