

THE OTHERNESS OF THE SEXED, RACED, AND CLASSED BODY IN MIRCEA ELIADE

Maria-Ana TUPAN

“1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia
email: maria.tupan@uab.ro

Abstract: *For a long time modernists were blamed for their aloofness from the world of common people and from lived history, willingly shutting themselves up in ‘Axel’s Castle’ - the title of Edmund Wilson’s negative assessment of high modernism at the end of the decade which had seen its bloom (1931).*

Recent revaluations, however, such as Christopher Butler’s ‘Early Modernism’, 1994, have focused on an underlying ideological agenda which shows modernist artists’ involvement in current issues, such as Empire politics, gender conflicts, race prejudices, apprehensions about revolutionary threats to the existing class hierarchy and property ownership or the consequences of the Great War. A re-reading of Mircea Eliade’s works has reclassified his work as that of a cultural anthropologist rather than a dogmatic historian of religion. Even his inroads into the fantastic are accompanied by echoes of the tensions working up people in an age of tremendous changes in politics and social relationships. Our paper is probing into the ideological unconscious of three of his fantasy writings: ‘Miss Christina’ and the classed body, ‘At the Gypsies’ raced bodies, and Les trois graces, or the woman body cast in flesh and in word. The encounter of characters belonging to different categories of social class and status plunges into trauma and spectrality. The gypsy skin carries signs of witchcraft, irrationality, libidinal energy, and the intersection with civilization causes exit from history. The eternal femininity is associated with sin, seduction, doom, and a male’s need of escape from its calling is the otherness of signs, of meaning and semiotic ubiquitousness, which ranks the same and follows the same logic as the Biblical trinity.

Keywords: Mircea Eliade; modernist fantasy; identity studies; poetics of otherness; critique of representation.

Characteristic of the early 21st century is the proliferation of concepts and schools of theory on poetics and aesthetics. In the earlier half of the last century there was a modernist cult of form, of art for its own sake— even if an increasing number of revisions enroll canonical figures, such as Conrad, Forster, Joyce and Woolf, let alone Waugh, Huxley, Auden and Orwell, among the subtlest anthropologists and social critics of late modernity. The post-war era knew a shift from aestheticist to semiotic poetics, which after the turn of the century exploded into an uncontrollable map of offshoots. We speak now of a poetics of space, a poetics of the novel, of the plot, of being, of the press, or even of “unnatural narrative” ... Relational poetics (which emphasizes collective modes of art production and distribution, and is socially oriented) has already earned itself a well-established niche on the map of contemporary critical theory, probably due to its frequent appeals to social or cultural anthropology.

No wonder if, in this motley landscape, we come upon what Jonathan Hart calls “poetics of otherness” (Hart 2015: web). Its definition is etymologically derived from the Sanskrit – *tara*, an Indo-European suffix expressing the differences between two things in terms of location. The author will study the making of words, language, in light of a poetics of space (of here and now) and a poetics of time, of now and then, otherness referring to the “hiddenness of place and the unknown of the future”.

The conclusion is that there is a part of language woven into text which lies outside the area perceived as other, that ordering, therefore, being a question of deictics.

The meaning of otherness adopted here is closer to Lacan’s theory thereof in the Seminar XIV, “Logic of the Phantasm” (also translated as “The Logic of Fantasy”). Lacan considers that “the Other [...] is eliminated “qua closed and unified field”:

What is this Other, the big one, there, with a capital O? What is its substance? Huh?

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I allowed myself to say - for in truth, even though in truth, you must believe that I allow myself to say it less and less, because one no longer hears, anyway, I no longer hear: it no longer comes to my ears - I allowed myself to say, for a time, that I camouflaged under this locus of the Other, what is called agreeably and, after all, why not, the spirit. The trouble is that it is false.

The Other, when all is said and done, and if you have not already guessed it, the Other here, as it is written, is the body! (Lacan 1966-67: 129).

The other is not the spirit reified in language, but the body inscribed by the intersubjective order of discourse, the Law of the Father, a normative language whose letter is written in the unconscious. It is only the pre-linguistic human being that cherishes illusions of autonomy while contemplating their body in the mirror. After joining the discourse community, one's own body and any other body is written over by anthropological narratives, ideological stereotypes, cultural constructs, etc. This seems to have been the philosophy behind Mircea Eliade's representations of the body in three of his stories written according to generic scripts of fantasy or even science-fiction.

Unlike the romantics' utopia of a Universal Spirit informing individual souls like an all-inclusive monad, although with them the prioritization of the subject over the other was rather the case, modernists exchange, under the influence of physiological psychology, Hegelian universality with Jamesian multiplied versions of the self as perceived by social others with whom they interact. Or, as Nicolas Bourriaud comments on Gombrowitz's *Ferdydurke*,

“This form comes about in the borderline area where the individual struggles with the Other, so as to subject him to what he deems to be his 'being'. So, for Gombrowicz, our 'form' is merely a relational property, linking us with those who reify us by the way they see us, to borrow a Sartrean terminology. When the individual thinks he is casting an objective eye upon himself, he is, in the final analysis, contemplating nothing other than the result of perpetual

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transactions with the subjectivity of others” (Bourriaud, 2002).

For Machado, for instance, the Narcissus figure of the self contemplating itself is replaced with a reified version of the self as a site of the encounter of the self and the other, of the one objectified in a body which is to be read, and the other reading that body and being read in its turn:

Antonio Machado

Dedicated to Jose Ortega y Gasset

I

The eye you see is not
an eye because you see it;
it is an eye because it sees you.

II

To talk with someone,
ask a question first,
then — listen.

III

Narcissism/is an ugly fault,/ and now it's a boring fault too//
But look in your mirror for the other one,/ the other one who
walks by your side.//

V

Between living and dreaming
there is a third thing.
Guess it.

VI

This Narcissus of ours
can't see his face in the mirror
because he has become the mirror

The third one who walks by your side is also mentioned in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, identified with Jesus on the way to Emmaus. Christ's body in this passage is post-apocalyptic, purified, but semiotic: the signs of crucifixion on his body are the only hints he offers to his disciples' recognition. Between the ideal realm of dream, and the factual reality, there is this third ontological level: the symbolical.

The body displayed for reading may thus be removed from actuality, its existence being relegated to a realm of fantasy as

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the trysting place of life and death, of sanity and madness, of myth and reality.

In the Machado poem, the repellent Narcissistic body, delighting in its own image, is displaced by the locus of inscription whose meaning is shared by the self objectified in it and the other contemplant it. This troping coincides with the birth of Bloom as narrator in Joyce's *Ulysses* (the Ithaca episode). Narcissus is no longer his own image in the mirror, but an artefact, a statue in his room. Bloom the canvasser is hypostasied in his narrative of himself, wherein he is not cast in the body of wise Ulysses, but of merchant Sindbad, excelling in exchanging goods and senseless signifiers (Sinbad the Sailor and Tinbad the Tailor and Jinbad the Jailer and Whinbad the Whaler and Ninbad the Nailer and Finbad the Failer and Binbad the Bailer and Pinbad the Pailer and Minbad the Mailer and Hinbad the Hailer and Rinbad the Railer and Dinbad the Kailer and Vinbad the Quailer and Linbad the Yailer and Xinbad the Phthailer). The charade is resolved in a signifier which replicates the rhyme but also fills up with sense in that analytical language (predication meaning the same as that of which it is predicated) which has also characterised the previous catechism of Bloom and his teacher, Stephen, the artist: "Going to dark bed there was a square round Sinbad the Sailor roc's auk's egg in the night of the bed of all the auks of the rocs of Darkinbad the Brightdayler".

This semiotic third, a Hermeneutic mediator, may have had several epistemological roots: Peirce's Interpretant, William James's social self and symbolic interactionism, or the Vienna Circle of analytical philosophy – Rudolf Carnap, Moritz Schlick, Hans Hahn, a. o.

As well as functionalism, the language philosophy of pragmatism and semiotics differed from the specifically modernist, structuralist binaries and cult of the autonomous, self-sufficient spacious form.

By contrast, the fantastic is based upon conventions of openness, vagueness, metamorphoses, split personalities, unbounded bodies that transgress not only their limits but the frontier between life and death, races, ontological levels, etc.

A typology of otherness similar to that identified by John Jervis in the western tradition (*Transgressing the Modern: Explorations in the Western Experience of Otherness*, 1999) can also be used as interpretive frame of Mircea Eliade's inroads into the world of fantasy, gothic and the supernatural. John Jervis equates otherness first of all with carnival pleasure and the spectre of misrule threatening social order. Next in line come modernity's others –uncivilized nations, women, nature – in the name of the European civilization, patriarchic values and cult of technological progress (conquest of the physical world). Thirdly, the othering experience is triggered by non-European races, blacks and hybrids.

Eliade's exercise in fantasy entitled *Three Graces* is an ingenious intertext whose allusions are not random but generative of a semantic field centred on an incremental motif: the unity and diversity of being, the vacillation between monad and sprawl, coherence and chaotic proliferation.

The unity vector is confined to the realm of culture. Bookish allusions are replications of an original, core meaning. Uncontrolled proliferation emerges in the realm of nature. The conflict between the two is never resolved. The natural body will always resist rationalization, patterning. Eliade's title, *The Three Graces*, applies both to myths and to women in the world. The former are stable in their meaning and representation: the Three Graces (Euphrosyne, Aglaea and Thalia) the Fatal Sisters (Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos) sending further reverberations into the resonance chamber of Paul Valery's *La Jeune Parque*. The cultural object will always carry with it some justification, it will not yield to randomness, and the attempt to extrapolate this etiology to the realm of nature is absurd.

The four male protagonists – scientists who had once yielded to the lure of writing poetry – are trying without success to remember an event of their student years in Switzerland: their encounter with three young women whom they had baptised the three graces. Their falty memory causes contradictions, among which a remark about the story not being possibly real before the publication of *Two or Three Graces* by Aldous Huxley. Their reconstruction of those scenes is unconsciously driven by the desire to make it fit into the Huxley precedent. In

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Huxley's story, the four male characters enter upon various relationships with a woman, Grace, who does not seem to have a stable character of her own. She changes radically as she passes from one lover to another, and, as in the absence of a male's influence she lacks any distinctive features, it is impossible for her companions to say whether there is a third Grace after all.

Eliade uses the Huxley plot as an allegory of life's uncertainties and lack of substance. His male characters, Professor Filip Zalomir, a specialist in botanical physiology, engineer Hagi Pavel and two doctors, Aurelian Tătaru and Nicoleanu, are the erudite members of a circle of narrators, the narrative scene being often dramatized in modernist novels (Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Edith Wharton's *The Eyes*) as a display of male love of the intellect in counterdistinction to women's domestic or sexual concerns. Tătaru is a Faustian figure, a doctor doubled by a researcher obsessing with the possibility of healing cancer. He believes that the chaotic proliferation of tumours is due to a loss of the cells' teleological drives. The opposite case is the replication of an archetype, such as Goethe's *Urpflanze*. His experiments in forcing cells back into their teleological evolution are analogous to the alchemist's search for the elixir of life. He manages, not only to heal tumours, but even to reverse the process of aging. It happens, however, that the dogmatic and atheistic political regime in Romania at that time, acting through the secret police, is alarmed at the Professor's mythological talk about the eternal youth of Adam and Eve before the fall. The experiments come to an end, and Tataru's patients' condition is arrested middle way between youth and old age. For half a year they look old, whereas the other half restores them to their youthful look and desires. The three patients are nature which is but an imperfect copy of the prototype. Their names sound similar to those of the mythological Graces, but with a difference: Aglae, Frusinel, and Italia instead of Aglae, Euphrosyne, and Thalia. In this way they too may be said to be "two or three Graces..." Euphrosyne is modelled on Huxley's heroine:

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“Frusinel, that is, Euphrosyne, **used two or even three names**. She had been married twice, divorced the first time, but the second man kept her, and Comrade Euphrosyne changed her ID as she saw fit.” (our emphasis)

One more triad paralleling the Three Graces is what Shakespeare calls “Hecate’s triple team:” Cynthia (the moon), Diana (on earth) and Hecate (in the underworld). They are believed to enter the world of mortals as in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, that is, at the summer solstice. One of the three patients, Euphrosyne, imagines herself as one of the Whitsun Rain Makers. As she feels the vigour of youth breathing life into her aged body at Pentecost, she advances “naked, like a mad dandelion, with dishevelled hair, with her dress clutched in her hand” scaring Dr Tataru who takes a step back falling to his death down a sloping path. As well as Frankenstein, he is killed by his own unwise creation.

Stuck at the chalet by the ensuing inquiry, Zalomit takes a walk nearby coming upon a copper tablet which reads: *Les trois graces*. He feels relieved: “Obviously, I understand now!” he whispered happily. “They are three and yet one; same body, although they are separate. A perfect, serene beauty; no other name would have suited them ...”

The “one and the same body”, though, is not of flesh and blood but a semiotic body, an inscription. It is the phrase designating them - *Les trois graces* – that resolves multiplicity of meaning into unity of the signifier.

The second text we are having in view is a short novel, *Miss Christina*. The plot is based upon a historical event, the peasants’ uprising of 1907, when the landlady going by this name is killed, apparently not by the rebellious mob, but by a steward jealous of her lecherous ways. Miss Christina has been haunting her family for some time when a painter and an archeologist are invited to visit their house. Possessed by the sexually aroused ghost, Simina, a nymphet, is herself playing a game of seduction on the painter.

Eliade is once more faithful to the ambiguity of the natural/supernatural superposition in a fantastic plot. Haunting, is

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suggested, may very well be a local superstition, lying in the abyss of the human psyche in the same way in which archeological findings of prehistory had been collected by historian Vasile Pârvan.

The plot is cast on a scale similar to a story in the author's *Memoirs* (1980); as a teenager he had competed for a literary award writing a piece of fantasy whose holistic ambitions send our minds thinking about Borges' *Aleph*:

Soon after that I started a fantastic novel, planned on cyclopean dimensions: *Memoirs of a lead soldier*. [...] It was a novel of reckless proportions, encompassing not only universal history, but the whole history of the cosmos, from the beginnings of our galaxy to the present. The earth, the origin of life and the appearance of man. [...] For fragments of the lead of which it was made had witnessed the most important events in human history: the conquest of India by the Aryans, the destruction of Nineveh, the death of Cleopatra, the crucifixion of Jesus, the devastation of Rome by Alaric, the flight of Muhammad to Medina, the first two crusades and so on, to this day, when I also introduced recent events; for example, the battle of Marasesti. But before history, lead had existed - in the form of gas - in various cosmic conflagrations that led to the composition of the solar system and of the Earth. Her remembered the millions of years without life, he remembered the appearance of the first living things, the battles between the monsters of the Tertiary era and so on, until the appearance of man and the birth of the first civilizations ...

It is not the painter's fear of Cristina that prevails as the worst of all in his unusual experience of the supernatural. He feels he is being looked at by an absolute other, "unseen and unknown." As he recovers the strength of his will, the terror of the other subsides, which means that the other is buried in his unconscious.

The novel ends with a repeat situation - a threat of the peasants' rebellion as in times of old - and an apocalyptic fire. The painter feels he is being carried on some strangers's arms through the rooms of that boyar's mansion and his visions are

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scenes of the life that had been lived there a long time before the Parliamentary reform had dispossessed the big landowners of their lands and before they themselves had decayed in dignity and morality:

Around him, enchanted rooms kept changing. He passed through a large ballroom with gilded polycandres and crystal arrows, [...] he met elegant pairs looking as if they had just stopped dancing, who looked at him confused, surprised. Gentlemen in black clothes, women with silk fans ... Then a strange room with lots of green tables and strangers playing cards without talking. Everyone looked at him in amazement, watching how he was being carried in the arms of some unseen men. Now they were going up the steps to a living room with old wooden furniture. [...] "The other house has caught fire now!" he heard a voice saying.

[...] He closed his eyes.

- How the boyars have all perished! ...

A whole social class had departed to another world: the painter and the boyars were strangers to one another. The apocalyptic fire reveals to the protagonist the reality that had vanished into empty images with a legend sounding like an epitaph.

The third text under consideration is the story *At the Gypsies'* which was written in Paris in 1959.

The nature/ culture conflict is still in place. The script of the protagonist exiting the historical world and turning back much later to an unfamiliar environment where nobody recognizes him is known from works as different as *Peter Rugg, the Missing Man*, by William Austin, *Rip Van Winkle*, by Washington Irving, *A Pebble in the Sky*, by Isaac Asimov, or *La planète des singes* (1963) by Pierre Boulle. All of them are allegories of some wrong political choice: they remain royalists in a country which had become a republic, free from the king's rule, they expose humanity to extinction through dangerous technological experiments, or allow themselves to sink to a subhuman condition.

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Borrowing the main narrative thread, Eliade plays on the wrong choice as well, which this time is of an ethical nature.

A young piano teacher, Gavrilescu, leaves his sheet music behind at his pupil's home. The incident already suggests departure from art, from harmony and creation. He gets off the tram planning to return and recover his scores. On his way, he stumbles into a place he had already heard about as being some brothel run by gypsies. He goes inside thinking he might escape the hot air outside. He is invited to stay and choose a mistress. He chooses three women who ask him to guess their ethnicity. Gavrilescu applies his list of stereotypes, and is surprised to be told that he had guessed wrong. Nature is unpredictable:

Of course he guessed them the moment he saw them. The one that stepped towards him, completely naked and very dark, with dark hair and dark eyes, was undoubtedly the gypsy. The second, naked as well, except for a pale green voile, had an unnaturally white body and shining like ivory and in her feet she was wearing golden shoes. This could only have been the Greek woman. The third was the Jewish woman. She had a long skirt of dark red tafeta which squeezed her body in the middle, leaving her chest and her shoulders naked. And the thick hair, bright red, was bound and braided in a complex braid at the top of her head.

Rejected by the historical world, Gavrilescu returns to the brothel where he has the chance to choose the decent woman he had once loved and deserted. If previous scenes had vaguely hinted at his shallow character and moral fallacy (he loses his garments which leave naked a decayed body much older than his actual age, or he gets wrapped up in curtains which look like shrouds), this time he is taken by Gerhard – his former love – in a coach whose driver is a messenger of death.

If the natural body is permanently breaking loose from patterns and attempted order and signification, a dead body in a grave will be marked by a sign, *sema*, as in ancient Greece. Gavrilescu's death is an allegory of his meaningless life since the moment he had drifted away from the righteous course. For the

third time otherness takes the form of a negatively assessed body, whether gendered, classed or raced.

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**Professor Dr. Habil. Maria-Ana TUPAN** is currently appointed to the Doctoral School of Alba Iulia University, Romania ([m\\_tupan@yahoo.com](mailto:m_tupan@yahoo.com)). From 1991 to 2014, Tupan taught courses in the history of British literature and in applied literary theory at Bucharest University. Senior Fulbright

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Grantee in 1994-5. Member of *The Romanian Writers' Union*, and of *Die Gesellschaft für Fantastik Forschung*. Author of 15 books, book chapters and articles published in Romania, U.K., Germany, India, Australia and U.S.A.. Papers read at conferences in Athens, University Park (Penn State University), Madrid, Manchester, Salzburg, Vienna, Dresden, Graz, Rome, Cologne. Member on the Editorial Board of Cambridge Scholars Publishing, *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* (E-ISSN 0975-2935), *Journal of Humanistic and Social Studies* (ISSN 2067-6557), Associate Editor of *The International Journal of Learning in Higher Education* - Volume 23. Awards from the Romanian Writers' Union and literary reviews. Publications in the fields of literary history and theory, comparative literature, genre theory, discourse analysis, and cultural studies. Relevant titles include: *The Shakespearean Search for Archetypes*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020, *The Key to Change. Interdisciplinary Essays in Cultural History* (Saarbrücken: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, 2017), *The Kantian Legacy of Late Modernity* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), *Realismul magic* (Bucuresti: Editura Academiei Române, 2013), *Relativism/ Relativity: The History of a Modern Concept*. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), *Modernismul si psihologia. Încercare de epistemologie literara. Modernism and Psychology. An Inquiry into the Epistemology of Literary Modernism* (Bucuresti: Editura Academiei Române, 2009); *Genre and Postmodernism* (Bucuresti: Editura Universitatii din Bucuresti, 2008).