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**THE POST-HISTORIC MAN IN MIRCEA ELIADÉ'S
SPECULATIVE FICTION**

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine some of the ways in which the post-historic man appears in Mircea Eliade's speculative fiction. The need for this study is explained by the fact that although M Eliade is very well known as a theorist of the religious phenomenon, far less is known about his literary writings, as they remained in the background compared to his scientific work. Of Romanian origin, the scholar wrote his short prose and novels in the Romanian language, another obstacle in terms of adequate reception. However, his works of fiction are valuable, pertaining to the extensive genre of speculative fiction, going from fantasy and science fiction to counterfactual histories and mythic or popular narratives. In this context, various references to the divine appear, but also to man's purpose in the world and man's attempts to surpass his limitations. The writer demonstrates vivid imagination, his fiction being able to meet the demands of both a general audience, but also a specialized one, concerned with the manifestations of the sacred and the profane in everyday existence. Through his literary achievements, Eliade proves to be a precursor of the postmodern wave in culture and of the posthumanist approaches within social research, the burden of meditation on the human condition being a permanent theme of his work.

Key words: post-historic man, homo religiosus, homo cosmicus, posthumanism, sacred and profane, rebirth, Mircea Eliade, speculative fiction.

1. Scientific rigor and literary speculation

Mircea Eliade is a researcher with a rich and varied body of scientific work, every page containing details meant to help us understand *homo religiosus*, his relationship with divinity and with the world/worlds as an existential place. There is a permanent fluctuation between the sacred (what is given to him) and the profane (what is acquired through his own experience) (Eliade 2005, 13). It is an experience of reunification within the human being, who can sometimes ignore the divine presence, but cannot definitively circumvent it (Frunză 2019). In his scientific writings the author constantly resorts to interpretations, as required by academic rigor, rarely venturing into speculations. In his literary works, however, the writer overcomes these limitations, taking forth the idea of the volume *The Sacred and the Profane*, where he spoke of "the various positions that man conquered in the Cosmos" (Eliade 2005, 15). Thus, M. Eliade's prose opens up a new perspective of analysis, not only as *homo religiosus*, but also as *homo cosmicus*, one that tries to define himself in relation to the divinity, but also in relation with himself or with other elements that shape a posthuman profile, posthumanism being a field of research that he was a precursor of.

This type of posthumanism goes beyond the mere human desire to break away from the earth and advance in the universe, establishing a new paradigm (even despite the fact that post, postmodern strategies, of course, refuse and undermine the concept of paradigm!). The romantic dream is not undermined by modernist rationality, but completed in this type of posthumanism as evolution and cosmic habitation. It is a much more present element in art and philosophy than our prejudices towards science fiction, a genre largely interested in cosmic adventure, would let us believe. An exegete of religions of Mircea Eliade's stature would express this idea through the voice of the character Ivan, from the short story carrying the same name: "Let us enliven the earth and then the solar system and galaxies, and everything that is there and that we do not yet know. To enliven them, that is, to bring them to life and to awaken the spirit that lies alienated in every life. Let us bless the whole creation, as some of you like to say" (Eliade 1981, 389). These are thoughts expressed in times of war, in debates of people trapped between gunfire, frightened not of death, but by the fact that in the infinite universe Heaven and God have disappeared, and they will not find eternal rest (Eliade 1981, 370). Thus, this type of posthumanism appears as a cosmic ideal, in life and after death, capable of operating an "awakening of the spirit", a retrieval of what actually is *homo religiosus*.

In this context we look at the particular image of post-historic man as M. Eliade portrays him in his literature. The debate about the post-historic man and post-history is broad and does not seem to be ending soon (Seidenberg 1950; Habermas 1979; Fukuyama 1992; Lyotard 1992; Agamben 2004; Jameson 2005; Ferrando 2013). There are many aspects to be taken into account, from the death of God and the withdrawal of the Creator from the world, from the evolution of humanity to the loss of the meaning of life and the meaning of origins, from radical transformations induced by technology and robotic societies to the destruction of the world through pandemic maladies, cosmic or nuclear cataclysms. These developments can be on a planetary or individual scale, both hypostases being illustrated in the writings of M. Eliade, who prefers the instruments of speculative fiction to theoretical debate.

2. Human and posthuman

It is important that in the discussion of posthuman and posthumanity we take into account that it is a vast field with multiple openings. Some of these are antithetic, such as the sphere of anti-humans. To a large extent, the posthumanity of cyborgs, robots or (through a post-anthropocentric projection) of extraterrestrials is anti-human, even bellicose, and science fiction literature has developed numerous scenarios of confrontation, but also scenarios of the destruction of the center, of human civilization, context in which some researchers define antihumanism as human actions that have as consequence the loss of human characteristics (Ferrando 2013). Another term (with a correlative sphere of meaning and activities) with which we can operate is the inhuman, understood as an overt or disguised attack on the human or as a degradation of the human.

Thus, a possible contradiction generated by the impossibility to detach from a deeply egocentric vision is highlighted, because the example used by Lyotard (a complete science fiction vision), is formulated as a desiderate, namely the ability of mankind to survive the extinction of the Sun, by developing technologies that ensure its continuity in the universe. For Lyotard, this is a problem on humanity's agenda: "The human race is already in the grip of the need of having to discharge the solar system in 4.5 billion years. It will have been the transitory vehicle for an extremely improbable process of complexification. The exodus is already on the agenda" (Lyotard 1991, 64). Interestingly, Lyotard is talking about a departure from the current solar system, seemingly not taking into account the possibility of new energy sources, capable of filling the Sun's cooling, to emerge.

Mircea Eliade also talks about the reconstruction of the world and the center when he brings the "post-historical man" to the forefront, a

man able to reorganize the world deserted by an atomic cataclysm. In this postmodern setting, the phrase "post-historic man" is only possible as a result of the unfolding of this Sci-Fi scenario: "But this is the price to be paid in order to radically liquidate the past and force the mutation, that is, the emergence of a species infinitely superior to today's man. Only an enormous amount of electricity, discharged in a few hours or minutes, would be able to alter the psycho-mental structure of the unfortunate homo sapiens, who has so far dominated history. Considering the limitless possibilities of the post-historic man, the reconstruction of a planetary civilization could be achieved in an extremely short amount of time" (Eliade 1981, 370).

3. Questions about the universe

Our transhumanism becomes overwhelming when we want to understand the evolution of the Universe as a whole. And when divinity intervenes in this equation any rational and understanding-inclined approach fades. The transcendental offers a choice: to believe or not to believe. It is what happens to James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "What was after the universe? Nothing. But was there anything around the universe to show were it stopped before the nothing place began? It could not be a wall; but there could be a thin line there all around everything and everywhere. Only God could that. He tried to think what a big thought that must be; but he could only think of God. God was God's name just as his name was Stephen" (Joyce 1994, 11). Joyce puts these thoughts on Stephen Dedalus, but it is obviously his way of thinking.

Mircea Eliade would, however, imagine a profound character with a rich imagination, called Ieronim Thanase, who, answering the same questions in the disturbing short story *Uniforme de general (Uniforms of Generals)*, will refer not to an almighty but lenient God, but to a strange, unnamed, somewhat terrifying force, as is apparent from the few data made available: "But say, *Maestro*, wouldn't it have been nice to have *thought* that we were hearing old Vasile Chelaru and Veronica? To be frozen in fear, to have known so young – and Vladimir is still a child – to have known the nameless terror, that moment without beginning and without end, when we humans discover that we have never been *alone*?" (Eliade 1981, 435). This "nameless terror" that replaces divinity is no surprise to the historian of religions Mircea Eliade, a skeptic when it came to faith, fact that allowed him such a comprehensive outlook as a scholar. But that moment "without beginning and without end" is relevant to human destiny in general and to the two young people in the story, because, had it existed, it would have marked the transition to a posthuman dimension that is difficult to predict and shape. When he invokes the "nameless terror" Eliade the writer relates to Eliade the

historian of religions, reiterating the idea of "terrible power" as the divine "anger" by which Rudolf Otto defined God (Eliade 2005, 11).

Sometimes things that are impossible to explain happen, at least not at the level of current scientific progress. It is a divine miracle, though hard to prove. In speculative fiction, however, these events are starting points for valuable literary texts. Such a scientific (pseudo) premise specific to the science fiction genre also appears in the novella *Tinerete fără tinerețe* (*Youth without youth*) (although the correct title would have been, perhaps, *Bătrânețe fără bătrânețe* - *Old Age without old age*, because the hero remains young for many, many, years!). The character Dominic is struck by lightning, somewhere in the center of Bucharest, and it would have been natural for him to die quite quickly. It did not happen as such, and when he was taken to hospital the doctors found that: "His skin has been burned 100 percent, and yet he has been surviving for the past twelve hours, and as far as we can tell he is not in pain" (Eliade 1981, 533). The event takes place on Resurrection night, as the author states in the very beginning of the story, paving the way for a magical-religious hermeneutics of the explanation for the survival, as we are to see, of the character. The Resurrection is a sacred time, updated by this celebration (Eliade 2005, 68). It is the time of Christic resurrection, the character Dominic taking over some divine attributes, for the man struck by lightning is purified and consecrated (Eliade 1992, 74).

At this point we can notice that the ideas expressed in a literary manner by Mircea Eliade, in consonance with his scientific concerns about time and the role of man in history, contradict the claims of some scholars stating that Eliade had a skeptical view of history, with man or humanity entering a process of decline (Dubuisson 2006, 235). The idea was echoed by Nina Witoszek (2006), having one of the statements made by Mircea Eliade in *Comments to the Legend of Meșter Manole* as a starting point. Greater attention to the author's scientific and literary writings highlights a temporary, not a definitive, degradation of sacred time and history. In fact, Eliade uses the concept of world degradation only to be able to highlight its periodic rebirth, the post-historic man being tasked, in each new cycle, with building a new world, a new history, with the hope that it would be a better one. In this context, the post-historic man is not an abstract concept, as his characteristics could be highlighted within in the ability of ordinary people to lead both a personal (profane) life and a spiritual one, in relation to the sacred. Within this context, it is difficult to attribute ideological outlooks to Mircea Eliade's approach to posthistory and the evolution of the post-historic man, as such theories could not withstand careful analysis (Fisher 2010).

However, there is also a pseudo-scientific assumption, necessary in speculative fiction, because a scientific reason, verifiable or at least

possible, of surviving lightning strike does not exist, as there is no explanation for the fact that Dominic remains young for a long time. Somehow, the man who should be charred lives, is strong and acquires an increased capacity for cultural assimilation, and the fact that the laws of medicine at that time (the interwar period), and as of now, are violated has no literary relevance (Robu 2008, 48). The researcher introduces the science fiction premise of the *mutation* to explain the extraordinary adventure of the character Dominic Matei. He is not only a mutant, but also a "hidden god", as the same researcher points out, one that evolves in a world of secrets, with complex twists, political fiction, the occult, inquiries from journalists and the game of secret agents completing the scene of various and often sensational confrontations (Robu 2008, 53).

4. Problems of the body and of the post-historic man

In the humanistic philosophy and culture, the human body does not have to be perfect, but it must be in balance and fall within certain limits. Very short people, dwarves, have often been discriminated against in history. This has rarely happened to very tall people. The very weak, skeletal, were more often than not marginalized- as were obese people. The problem of the body was (and is!) extremely difficult, in many cases people with disabilities being marginalized: the limbless, the limping, the blind, as well as those carrying visible signs of disease. There are situations that warn us about the dangers of circumstantial posthumanism, long before posthumanism is defined!

This alienated body (Jameson 2005, 119), became alien (thus posthuman) through the transformations to which it was subjected, as it can be seen in Mircea Eliade's story *Un om mare (A Great Man)*, written in early 1945. It is the tragedy of Cucoaneş, a special man who, one day, begins to grow. The hero is an adult, and the increase in his size does not mean putting on weight, often coming with age, but becoming taller and widening to gigantic dimensions, unusual for the human species. It's an aberration, a genetic mutation, and the process is out of control. M. Eliade does not introduce genetics into the equations, as it was a scientific field little developed at the time, but brings medical motivations to the forefront, the process of Cucoaneş becoming a giant being described as an incurable disease, the name of the strange disease being macranthropy. It is clear that this is a disease from the way in which the giant's body transforms. When his friend asks him to resume visits to the clinic, at least so that the specialists there have the opportunity to study him for the "progress of science", Cucoaneş replies: "I am perfectly indifferent to the progress or regression of science. There's only one thing I'm interested in: *healing!* And I see I can't..." (Eliade 1981, 104). The process of dehumanization is

complemented by one of mythization in the form of a primitive giant, the author choosing to make his non-aggressive.

The most powerful and authentic part of the text is that of the passages in which Eugen Cucoanes tries to keep himself within the limits of the human, in order to be with his lover Leonora. He leaves her out of too much love when his stature renders him completely dehumanized. Cucoanes reaches a height somewhere between 15-30 meters, and obviously he could no longer live in communities with normal people. It is imposed isolation, posthumanity seen as painful post civilization, but the only possible one. Mircea Eliade, however, also imagines a surprising involution, for as he grows (to six - seven meters, or more!), Cucoanes loses his human attributes, becomes unable to speak, losing the mobility of his limbs (and his thinking). He becomes a lonely giant, unable to communicate, but his posthumanity is not aggressive, predatory, for in his unending peregrinations he always takes care to not crush the places where there appear to be human activities. After the loss of the meanings of life only a weak moral landmark still stands.

Mircea Eliade also presents a variation on the theme of golem, the clay creature of the Jewish tradition, inanimate, but able to have a body, and embody hope and fear at the same time. Obviously, in this case, somewhat paradoxically, Eliade avoids the occult complications of the legend, bringing the golem to the surface, deeply human, even in his alienation, running away so as not to hurt anyone. Elizabeth R. Baier remarked the subversive action of some authors, who oriented the traditional image of the golem towards violence, towards evil, including Gustav Meyrik (Baier 2012, 68). It is clear that the Romanian scholar and literate was familiar not only with Jewish cultural traditions, but also with those works of the early 20th century, which allowed him to write this science fiction short story, having as character the extraordinary Cucoaneș, whose posthuman evolution does not make him a violent, dark character.

The "technical scheme" of the evolution of The SF of Cucoaneș in *Un om mare* was also surprised by Sorin Alexandrescu. It is not named, and the analysis will be continued within the general framework of literature, with a focus on the peculiarities... of (scientific-)fantastic in Eliade's works! The elements are accurately described: "The author progressively follows the gap between the narrated facts and their logical verisimilitude. Cucoaneș's increase in height, relatively slow paced at first, is interpreted as a disease, namely "macranthropy", a very rare disease, but explainable: the reactivation of "a gland that had disappeared during the Pleistocene". The acceleration of the "macrothropic" process is so spectacular, however, that it quickly overcomes the medical – and therefore – rational verisimilitude of the "case", obviously signifying an exceedance of the "human condition",

thus projecting the character into a "mythical condition" (Alexandrescu 1969). Cucoaneş thus reflects a process of becoming the post-historic man. Disease, as a personal catastrophe, opens the way to a budding interregnum, a transition from human to posthuman (Seindeberg 1950, 52).

5. Proto-SF and SF in Mircea Eliade's Work

The idea of Mircea Eliade as an author of science fiction literature (of anticipation, of scientific fiction or of speculative fiction, as it is also called) prompted his commentators to be circumspect. One by one, they discovered the author's realistic prose and made connections with the fantasy one, folkloric or purely speculative one, philosophical one, although the references to Eliade's scientific subtleties and concerns in this field would be highlighted by the author himself: "Ever since adolescence I have enjoyed writing novellas, short stories and even fantastic "novels". The first published literary prose was entitled *Cum am descoperit piatra filosofală* (*How I discovered the philosopher's stone*) (...) In the autumn of 1921, the *People's Sciences Newspaper* had announced a competition among high school students: a "literary composition" with a scientific subject " (Eliade 1981, 5). Although Mircea Eliade speaks of fantastic writing, obviously this first work was SF, framed in the genre allowed by the theme of the contest (a scientific subject), by the specifics of the publication (oriented to astronomical literature, a kind of variant or proto-SF), but also by the content of the work, speaking of a laboratory experience, completed with a great disappointment: the character wakes up from the dream (fantastic, deeply romantic motif), finds that the adventure existed (assuming a technical possibility of realization specific to the science fiction genre), and at his feet there is a lump of yellow metal. It is not gold, only pyrite...

Various Romanian critics wrote about Mircea Eliade, the author of science fiction literature: Sorin Alexandrescu (1969), Florin Manolescu (1980), Eugen Simion (1981), Mircea Oprița (2007) or Cornel Robu (2008). Each of the critics mentioned identified themes and hints to the genre of science fiction, not science fiction writings per se, these themes being rather at the confluence with the fantastic, the magical or even the mythical horizon. The rather restrained approach is natural, because it seems risky to frame the hard working and stern scholar of religions within the framework of a risky, if not marginal, genre such as the SF. Of course, coming from this field, Cornel Robu and Mircea Oprița prove themselves more insistent, giving more courageous arguments in this respect. But what seems more constraining from the SF point of view is very fertile from the posthumanist perspective.

Mircea Eliade rather aligns with this direction, the elements of

political fiction being present in many of his fantastical and SF writings. Present, but not dominant, because the Romanian author realizes, in some of his best texts, a balance between the scientific premise (hypothesis) capable of vascularizing any quality science fiction text, the dynamic narrative approach, with sometimes rapid sequences of events, characteristic of the popular genre of adventures, with references to the political context, as I have already stated, but also with numerous cultural or socio-psychological references, each of these aspects contributing to the artistic success of the writings.

6. SF graces and posthuman lightning

As Cornel Robu noted, the novella *Tinerete fără tinerețe* is part of the group that do not have a "classic catalyst", namely the element capable of stimulating transformations, mutations, having the effect of escaping time. But the SF premise, the lightning strike that leads to rejuvenation, remains unaltered and particularly necessary for the realization of the narrative. The situation regarding the "catalyst" is different in Eliade's other SF writing, *Les Trois Graces*, "where the "rejuvenation serum" prepared by Dr. Aurelian Tătaru can still be considered a catalyst "for internal use", as it is injectable (Robu 2010, 298). Cornel Robu's train of thought might lead us to believe that the suggestions present in the text are an extension of the folk fantastic, where the elixirs of youth have an important role. In fact, M. Eliade does not introduce magic potions, but medicine, whose role is to cure neoplasm (cancer). It shows radical curative action, causing the disease to disappear, but also radically disrupting the lives of the three patients, a disorder of the human existential continuum. One survives for a longer time, being forced to carry the burden of her real age from autumn to spring, when, with the awakening of nature to life, the old woman becomes a lady of 35 years of age, resuming her real age in autumn. It is an impossible posthumanist condition for the current man, but it can function as a scientific hypothesis for a good quality SF text. It is also a new hypostasis of the post-historic man, able to evade the flow of time, at least for a period.

This type of approach allows M. Eliade to give a practical illustration of his scientific theory of circular time, the periodic end of history and the subsequent rebirth for a new history or posthistory. Circular time is opposed to linear time, based on a timeline. An exit from linear time constraints is possible by creating various narratives (Ricoeur 2002, 35-37). In this manner, science and speculative fiction are found in the work of M. Eliade. Thus, linear time no longer opposes the cyclical one, but becomes part of the latter (Rennie 1996, 83). *Homo*

faber, the post-historic man able to rebuild the world or to make it crumble, thus *acts*.

In *Les Trois Graces* M. Opreță identifies an old romantic motif (fantastic, therefore) transposed into the SF register, "the Faustian motif of the slip towards the genetics of mutants" (Opreță 2007, 77), which draws attention to biological disorders, sufficient to make the transition to such an artistically fertile posthuman level. The three graces become human curiosities, but are not excluded from interaction close to normality, although it occurs under exceptional circumstances. Not only the temporal variation, the flow of age, is an element of attention, but also another "secondary" effect, such as the overflowing sexuality of the character Frusinel, insatiable from spring to autumn, with love affairs no matter the place. The last meeting with Dr. Aurelian Tătaru takes place in the woods, for he dies during a sexual assault of his former patient.

At some point, intelligence service agents (which can only be the Securitate!) and policy makers understand the value of Dr. Tătaru's research and take action to recover what can be recovered. The biologist Zalomit, a friend of the deceased doctor, enters the scene, but his role is rather that of witnessing all these incredible histories and narrating them in small circles. The recipe for this miracle drug, that generated the temporal-existential disturbances of the three patients, a medicine that, if perfected, would have ensured eternal youth, immortality, is permanently buried with the death of Zalomit. As Cornel Robu points out, for a good quality literary work it is irrelevant whether the scientific hypothesis (premise) has real coverage or not, "because, in science fiction, rational, 'scientific' explanation is invested with a specific aesthetic functionality, since it addresses a "sense of logic" pertaining to the human mind and mobilizes it to crystallize that "appearance of truth", sufficient to procure that willful momentary suspension of distrust for the imagination" (Robu 2008, 46). There are aspects fully reflected in the novella *Les Trois Grâces*, as well as in several other works by Eliade that have SF implications.

6. Conclusions

The conclusion of this study is that Mircea Eliade used his literary talent to exploit the themes of his scientific research in speculative works of fiction, without being constrained by academic rigour. His reflections on the post-historical man, homo religiosus and homo cosmicus were contained in high-value literary pieces. At the same time, he was able to investigate a series of philosophical curiosities and anxieties about the fate of man in the world, his relations with the divinity, but also about the destiny of mankind in an age of great transformation and threats. Eliade's favorite theme proved to be that of

the temporary withdrawal of man from history, a suspension of calendrical time and its revival both by exemplary individual destinies, rising to the level of divinity (at least partially), and as an evolution or involution of all mankind.

Speculative fiction allows M. Eliade to resume the discussion of his favorite scientific themes, an area where the author is extremely ingenious in creating narratives. Linear time is repealed, becoming a component of the circular one, specific to the posthistorical world. It is obvious that his literature can be read without the reader having gone through his scientific work, but the links between them make them both much more attractive. Eliade is much more expansive in his writings of fiction, proposing an insight into the destiny of man found in unusual situations in almost every work. Thus, the post-historic man, anchored in posthistory and in the posthumanist universe, proves to be more humane than ever.

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