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The Multivalence of the Labyrinth: Closures and Openings of Space, Time, and Self-Awareness

Abstract: Originally, an image in which the mythological and historical levels intersect (a place of perdition, a construction with deceptive roads that hide the exit), constituted into a universal symbol through hermeneutic becoming, the labyrinth can express destiny and history (beyond individual limit-situations). Mircea Eliade's interpretations add new philosophical connotations to this symbol: it can signify a consciousness closed in its own subjectivity, a wandering through personal memory, ignorance or a life devoid of fundamental landmarks, but also imprisonment in a concentration camp and in a time of historical terror. In this article, I aim to show that, according to Eliade, finding one's way out of the labyrinth amounts to discovering the meaning of individual experiences and events, of (spiritual) revelations, to making the transition from ignorance to knowledge, but also to escaping from history – the ultimate form of conditioning.

Keywords: labyrinth, initiation, symbol, history, deliverance.

Some introductory reference points

Originally, the labyrinth is the place where a drama of non-habitation is played out if we consider that authentic habitation (in variation on the well-known Heideggerian theme of habitation in a poetic way, starting from Hölderlin's verse) means finding one's place where the "song of existence" can be heard. Man is the one who brings the place to life, "sanctifying" it, in fortunate cases, with his habitation, because man inhabits, unlike other living beings, who only take shelter.

We cannot think of habitation without thinking of the place or places where we have felt "home." But the more sophisticated the human mind and activity become — the more we indulge in the situation of wandering beings in both the real and the virtual, the more centers this "home" has.

To answer the question "Who actually gives us a measure with which we can measure the essence of habitation and construction in its full extent?" (Heidegger 1983, 147), the philosopher stated in the text of a conference of August 5, 1951, entitled "Construction, Habitation,

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Thinking” that we arrive at habitation only through construction, from which we can deduce the human vocation to construct different physical and metaphysical spaces, private territories dedicated to daily life, particular areas of memory and imagination, whose perception is as diverse as the individuals in them, and all of this implies the relativity of habitation in space and at the same time the liberation of the notion from the domestic source to which it refers. Whether in a practical order or in the order of the spirit, construction is carried out on the basis of a project conceived by the architect or artist, or by the one who can command it by virtue of the power (political or financial) he holds.

Paradoxically, the labyrinth gives a measure of the lack of habitation, but at the same time a measure of the nostalgia of habitation. For the labyrinth is a construction whose original design being the expression of a concentration thought, cannot enter the sphere of the notion of habitation, in the spirit of Heideggerian thought which I mentioned. The one locked in the labyrinth wants to escape from this maximum discomfort, in order to find the place where he can live as a free being.

If we ask ourselves “What do people actually do with their habitation, what do they do in their homes?”, the natural answer is that they live there, meaning they spend a large part of their time, they arrange their homes to their taste and live their lives, and those who, whether for too much good or too much bad, come to think about the that living is the same as finding your identity in a place whose meanings transcend its materiality, experience living as existence in time, where the “song of existence” can be listened to and understood in all its depth. In this sense, it can be said that the memory of the attic where Mircea Eliade lived in his adolescence gives a measure of habitation:

When you are 15 years old and discover modern poetry and a lot of other things, you prefer to have a room of your own, which you can arrange or transform (...) It was, therefore, a place that was truly mine. I lived in it, there I had my bed of a certain color. I had engravings that I cut out and placed on the walls. And, above all, there I had my books. More than a workroom, it was a place to live. (Eliade 1990, 19-20)

Mircea Eliade’s conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet, from 1970, in which thoughts, projects and constructions that can be rooted in an authentic dwelling are evoked, reinforce the hypothesis of the uninhabitability that the labyrinth establishes: as an image in which the mythological and historical levels intersect, constituted into a symbol through hermeneutic becoming, this is a prison, moreover, a place of perdition, a building “with deceptive paths” built by the the architect Daedalus at the behest of King Minos of Crete, to imprison the Minotaur, symbol of the murderous monster, fruit of Queen Pasiphae’s

passion for the white bull sent by Poseidon as a sign of the favors enjoyed by Minos and the divine basis of his power in the city. Emerging victorious from a war with Athens, the king of Crete imposed the condition of peace that Athens would send seven young men and seven young women every 9 years to be fed to the Minotaur. Eighteen years after the imposition of the tribute, Theseus, leaving his companions destined to be torn apart by the Minotaur with him at the entrance, entered the silent building, killed the beast, then, guided by the woolen thread given by Ariadne, exited the Labyrinth. (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1995, 305).

According to legend, Daedalus, the author of the uncovered stone labyrinth construction, has a son, Icarus, with whom he is imprisoned by Minos in the labyrinth, because he had conspired with Theseus to kill the creature that demanded innocent sacrifices. Daedalus makes two pairs of wings out of wax, for himself and his son, so that they can escape. Icarus, fascinated by the beauty of flight and heights, does not listen to his father's advice not to fly too close to the sun, and the god Helios melts his wings with his heat. (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1995, 138.) We can consider that Icarus's fall into the Aegean Sea is a variant of hubris, but also an image of the desire for absolute freedom and overcoming the limits to which the symbol of the labyrinth refers.

Starting from this well-known legend of the labyrinth as "a crossroads of roads, some of which are dead ends, through which you must discover the path that leads to the center" (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1995, 191) the cult of the labyrinth is also explored on a religious level, as Gustav René Hocke shows. In the cathedrals of the Middle Ages, labyrinthine drawings can be found as an archetype of a path of salvation, because the city of Jerusalem, which symbolizes heaven, represents there the central space that can only be reached with difficulty. Such decorative "puzzles" in the East are called "mandala", Hocke reminds us after Ananda Coomaraswamy. "But in Leonardo, a first turning point occurs: the abstract intertwined labyrinth becomes a map of mystery, a cryptographic symbol of the ancient cosmological representation of the 'knotting of things.'" (Hocke 1973, 174). According to the mystical tradition, "going and returning through the labyrinth would be the symbol of death and spiritual resurrection", but it also expresses "concentration on oneself, among the thousands of paths of sensations, emotions and ideas", which leads to "the transformation of the self (...) which will be unequivocally affirmed at the end of the return journey, at the end of this transition from darkness to light, will mean the victory of the spiritual over the material and, at the same time, of the eternal over the ephemeral, of intelligence over instinct, of science over blind violence." (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1995, 193). The labyrinth also symbolizes "access to the center through

a kind of initiatory journey”, and this center, beyond the architectural order itself, can also be, symbolically, “the interior of the self, (...) a kind of inner and hidden sanctuary, where what is most mysterious in the human being reigns”, which “consciousness can only find after many detours or after intense concentration, until that final intuition where everything is simplified following an illumination” (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1995, 193), and we will see how the Eliadean characters Ștefan Viziru and Petre Biriș live this experience.

The labyrinth is of major importance in Mannerist art and literature, taking on the same meaning of the roundabout way to the “center” which from an artistic point of view means perfection. This motif appears in Borges in the volume entitled *Labyrinthes* (in which the stories unfold “labyrinthically” from a technical point of view), as well as in poets such as Eluard, Michaux, René Char, Dylan Thomas and others. (Hocke 1973, 174).

The new meanings of the original notion of labyrinth, “a place that with its winding meanders hides the way out” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*) or “a winding path, in which it is sometimes easy to lose your way, without the help of a guide” (Santarangeli, 1974, 10) concentrate both images of non-habitation in the physical sense and of the nostalgia of dwelling on a metaphysical level, and some writings by Mircea Eliade add new connotations to this symbol.

The symbol of the labyrinth in the work of Mircea Eliade: initiation, self-knowledge, love, destiny and history

For Mircea Eliade, the labyrinth is “the image par excellence of initiation” (Eliade 1990, 31), a universal symbol capable of expressing limit situations, destiny and history. He believes that “every human existence is made up of a series of initiatory attempts” and he often writes about how he felt his personal experiences in his *Diaries* and *Memoirs* or confesses in interviews:

A labyrinth is sometimes the magical defense of a center, of a wealth, of a meaning. Entering it can be an initiatory ritual, as seen in the myth of Theseus. This symbolism is the model of any existence that, going through numerous trials, advances towards its own center, towards itself, Atman, to use the Indian term... More than once I have been aware that I am coming out of a labyrinth, that I have found the thread. Before, I felt desperate, oppressed, sparse... Of course, I did not say to myself: ‘I am lost in the labyrinth’, but, in the end, I still had the impression that I had emerged victorious from a labyrinth. Everyone has known this experience. It must also be said that life is not made up of a single labyrinth: the trial is renewed. (Eliade 1990, 150)

Regarding the solidarity of the labyrinth with the rites and beliefs related to the founding of cities, the orientation of ramparts (which are primarily a means of “magical” defense), a *Diary* entry from March 15, 1946, is relevant:

I am browsing through the books brought from London. I reread Jack Wright’s *Cumean Gates*, with all the notes I had made on the labyrinth. I was thinking then, around May 1940, of writing a book, *Anthropocosmos*. I gathered a lot of material, I think I understood how the problem had to be posed so that all these symbols, rites, beliefs in connection with the labyrinth, the mandala, the founding of cities, the orientation of ramparts and fortifications, the homologation of caves with infernal geography, etc. would reveal their profound meanings and their structural solidarity – but I wrote almost nothing. (Eliade 1993, 70)

We can say that what Mircea Eliade the scholar of religions did not have time to record in scientific work (as is the case with the projected book *Man as Symbol*), Mircea Eliade the writer explored in novels and short stories.

In the reference book (published in French in 1952, translated into English in 1961) Mircea Eliade wrote in the paragraph “The Symbolism of ‘Limit-Situations’” from the chapter dealing with the symbolism of knots (“The ‘God who binds’ and the Symbolism of Knots”): “(...) the labyrinth is sometimes conceived as a ‘knot’ which has to be ‘un-tied’, and this notion belongs to a metaphysico-ritual unity which comprises the ideas of difficulty, of danger, of death, and of initiation.” (Eliade 1961, 116). Untying a knot to escape the bond that holds you tight, that keeps you prisoner in one place, is similar, indeed, to breaking out of the labyrinth, which means liberation, in a concrete, physical sense, or access to knowledge, liberation from ignorance, access to reality, liberation from illusion.

In addition to the symbolism of “knots” and “untying”, the labyrinth, Eliade notes, is also in solidarity with the “mandala” (which has the function of initiation and defense). Beyond the specifications and considerations in the philosophical and scientific work, some short stories and the novel *Forbidden Forest* add new artistic and philosophical connotations to this symbol. The labyrinth is first a signifier of consciousness “closed” in its own subjectivity, a symbol of personal life lacking fundamental landmarks. Secondly, the labyrinth is a signifier of history and destiny. Combining these two meanings, the labyrinth becomes a kind of symbol of the symbol, a “second-degree” symbol or a “metasymbol”. From these main meanings, secondary meanings can be derived: on the one hand, the unknown, the incomprehensibility of one’s own life and, on the other hand, routine, meaningless repetition, wandering among shadows and things that say nothing, among false landmarks. This is the case of Ștefan Viziru, the main character from *Forbidden Forest* who at one point identifies himself with the legendary Ulysses.

Ștefan recognizes himself in the figure of this “wanderer” when he extends his stay in Portugal to live an amorous experience with a certain

Stella Zissu — a kind of a modern “Circe” —, thus trying to solve one of the “mysteries” that obsessed him: a name heard through the wall of the hotel room where he retreated to paint. However, this experience is nothing more than a postponement of the goal of the journey to the “center”, of the revelation at the end. Another false landmark is the meeting with the “priest” Bursuc who oscillates between vulgarizing and anathematizing the love for Ileana of Ștefan who makes the imprudence of confessing to him in a way that itself suggests the degradation of the mystery of confession: a still undecided, uneducated religious individual talks about his spiritual complications to a priest who has fallen from his dignity.

But the story of the labyrinth has meaning, for Mircea Eliade, only through the exit it presupposes. If “entering the labyrinth (is) an initiatory ritual”, the exit from the Labyrinth begins with the advance towards the “center” which is at the same time the self and the sacred, the absolute reality (Eliade 1990, 129). In other words, the metaphysical and religious meaning of the Labyrinth experience coincide. For the exit, in turn, has several meanings: on the one hand, the unraveling of the mystery, the liberation from an oppressive unknown and, on the other hand, the penetration into a mystery that gives meaning to apparently absurd things, rediscovering the fundamental landmarks of a life that is gradually losing its content, or whose content is formless. Such a “manneristic” representation is the “painting” painted by Ștefan. Ștefan’s “artistic” experience and the experience of love, interdependent we could say, prepare him for the mystical experience he will ultimately live. For the car in the dream with which Ileana Sideri should have appeared on the night of the summer solstice appears later, as the real “vehicle” of the fate. But this happens only after Ștefan had found out the other secret, that of Mrs. Zissu, the one destined for Captain Sideri. The mystery of these “knots” and connections is clarified when Ștefan comes into possession of the diary of the writer Partenie, his “super-ego”, which is equivalent to the “untying” of the obsessions of his life.

Ștefan Viziru does not understand very well what happens to him when he falls inexplicably in love with Ileana, whom he meets by chance in the Băneasa forest on the evening of the summer solstice, but he intuits that this event is not an ordinary one: “(...) This love could reveal something to me. Maybe I met you and I fell in love with you to teach me something. Teach me, then! Tell me why you appeared in my way (...). When I met you, I felt that a sign had been made to me”. (Eliade 1991, 60). Resigned to the idea that he cannot love two beings at the same time as the saints, that he cannot discover “a new and truer category of love” Ștefan paints. Initially following the desire to represent the car by which Ileana would have come in his life and who would have disappeared in the Băneasa forest, when the skies open, according to popular tradition. Unable to give shape to this state, “he constantly added colors, without any artistic preoccupation, but

only because this game charmed him, allowed him to find, somewhere, very deep in his being, a different Time, a different existence” (Eliade 1991, 206).

The main character in *Forbidden Forest* is a restless “metaphysician”, in a continuous search for the meanings of things that from the point of view of the ordinary people are incomprehensible, relating in all his actions (including when concluding economic treaties) as in “chimeras”: Mrs. Zissu; the car; the belly of the cetacean in which he feels imprisoned. All of these converge in the image of the labyrinth, a symbol through which “Daedalus doubles Babel” (Bachelard 1991, 204), a notion that “covers both nocturnal life and waking life”, an experience that involves “deep, primordial” emotions, a place where the being “is subject and at the same time object, conglomerated in the lost being” (Bachelard 1991, 173). It is the most frequently obsessive image in the book. Beyond the strange aspect of his way of formulating and expressing his anxieties, which can also be diagnosed in terms of a conflict between the “aesthetic man” and the “religious man” that coexists in Ștefan, the Eliade character actually suffers from depression, after a political detention that was the result of a confusion of the authorities. He recovers in his own way in the clinic, when he understands “that one can get out of the labyrinth”. In other words, when he passes from fantasy to symbol, when he formulates the final meaning of the labyrinth, which is the exit. In the preface to *Images and Symbols*, among the functions of the symbol, Eliade emphasized the therapeutic one, which allows man to rediscover a language and the experience of an original primordial time, “nostalgia” for times lost and found through the symbol.

The labyrinth means wandering in a space from which one can escape through an act that combines heroism with intelligence, but it also means closure within oneself, that is why Eliade associates the image of the labyrinth with that of an imperfect sphere, from which one can escape if one discovers its cracks:

(...) There, in the labyrinth, I felt closed on all sides. It was as if I were a prisoner in an immense metal sphere. I could not see its edges anywhere, but I still felt irremediably closed inside it, I felt that no matter how much I struggled, no matter how much I advanced, no matter how far from the center from which I had started and closer to its edges, these iron edges remained inaccessible to me. I felt condemned for the rest of my life to spin, in vain, inside this sphere, as in the darkness of a labyrinth. And yet, one day, almost without realizing it — I shattered the shell and I came out as if I were coming out of a huge egg, whose shell seemed inaccessible, invulnerable like a slab and which, barely touching it, shattered. And I came out into the light again, I came out of the labyrinth... (...) I understood that that sphere that seemed endless and inaccessible to me was, in fact, broken in different places (...) that through all those cracks one could get out, that each crack was a window. (Eliade 1991, 257-258)

Ștefan's labyrinth does not exist in reality, but he feels lost because his mind constructs it in different forms (from personal experiences to historical pressures), as if to demonstrate that the symbol "possesses an existential value all the greater the more (...) it better expresses an unconscious inner reality" (Meslin 1994, 238). The "labyrinth" in *Forbidden Forest* summarizes a series of collective archetypes, but through the personal, existential, "healthy", creative openness that the character created by the author ultimately finds, he acquires, beyond the "therapeutic" function, an artistic value (as happens in the case of Zaharia Fărâma, from the story *The Old Man and the Bureaucrats*, the narrator of times with luminous labyrinths, open to "theophanic representations" under the conditions of detention in a real prison labyrinth).

The very finding of this symbol that expresses existential trials leads to healing. For Eliade, leaving this "place" where dwelling is possible only through thought is equivalent not only to finding the meaning of the characters' experiences and events, but also to an escape from history, the conditioning par excellence. If the original meaning of climbing the labyrinth is one spatial, for Eliade this meaning is rather temporal. For example, the main character in *La țigănci (To the gypsy girls)* gets lost in time, as does Adrian in the short story *În curte la Dionis (In the Courtyard of Dionysus)*. The latter loses his memory, finding vague landmarks while the elevator he is in (the symbol of ascension being in this case an elevator itself — a model of the camouflage of the sacred in the profane) travels through a space whose levels are as many floors of temporality: "Whether we go up or down, it is the same thing, because the elevator is the same, only the direction varies" (Eliade 1991-2, 180). But Adrian's forgetfulness (equivalent to sleep, to disorientation, to "blindness") has an initiatory meaning: "This is how the miraculous process of anamnesis begins: I meet someone, known or unknown, I cannot figure it out, but sometimes from the first words they address to me I feel that signs are being made to me..." (Eliade 1991-2, 180). Adrian is a modern Orpheus (considers Eugen Simion in the Afterword to volume V of the Eliadesque fantasy prose series published by the Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House in 1994), who saves Eurydice (Leana, a mysterious singer who sings in pubs without asking for money) by urging her to sing verses about paradisiacal peace, in order to tame people through the Word.

Ioan Petru Culianu drew attention, in connection with this story of Eliade, that "up" and "down" are confused directions even during mystical ecstasy (this is how things are in the "merkabah mysticism" analyzed by G. Scholem). The title of the story can be read, we can say, according to Culianu's interpretation, in the key of the "creative hermeneutics" cultivated by Mircea Eliade:

In Romanian, the word ‘court’ designates, as in French, the place in front of a house and the entourage of a king or dignitary. And more: we say “in the courtyards of longing”, that is, “in the vicinity of longing”, in the entourage of the great dignitary who is longing (*Sehnsucht*, a metaphysical and creative nostalgia). (Culianu 2000, 277–279)

Indeed, reading this story is a special experience, which can be summarized in terms of “nostalgia” and even “irony”, Mircea Eliade himself confessing in his diary the ironic intentions that his fantastic prose sometimes has (which here takes the reader in an elevator through the labyrinth, to indicate the ludic as a possibility of exiting into the open space symbolized by a courtyard.)

The “irony” with therapeutic intentions is also surprised by exegetes, such as Edward P. Nolan, who believes that in the novel *Forbidden Forest*, Eliade appears to us on the one hand as an artist, and on the other as a true master of revelations: “The work through his novel as a journey through the labyrinth is itself an initiatory ordeal”. The reception or critical evaluation of the novel is a liberating experience for the reader as well:

Attending to Eliade’s orchestrations of image, theme, and structure evokes a balanced mixture of irony and sympathy that helps us achieve the required middle distance between ourselves and the world of the novel we imagine for a moment as our own. This generation of a balance between the sense of distance occasioned by irony and the sense of proximity achieved by sympathy is a move toward greater health, toward a ‘new, more structured, stronger personality’, with which we can better face the ‘terror of history’. (Nolan 1991, 117-118)

A phenomenon of labyrinthine wandering in his own memory also happens to Zaharia Fărâmbă, the narrator of the story *The Old Man and the Bureaucrats*. In addition to the “proper” labyrinths in this short story (that of the streets of interwar Bucharest and the cellars with “signs”, that of the building in which the narrator is locked up for interrogation), Zaharia Fărâmbă constructs (and deconstructs, constantly changing hypotheses, shaking his own certainties) a labyrinth of narrative in which the investigators move around in confusion, because they are looking for the profane secrets of the events (possible spies, traitors, the Polish treasure), while the old teacher searches for the connections between the miraculous events that the heroes of the story go through. A true “sacred geography” and a mythology of interwar Bucharest are thus outlined in which characters who “hide great secrets” wander, each with their own story.

Returning to the novel *Forbidden Forest*, an important character in the novel, a friend of the protagonist, the philosophy teacher Petre Biriș, conveys the idea of the existential mystery, by invoking the symbol of the labyrinth in which Ștefan had concentrated his seemingly unresolved search: “Ștefan had once sent me with a message to Ileana. He told her that he had

felt lost in a maze, but that he had not given up in discouragement, and in the end he had discovered that he could get out of the maze” (Eliade 1991, II, 319) — summarizes Biriş (caught and investigated by security following a failed attempt to cross the border through Arad, to Paris), the rediscovery of the Christian virtue of hope, without being too sure, as he claims, of the content of the message. The statement given to the security investigators does not tame them (typical characters who illustrate the opacity of the sacred), suspicious regarding a information about the organization of an invincible armed resistance in the Carpathian Mountains, unconquerable, like a maze. Biriş is amused by this concrete decoding (emblem of the “hermeneutics of suspicion”) of an existing message from 1938-1939, because he, like other positive Eliade characters, is a follower of the hermeneutics of trust.

Or, the symbol of the labyrinth signifying, through closure and wandering, the historical conditionings, the impossibility to escape from time and destiny, also concentrates the obsession of coming out of time, related to the “intellectual passion for theological mysteries and metaphysical problems”. Thus, the evolution of the character Stefan is intimately linked to the course of a spiritual initiation, difficult to clarify until the enigmatic explicit end of this open work (because the character takes with him into the world beyond the revelation at the end, leaving the reader free to interpret). His new love that wants to be plenary, similar to that of the saints, leads Ștefan Viziru beyond love, opens the horizon of knowledge: “Maybe there is something else besides love. Maybe there is a possibility open to miracles somewhere, an irreducible mystery, a secret that we have not yet been able to decipher. (...) Something that also starts from here, from a love, but that leads elsewhere.” (Eliade 1991, I, 15). The most convenient interpretation in the Eliadean system leads us to the aspiration towards totality of the main hero and the narrator, expressed so doubtfully-confident. This love, which in fact seeks nothing more than the fulfillment of earthly love, finally awakens the understanding of the sacred that manifests itself in the world through unexpected appearances.

Telling the investigators that he was taking a message from the labyrinth to Paris, Biriş philosophically decrypts the symbol: “a coded formula, invented by us, by Ștefan and me. It’s a way of speaking when we refer to extreme situations from which, apparently, there is no way out. (...) I am very interested in existentialism. (...) Jean-Paul Sartre and the others. I wanted to meet them, talk to them, explain to them what it means, in this part of Europe, to be «en situation» and to be asked «le problème du choix». I wanted to present them with a series of ‘existential situations’.” (Eliade1991, II, 315).

The true message that must reach Paris from here, which could even interest Westerners, and generally other cultures for its originality, is that of the mystery of death and the terror of history which designates, in the

meaning given by Eliade in *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, historical events void of any transhistorical significance, in other words, the conditioning of man by actions and deeds beyond which the divine will cannot be glimpsed. (Eliade 1969, 185). The feeling of terror characteristic of modern man is produced, I think so, not only by the absence of meaning in historical events, without any divine justification, but especially by the unknown, the unpredictable and the inexplicable human thought that are at their origin. “Lack of meaning” can mean disorientation caused by the absence or imprecision of orientation in a direction, it can be an answer to an unformulated question or, on the contrary, silence around fundamental questions, means the cancellation of communication that religiously charged symbols made possible.

To conclude the demonstration, Ștefan, the main character in *Noaptea de Sânziene*, embodies the type of profane man, but with religious “intuitions”, dissatisfied with his historical condition, observing in appearances, epiphanies from beyond this world. After choosing several deceptive paths to unravel the mysteries he intuits (Mrs. Zissu’s secret, Vădastra’s secret, his conviction for a cause that is not his), towards the end of the novel we learn, through the “message” that Ștefan sends to Ilena through Biriș, that he has found out in which direction the solution to salvation must be sought, in other words, “exit from the labyrinth”, beyond the transition from ignorance to knowledge, namely in the places in the historical world loaded with hierophanies, in the sequences of everyday life loaded with epiphanies, in love. And love is part of the things that are inserted into such a language, of the “cracks”, the “windows” through which we have access to the experience of the sacred, the only savior. Escalating the labyrinth towards true dwelling in the spirit can be considered a pretext for the search for the self, but also part of an initiatory scenario whose goal is spiritual regeneration, “changing the existential regime” (Eliade 1959, 236), the need for a personal religious experience, engaging the total experience of man, his salvation in eternity. It is an act of “freedom from matter”, with endless implications in the imaginary, even if what remains is a large amount of the Unknown, accessible only to poets in the modern world, as Rimbaud stated.

The purpose of the research of initiation is, from Eliade perspective, the knowledge of man, for “Initiation is one of the most significant spiritual phenomena in the history of mankind. It is an act that not only engages the religious life of the individual in the modern sense of the term ‘religion’ - it engages his total life.” (Eliade 1963, 228). If, however, the process of initiation proper has to go through ritual, the initiatory death (what happens to Eliade’s characters Ștefan Viziru, Ileana Sideri and Petre Biriș), is only to show that access to the imperishable condition of the spirit presupposes the abolition of the condition determined by existence.

“Isn’t the theme of regenerating death” somehow “the most important dimension of the novel, as the author saw it?” (Alexandrescu 2021, 64-65). To this rhetorical question, Eliade himself gave an answer in his *Diary* as he approached the end of the novel: “The symbolism of Death allows everything: extinction or regeneration, a true new life beginning”. (Eliade 1993, 263).

For the most part, modern people have lost their sense of religiously based life, so initiation has almost disappeared from the modern world, Eliade remarked. However, beyond the traditional formulas of initiation experiences, and even in the absence of “ecstatic journeys”, spiritual renewal and “clairvoyance” can be achieved when man falls in love, when life itself is understood as a continual trial. It is a (contemplative) path opened by the work of Mircea Eliade who in the *Diary* interprets his own life as a “labyrinthine initiation”. In the novel *Forbidden Forest*, the labyrinthine initiation is impelled by the “nostalgia of paradise” related to the deep impulses of man, among which that of love is paramount, according to the image and likeness of the Creator, a loving state updated at every moment by the presence of God through creation, in man, while resemblance is the external action of the spirit on matter.

The character created by Mircea Eliade knows a reflected experience of a complicated love, that is unknown for many people, an experience through which he discovers “hidden” meanings of history. If love is for Ștefan a way of escape from a historical destiny conceived like a labyrinth, carrying the promise of a renewing life, beyond happiness and suffering, the way he chooses is to live regarding things with melancholy and “with inspired attention”, to see what is hidden in their appearance.

It is a significant attitude not only for the crossing from ignorance to knowledge, but also for the revelation that profane prejudices, daily life, everything that impedes our access to the sacred, can be overcome since love can be thought and sought in the historical world in which we sometimes feel trapped like in a labyrinth.

I started from the premise of the uninhabitability expressed by the labyrinth, a symbol of imprisonment in a construction with complicated paths from which one cannot escape without a guide, a symbol of closure in itself, but also in history. Mircea Eliade, constructing situations and characters that have the revelation of their labyrinthine existence, but from which they can be saved, attributes to this symbol a meaning of salvation by rediscovering the sacredness of the deepest human experiences, such as love as a form of knowledge and defense of the self.

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