

Prolegomenon to Teaching Myth and Old Literature, as Inspired by Mircea Eliade's Insights

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The Studies of Myth and Old Literature as Backed up by Cultural Perspectives

The present research has been motivated by our students' need to understand, during the courses of literature, why one should be informed about some literary matters belonging to the past and which are perceived as being 'obsolete' nowadays. The answer to this question involves a review of the diachronic method of studying literature, and also a reassessment of the domains of myth, religious literature and literature in today's secular world.

It is a truism to state that myths and stories are the ancient substratum of literature. The question is to what extent myths and religious stories can be still regarded as characteristic features of literature in general². However, when literature became a separate, secularized, domain of human activity, the question arose about the possibility/legitimacy of the fact that religion and literature should be analyzed together, and, moreover, that such matter could stand for an object of study. This is an issue analyzed by Eric Ziolkowski, who, while trying to reconcile anew the two fields of human activity makes an accurate review of this specific domain of study in his book: *Religion and Literature: History and Method*. The important fact he notices is that:

Religion and literature have in common that each is perceived as a hallmark of human life. Together with the reasoning and the tool-making, which underline the concepts of *homo sapiens* and *homo faber*, the religious and literary capacities alike are considered definitive aspects of human life – hence the term *homo religiosus* [...] popularized by the Romanian-born historian of religions and fiction writer Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) (Ziolkowski 2019: 6).

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² “The earliest forms of writing from languages known to us, such as the Hebrew Bible, the orally-derived ‘sacred’ texts of South Asia (from the Vedas, to the *Bhagavadgita*), the Eddas, ancient Greek and Norse myths and legends, and Runic inscriptions and epitaphs are almost inevitably religious” (Ziolkowski 2019 : 6).

As Mircea Eliade is a personality deeply connected to Romanian thought and literature and a globally renowned author dealing with man's religious and literary capacities, perceived as hallmarks of human existence, our paper will take advantage of some of his insights. Methodologically speaking, today's tendency, of reducing literary phenomena to mere diachronic and 'archaeological' perspectives, founded on the historicist and positivistic thought of the 19th century, needs reviewing. Old and modern literatures, as well as myth must be considered from a wider, cultural perspective and as related to man's existential, ontological issues, which have always been present as such, both in *homo religiosus* and/or the modern laic man. Such critical standpoint opens the way to apprehending myth, religion and old literature as related to man's creativity, i.e. to his permanent need to imagine, in the course of time, different ontological 'true stories', which describe reality and existence as related to human condition.

The Quest for Meaning. Myth, Religion and Secularization

While approaching the study of myth and old/religious literature, one must be aware of the fact that contemporary 'reality' has been marked by the cognitional 'breach' produced by secularization, followed by the evolutionist ideas founded on historicism, and on the capitalist system of production. An important consequence of this process of shifting from the religious to the laic outlook (about 'reality') is the fact that today the meaning of existence as such has not only fallen out of the traditional organic world view equation (by which man's existence was viewed as part of the overall existence), but man's existence itself has been deprived of its ontological roots, while being defined only in the terms of historical becoming. In other words, the students' feeling of 'obsolescence' and the 'distance' they keep with regard to myth and old, religious literature can be justified by the contemporary bare historical attributions man gives to his existence. As Mircea Eliade puts it, 'modern man considers himself constituted by History, the man of archaic societies declares himself the result of a number of mythical events'³ (Eliade 1978: 23). This is the reason why, in order to understand a certain cultural background felt as 'reality', literary studies should be accompanied not only by historical, but also by socio-cultural studies, which provide the students with fundamental aspects of the respective, successive world views, or 'true stories' which described reality the perception of which has changed in time and space⁴.

³ All translations from French, Romanian and Serbian into English – by Mariana Dan.

⁴ « Un moderne pourrait raisonner de la façon suivante: je suis tel que je suis aujourd'hui parce que un certain nombre d'événements me sont arrivés, mais ces événements n'ont été possibles que parce que l'agriculture a été découverte il y a presque 8000–9000 ans, parce que les civilisations urbaines se sont développées dans le Proche-Orient antique, parce qu'Alexandre le Grand a conquis l'Asie et Auguste a fondé l'Empire Roman, parce que Galilée et Newton ont révolutionné la conception de l'Univers, en ouvrant la voie aux découvertes scientifiques, et en préparant l'essor de la civilisation industrielle, parce que la Révolution Française a eu lieu et parce que les idées de liberté, de démocratie et de justice sociale ont bouleversé le monde occidental après les guerres napoléoniennes. [...] De même, un 'primitif' pourrait se dire : je suis tel que je suis aujourd'hui parce qu'une série d'événements ont eu lieu avant moi. Seulement, il doit immédiatement ajouter : des événements qui se sont passés dans le temps mythiques, qui, par conséquent constituent une *histoire sacrée*, parce que les personnes du drame ne sont pas des humaines, mais des *Êtres Surnaturels* » (Eliade 1978: 23–24).

The Romanian philosopher, historian of religions, culture and ideas, Ioan Petru Culianu (1950–1991), who was Eliade's assistant at The University of Chicago Divinity School, noticed that the separation of the religious and laic world views had not only important socio-cultural, but also psychological consequences within today's western world:

Since the age of the Enlightenment [...] the State began to take over, little by little, tasks which had traditionally belonged to religion. This is the phenomenon, which we call 'secularisation'. However, the State, whose social and psychological functions are different from those of religion, could not assume the obligation to offer adequate space for the individual expression. Today, the capacity of the State to provide existence with a *meaning* remains within the limits of the occidental system of production. [...] The traditional rites and myths do not succeed to perform their integrative and compensatory functions (Culianu 2005: 238–239).

However, within secularization, modern man's *quest for meaning* has not ended, and will never end, as man is by definition *homo symbolicus*, prone to create significative worlds of meaning, which has been a characteristic trait present in all cultures. While in the earlier societies the ontological meaning was preserved in and provided by the 'true stories' of the traditional man, who explained reality not by means of historical facts, but by different narrations (which remained to be regarded as 'obsolete' today), modern man tries to compensate the absence of meaning in different ways. In his study, *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions*⁵, Eliade actually deals with the different occult or non-religious modalities man resorted to since the oldest times, in order to provide an existential meaning, or compensate for its absence. In his opinion, 'compensation' is related to man's need to overcome the limited historical time, of the human condition, and find a meaningful metahistorical time – a tendency which represents an inborn quest, related to man's structure of consciousness: "The 'sacred' is an element of the structure of consciousness, not a stage in the history of consciousness. The *significative world* – as man cannot live in 'chaos' – is the result of a dialectical process, which can be defined as the manifestation of the sacred?" (Eliade 1994: 6). It appears that the notion of the 'sacred' is not necessarily related to religiousness, but to the meaning of existence as such, as viewed from a trans-historic perspective.

After secularisation, the meaningfulness has often been reduced to the satisfaction of man's desires, which is a fact that is well understood by all contemporary PR services. On the other hand, the social and cultural studies have uncovered the fact that the contemporary absence of ontological meaning enhances the possibility of man's ideological and marketing induced manipulation. Today's advertising of a whole range of 'true stories' which 'bring happiness', and which are revealed as being 'meaningful', must actually 'lure' and convince man to buy a product. Founded on man's need to find a meaning of life, the advertised 'true stories' necessarily have a certain practical aim, be it ideological or commercial. The contemporary powerful presence, not only of mass-media but also of the internet, although unveiling a virtual reality, leads to the illusionistic impression that their intention is to objectively reveal 'reality'. However, all information acquired in this

⁵ In Serbian: *Okultizam, magija i pomodne kulture*.

manner is deprived by any ontological, or direct *meaning*, which could be relevant for man's life. In fact, that kind of tentative to present information (that one has not even asked for) as 'communication' about 'reality' (in which human figures are only present behind the screen), represents a serious aspect of *mediating* the experience of 'reality', by means of creating 'hyper-reality', as a way to comprehend 'reality' and its *meaning*. The contemporary marketing propaganda, actually reiterates the principles of evolutionism, conceived according to the model of the natural sciences, and presently taken out of 'Pandora's box' of the 19th century positivism⁶.

Myths in Secular Shapes

We used the above sociological insights only in order to illustrate Mircea Eliade's interpretation of 'the sacred', which has not actually disappeared after secularisation, but continues to exist today as camouflaged in different 'profane' appearances. As for Eliade 'the sacred is an element of the structure of consciousness, and not a stage in the history of consciousness' (Eliade 1994: 6), today's sociological insights reveal the fact that he was right at least in two aspects: 1) the notion of the 'sacred', which does not necessarily imply religiosity, must be judged in relation to the *meaning* of a 'true story', in the absence of which man accepts even the simulacrum of the meaning of reality. In other words, all that gives meaning to life is 'real'. 2) The 'meaningful story' changes in time and space, while founded on the paradigm of existence as such and man's pondering upon it. Existence may endure different explanations, which take different forms in the history of culture, and which are always perceived as 'true stories' about reality. No matter if those stories are theological, marketing stories, ideological, or political, they actually are manifestations/extrapolations of the same pattern of man's structure of consciousness which, by means of 'the true stories', relates to cognition and meaning.

In this respect, myths are not obsolete matters, as students may think, as mythical patterns are to be found everywhere: in political discourses, ideologies, historical narrations etc. Moreover, religiosity, as a structure of consciousness, might embrace secular features, as well. Mircea Eliade notices that Marxism, in spite of its materialistic and atheistic foundations, builds communism on the mythical structures of Christianity. The socio-political success of Marx' 'true story' can be also explained by its capacity to provide man with an *ontological meaning*⁷.

⁶ These statements are founded on Jean Baudrillard's insights in the virtual 'simulacrum' of reality, as well as on his grasping and intellection of 'hyperreality': Bodriar 1994: Žan Bodriar, *Prozirnost zla*, Novi Sad, Svetovi. See also the socio-cultural study by: Tomić 2008: Tomić, Zorica: *New\$ Age*, Beograd, Službeni glasnik.

⁷ Let us leave aside the philosophic validity of Marxism and its historic destiny. Let us consider only the mythical structure of communism, and the eschatological sense of its popular success. Whatever one might think of Marx' scientific affinities, the fact is evident that the author of the *Communist Manifesto* takes over and develops one of the great eschatological myths of the Asian-Mediterranean world, namely: the soteriological role of the Just (the 'chosen one', 'the anointed one', the 'innocent one', the 'messenger', who is nowadays the proletariat), the sufferings of which are called to change the ontological condition of the world (Eliade 1998: 19).

Today, one can easily recognize mythical patterns, used in politics for the awakening of national or nationalist feelings. Phenomena that were detected by Eliade as the 'mythical remains' in the modern profane world, the Serbian anthropologist, Aleksandar Bošković, calls today's reality:

As politics cannot even be imagined without the use of myth (the myth of the 'chosen', the myth of the courageous nation, the myth of the genesis, the eschatological myth of the happy future, the myth of the united Europe, which is in order to mention here only some of them [...]). The language of everyday politics is so much related to and has intermingled so much with the mythical, that it might become, in the absence of this [mythical] 'supernatural', respectively 'irrational' element quite unintelligible (Bošković 2006: 13).

As related to ontological meaning and cognition, myth is called back today to compensate for all those mythical functions of the 'true stories' society needs, and which remained vacant after secularization. By understanding the presence of myth in today's secularized world, the students may acquire a better understanding of the mechanisms on which the very notion of 'reality' has always been built – be it religious, or secular.

Mythos and Logos and the Issues of Belief

It is the evolutionist propaganda about 'what reality is' and 'what is real', which has enhanced the almost pejorative interpretation of the notion of *myth*, considering it as an invented story, folk tale, illusion, obsolete belief, etc, contrasting with 'real reality', as exposed before. In such context, the impression is left that today's reality overlaps with the notion of (universal) truth. Therefore, it is quite a task for the teacher of literature and culture to define and analyze myth scientifically, as the notion of myth includes a whole range of socio-cultural interpretations, some of which we will further try to highlight here.

The origin of the word *myth* is to be traced back in Greek antiquity. In his study *Aspects du Mythe*, Mircea Eliade states that after Xenophon (5th century B.C.E.), who criticized and rejected the 'mythical expressions', used by Homer and Hesiod, the Greeks have voided the notion of myth of all religious and metaphysical values. The Greek word *mythos*, as opposed to the word *logos*, and later to *historia*, has been finally used to denote 'that which cannot really exist'. The Judeo-Christian tradition, as a historical religion (i.e. founded in historical time, due to the manifestation of God in history), has also rejected *myth*, by considering as lies all facts that were not presented in the Old and New Testaments. On the contrary, Mircea Eliade is not interested in the human mental stage, or historical moment when myth, after its degradation in time, came to be understood as 'fiction'; his research deals with traditional societies in which myth was still 'alive', i.e. it was perceived as a 'true story' in its own cultural context, which provided the respective communities with models of human behavior, while endowing existence with significance and value (Eliade 1978: 10).

In his *A History of Religious Ideas*, in 3 volumes, Mircea Eliade actually exposes the most important myths as 'the true stories' of humankind that unveil *cultural realities that the different cultures believed in before secularization*. Each

'true story' represents what we call today a metanarrative, or meta-discourse about the world, i.e. about reality. It was according to the exemplary model of the respective *myth, which was perceived as reality*, that the traditional man led his life. The fact that people '*believe*' in a certain 'story' about reality can be noticed in Eliade's French, or Romanian variants of this exhaustive study, in which the initial, full title is *A History of Religious Ideas and Beliefs*, which was abbreviated in English as *A History of Religious Ideas*⁸. According to such conception, an atheist is also 'a believer', as his belief can be equally explained by 'the true story', viewing reality as deprived of God or gods. In one of his last interviews, published in ex-Yugoslavia⁹, Mircea Eliade makes the statement that there is no essential difference between a religious fanatic, who prays in his temple and a staunch atheist who pays visits to Lenin's Mausoleum, as it is only the object of their cult/ belief that is different, while the *inner pattern/structure* of both is similar, and one must not judge things only according to appearances. Although Lenin's Mausoleum is not a religious symbol, it still performs the *function* of a religious symbol. Both the atheist and the religious fanatic actually follow the same depth psychological pattern, no matter of the time and space they live in. Considered in this manner, many things, which are only apparently opposite (sacred or profane), become, at a deeper look, identical, when one takes into account their *function*. *The very need to believe in a 'true story' about reality, whether it refers to an atheist, or to a layperson, reveals the fact that Eliade's 'homo religiosus', as a prototype, must not be necessarily linked to religion (as faith), but to belief*. Therefore, one should keep in mind the difference between faith and belief: *faith* refers to religion and theology, while *belief* may be used either in relation to religion, or in a profane context. This is the reason why studying the structure and the function of traditional myths can provide one with a better understanding of our own, contemporary world view and our own beliefs¹⁰.

The Dichotomy *Myth-Reality* and the Issues of Belief and Disbelief

At this point, one fact is evident: all definitions of myth (even if apparently displaying collisions of meaning) have a common denominator: myth is always interpreted in a more or less obvious relation to a certain reality man *believes in*. The dichotomy: *myth–reality* is a dynamic process in which myth represents not only religious stories, but also different meta-narrations defining 'reality' in certain historical times, within different cultures. For Mircea Eliade, myth is *that* reality, which was *then* perceived, experienced, described, defined, and *believed in*, as such. It was the religious and/or political institutions that usually monitored the correct interpretation of the 'true story' of the respective 'reality'. For example, it was on the grounds of his contemporary, officially defined 'reality' that Giordano Bruno was burned on the stake, as, *in those times*, the Inquisition was the institution meant

⁸ In French: *Histoire des croyances et idées religieuses*, and in Romanian: *Istoria credințelor și ideilor religioase*.

⁹ Eliade 1989. Mirča Elijade Čovek i sveto. Poslednji razgovor sa Mirčom Elijadeom, in „Mistika Istoka i Zapada”, Gornji Milanovac, Dečje novine, str. 9–14.

¹⁰ « Comprendre la structure et la fonction des mythes dans les sociétés traditionnelles en cause, c'est ne pas seulement élucider une étape dans l'histoire de la pensée humaine, c'est aussi mieux comprendre une catégorie de nos contemporaines » (Eliade 1978: 10).

to defend the borders of *that* 'reality'. From today's perspective, *that* reality defended by Inquisition may be regarded as myth, in the sense of illusion, or something that is not real, as modern man does not believe in *that* reality any longer. It is the *change of belief in a certain reality* that brings about the dynamics of the dichotomic relation *myth–reality*.

The important issue to ponder upon is not only defining *myth* as such, but also defining the meta-narration on which a certain *reality* is founded. Secularization has been, since Enlightenment, an important process and turning point in defining contemporary secular 'reality', affecting not only the relation *myth–reality*, but also the dichotomy *sacred–profane*. As Mircea Eliade puts it in mythical terminology, the primordial *deus otiosus*, i.e. God resting after making the world, might be called the first example of 'the death of God', that later Nietzsche proclaimed' (Eliade 1978: 120). The essential impact secularization had on our 'reality' could be analogically defined as a new distinction performed in defining the true story (*histoire vraie*), and the fake story (*histoire fausse*) about reality, which is a distinction already performed by traditional cultures as well, although on other grounds of belief (Eliade 1978: 18).

Contemporary *belief*, as defined some centuries after secularization, could be detected as a world view founded on two laic metanarratives, as Jean François Lyotard proposed: the metanarrative of the emancipation of humanity by progress, and the metanarrative of the unity of knowledge:

The first means, briefly, that through the advance of democracy, education, and scientific knowledge humankind is emancipating itself from the ignorance and oppression of the past; the second, informs us that this liberating knowledge is made universal through the generalized, abstract and rational ways of knowing, and of organizing what is known, characteristic of science and social science (Ellwood 2014: 3).

The fact that a *belief* might, or might not be necessarily tied to faith represents a solid background on which old and religious literature can be understood today. In our opinion, a teacher of literature and culture, must, first of all, clarify two facts: 1) the fact that both religious, and laic 'true stories' as world views are actually a matter of belief as to what a described reality looks like, i.e. what is its 'true story', and 2) the fact that 'reality', as a world view, constantly changes in time and space, while following *the change of the belief related to it*. If not solely related to religion, but also to laic narratives, belief represents an important act of world cognition, no matter if the narration is displayed in mythical, religious or abstract terminology¹¹.

The issue of the *belief* in a certain story taken as 'reality' can be also correlated with *disbelief*, as its opposite. The process of falling from a *belief* to *disbelief* can actually be regarded as the core of the process of demythisation, during which a narration that was considered to be real becomes unreal, only when analyzed *a posteriori*. It is this process which explains the constant changes of the value of the 'true stories' about reality in time and space. Our students can easily

¹¹ 'The force of beliefs is just as great and can be just as personal as that of faith. [...] In fact, without belief, our interpretation of our environment, of the world we observe, would not be coherent. [...] Whether they are right or wrong, or somewhere in between, our beliefs act as a unifying and meaning-giving agent within our mental world' (Babuts 2014: XXXVII).

understand that the ex-Yugoslav 'true story' about reality was founded on the belief in the antifascist fight, and on the idea of 'brotherhood and unity' (in Serbian: *bratstvo i jedinstvo*) of all the nations belonging to it, while the countries that resulted after the secession, presently have, each of them, different 'true stories', that emerged in the meanwhile, which are a *new reality*, emerging as the old one faded away. This leads to the idea that not only myths, but also the laic *historical narratives*, as 'true stories' are equally subject to degradation, becoming demythologised in time, i.e. becoming 'fake stories'. The same process is to be viewed in apprehending communism, the metanarrative of which was regarded as true and 'real', which is not the case any longer today. It is important for the students to understand that, although today's man considers himself as constituted by history and as being the result of historical events, all his historical metanarratives are analogous to myth in their structure, function and 'longevity'. Therefore, in approaching the dichotomic correlation *reality-myth*, one must necessarily judge things within their specific, contemporary context, not *a posteriori*, as beliefs change, together with the world view. It looks like the end of the belief in a certain reality (be it religious or secular) represents the end of that specific reality. However, students must be aware that mythical patterns have always remained in use:

[It was] with the help of myth that history was written and explained (Herodot), philosophical ideas and moral values were exposed (Teagen, Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotles, Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euhemerus), [while] it was with the help of myths that the patterns were founded for explaining language (Max Müller), psychologies and the unconscious (Freud, Rank, Jung), as well as the structures of thinking (Lévi-Strauss, A.J. Greimas) (Bošković 2006: 33).

Experiencing the Sacred and the 'Breach' of Perception

Leaving aside Eliade's metaphysical insight as such, we will emphasize, for a better understanding by the students, three facts: 1) the dynamic relation *myth-reality* must not be regarded solely in the terms of man's *quest for a meaning*, 2) nor in those of *man's need to believe in a convincing 'true story'*, as a 'compass' for his life, but also 3) in terms of *man's experience*. In Eliade's view it is the existential, authentic, concrete experience that plays an important role in defining the borders between what man feels as 'reality' or 'myth'. Mythical and religious experience is hard to be understood from a laic, rationalist perspective, because man's concrete experience, as such, cannot be reduced to abstract notions.

Eliade envisages that there are two ways of being in the world, two existential situations man assumed during history: *the sacred*, and *the profane* (Eliade 1995: 16). It is important to notice that Eliade attaches an equal importance to 'the sacred' and 'the profane', which are to be found in a similar relation as 'myth' (the *living myth*) and 'reality', i.e. the two notions must not be regarded in opposition, but as a correlation of apparently antithetic terms, in which none of them can be defined but in relation to the other (*coincidentia oppositorum*). The profane side of existence is very important for Eliade, as it is the very ground of human existence and experience and of pondering on man's condition (*condition humaine*), which is the main focus of his overall preoccupations. Eliade was not and did not have the

intention to be a philosopher of religions, he was not interested in issues related to the existence of god/gods, nor in the philosophic argumentation on this matter. Instead, he was preoccupied by *man's experience* as related to the sacred, and the modalities of the manifestation of the sacred in man's profane world¹². Personalizing the sacred through man's experience of the numinous, the sacred is felt and described in Rudolf Otto's terms as *ganz andere* (something else) when related to everyday experience, and therefore it can only be explained in correlation with the profane experience: the experience of the sacred is fundamentally different from the experience of the profane, even if it happens on the profane level of existence, being felt like an existential breach. After secularisation, such experience is camouflaged within the profane, and the modern man may, or may not perceive it. As with Eliade experience represents a form of acquiring knowledge, esthetic experience must also be viewed in its existential aspect, leading to knowledge.

Matei Călinescu¹³ noticed that when defining 'the sacred' in Eliade's conception, one must have in mind the opposition between *that which cannot be known (l'inconnaissable)* and *that which cannot be recognised (le non-reconnaissable)*. The first term is agnostic, while the second looks like Plato's doctrine of *anamnesis*, according to which real knowledge is possible for the one that can recognize it by 'remembering':

The idea that the 'Transcendent' became 'unrecognisable' [today] - which should be understood as a philosophic metaphor, which is not less legitimate than Freud's psychological metaphor related to the 'censorship' of conscience - leads to the theory of interpretations or hermeneutics which works on the analogies of meaning which hide, vary and branch in different shapes (Calinesco 1985: 306–307).

In other words, after secularization and demythisation, hermeneutics represents a necessary instrument for both religious and literary interpretation, as it is able to reconstruct a certain *meaning* which was present before secularization. Within history (which deals with the linear and irreversible time after secularization), the *meaning*, to be found in a symbol, or myth (pertaining to *illo tempore*, i.e. to times that could be cyclically re-actualized) has become hardly noticeable. In fact, myths and symbols have become *unrecognisable* as such in a world that has put aside not only religious experience, but also the polysemic values of man's existence in time and space. The hermeneutic methods of approach are needed today in order to fill up the 'gaps of perception' of the modern, laic man.

Myth, Literature, Science and Religion as Vehicles for Knowledge

For Eliade, who was interested in man's experience in general, and in the experience of the sacred in particular 'myth, like poetry constituted a form of truth, a vehicle supplementary to reason, logic, or science, by which to comprehend experience, representing an all-embracing vision of the world' (Ziolowski 2019: 48).

¹² In this respect, Eliade was influenced by Rudolf Otto's booklet, *Das Heilige* (Eliade 1995: 11), translated into English as *The Idea Of The Holy*.

¹³ Matei Călinescu (1934–2009) was an important literary critic of Romanian origin, later professor of comparative literature at Indiana University.

In this respect, Eliade followed the early view of Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) who regarded myth as 'poetic metaphysics' (in his *New Science*), enabling an understanding of myth to develop that allowed for a whole new perspective on the relationship of myth and literature (*ibidem*: 47). Opposing to Cartesian opinions and rationalism, which already sprouted at the beginning of the 18th century, Vico advocates for man's imagination and originality (understood in etymological sense, as originary). Moreover, metaphor and myth were for him, like for Mircea Eliade in the 20th century, means or vehicles of knowledge, in spite of the rationalist aesthetics for which poetical expression represented only a *jeu d'esprit*, a kind of decorated discourse. Therefore, 'Vico is probably the first modern thinker who envisaged the existential approach to both myth and poetry. His anthropology encompasses an esthetic approach founded on the value system which represents a way of being' (Calinesco, 1985: 302). In his turn, while advocating for myth, narration and interpretation, Eliade rejects the process of the explanation, which is, as an attribute of the exact sciences, reductionist and irrelevant for comprehending man's condition. He fiercely opposed to 'the myth of science', which has put a monopoly on all the fields of man's knowledge today, and which is responsible, especially after secularization, for the fact that a number of different 'instruments', as vehicles of knowledge are not recognizable for man any longer.

In Eliade's opinion, reality has got a whole lot of aspects and ways, which should not be reduced to the 'sectarian intellectual dogmas', the roots of which are to be found in the positivist and reductionist outlooks of the 19th century, as founded on logical speculations and on the obsessive ideas of progress, which the humanistic sciences have directly borrowed from the exact sciences. The consequence of this new/modern myth of science has been not only man's being deprived of his spirit¹⁴, but also neglecting other important traits and needs of man's existence, such as sleeping and dreaming, day dreaming, loving, listening to music, creating stories and retelling, playing, reading etc, which are activities that cannot be reduced to the rational aspect of life, nor disregarded. In this respect, the very rationalistic axioma *cogito ergo sum* looks like 'sectarian' ideology, as man first exists and experiences existence in its fullness, while rational thinking is only one aspect of man's life. 'In the same manner a new axiom reveals a structure of the real, unknown since then – in other words it *finds* a new world –, fantastic literature reveals or rather *creates* parallel universes. This is not an act of evasion, as some historical philosophers think, because *creation*, on all levels and in all its interpretations, represents the specific trait of man's condition' (Eliade 2007: 172, 173). Both science and literature equally discover new universes of meaning¹⁵.

¹⁴ 'Man's spirit' is sometimes 'matter', in other times it is 'sensation' or 'energy', 'vital instinct', or an 'epiphenomenon', etc., it is all that, but not 'spirit' (Eliade 1991: 28).

¹⁵ [Each new axiom is] a free mind game, an invention outside the logical processes, it is a central act of imagination in science, and it looks, in all respects, like any similar act in literature. This means that literature is, or may be, in its own way, an instrument [a vehicle] of knowledge. It is in the same way in which the new axiom reveals the previously unknown structure of the real (i.e. *discovers* a new world), that any creation of the literary imagination reveals a new universe of meanings and values. It is evident, those new meanings and values confirm one or more of the infinite possibilities which open for man's *being* in the world, i.e. for his *existing*. Literature represents as well an instrument [a vehicle] of

Dealing with the issue of the human condition and man's existential experience, literature creates its own universe of meanings and values, which represents a new, possible way of being. This is exactly what myths also do, as well as old religious literature. Therefore, one can notice the resemblance between literary works and their mythical and religious predecessors. Myths are related to creation, they explain how something came into being: a world or a species, man and his social institutions, etc. 'In this sense, we can speak about certain continuity between myth and literary fiction, as they both talk about the creation (or 'discovery') of a new universe' (Eliade 2006: 267–268). However, even if literary works may reveal unexpected or forgotten meanings, they do not have the exemplary value myths had in traditional societies. On the other hand, a parallel can be also drawn between aesthetic and religious universes:

In both cases we deal with *individual experiences* (the aesthetic experience of the poet and of his reader, on the one hand, and the religious experience, on the other) and with *transpersonal realities* (a work of art in a museum, a poem, a symphony, a Divine Figure, a ritual, a myth, etc.). The works of art, as well as 'the religious data', have their own, particular way of being: *they exist in their own field of reference*, in their particular universe. The fact that this universe is not the physical universe of the immediate experience does not imply its non-reality (Eliade 1994: 20).

The awareness of the fields of reference as such is of great importance in today's *inter-* and *transdisciplinary* studies, which have renounced at mostly using the diachronic methods of approach, and turned to the discovery of a whole network of relations, as relevant for describing a certain phenomenon, viewed as a complex reality. Eliade was one of the pioneers of this kind of approach, which does not imply his disregarding of the respective historical context; on the contrary, it means enriching the context, by adopting a perspective of association with data acquired from other fields of human activity and cultures. The comparison of the metahistorical meaning man attributed to his existence in various cultures (realities) could thus acquire transhistorical insights and the discovery of patterns of human thought and behavior. Myth, religion and literature belong to the same universe, which is fundamentally existential, regardless of its religious or profane appearance.

Teaching Myth and Literature, as Inspired by Mircea Eliade's Insights Conclusions

Eliade's critical approach to myth, religion and literature, has got important practical implementations in the process of teaching, as it can open the student's awareness in more directions. 1) It is a fact that literary studies, should be accompanied by cultural studies, without being reduced to diachronic, evolutionist perspectives, founded on the opposition of 'obsolete' and 'modern' productions. 2) If *homo religiosus* is regarded as a prototype (as *homo sapiens* and *homo faber* are), this equally implies regarding man as *homo semnificans*, i.e. as a being able to create universes of meaning, which not only exist in parallel with 'bare life', but also

knowledge, as literary imagination reveals some unknown dimensions or aspects of the human condition (Eliade 2006: 264).

characterize the complex structures known as cultures, which are ‘social constructs’, or ‘imagined realities’ (Harari 2015: 31, cf. Ziolkowski 2019: 7), which ‘exist in a different way from physical phenomena, such as radioactivity, but their impact on the world may be enormous’ (Harari 2015: 117, cf. Ziolkowski 2019: 7). 3) Myth, religion, literature, but also science are various aspects of man’s permanent need to create culture, and the fact that the created universes of signification are not the physical universe of the immediate experience does not imply their non-reality, but represents man’s specific way of being, i.e. his need to search for metahistorical meanings, which is the foundation of all cultures. 4) The ‘reality’ of those universes should be regarded not only in the historical context of a certain world view, but also from the perspective of the recurrence of the transhistorical mythical patterns, which provide with deeper meaning man’s temporary, historical existence. 5) Studying myth and religious literature contributes to both transcultural and transdisciplinary awareness, as the presence of myths in all human cultures and in different disciplines (literature, history, art, political anthropology, psychology, social sciences, etc.) enhances a wider world view, which leaves behind the mere evolutionist, reductionist perspective. 6) The critical study of myth and religious literature opens the possibility of understanding cultural values as being fundamentally existential, as all the ‘true stories’ about reality, be they religious or laic, maintain the same structure and function, and disclose man’s need to talk about his condition in the world, which is a need that has never ceased.

Eliade’s existentialist approach to human condition, as extended through all human (present and past) cultures and their ‘true stories’ about *being* has laid the foundations of today’s studies of imagology, and identity, dealing with ‘seeing oneself in the other’. Transculturalism, as a characteristic background of all Eliade’s studies, should be adopted as a method of teaching national literature and culture as well, in the global world of today.

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Abstract

As Mircea Eliade is a personality deeply connected to Romanian thought and literature and a globally renowned author dealing with man's religious and literary capacities, perceived as hallmarks of human existence, our paper took advantage of some of his insights, which have been useful as implemented in the process of teaching literature and culture. Methodologically speaking, today's tendency, of reducing literary phenomena to mere diachronic and 'archeological' perspectives, founded on the historicist and positivistic thought of the 19th century, needs reviewing. Old and modern literatures, as well as myth must be considered from a wider, transcultural perspective and as related to man's existential, ontological issues, which have always been present as such, both in *homo religiosus* and/or the modern laic man. Such critical standpoint opens the way for the students to apprehend myth, religion and (old) literature as related to man's creativity, i.e. to his permanent need to imagine, in the course of time, different ontological 'true stories', which describe reality and existence as related to human condition.

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