

---

# MEN AND STONES

## A LANDMARK IN MIRCEA ELIADE'S LITERARY AND RELIGIOUS WORK

**Daniela Preda**\*

*'Lucian Blaga' University of Sibiu, 'Andrei Şaguna' Faculty of Theology, Victoriei Blvd. no.10,  
55002, Sibiu, Romania*

(Received 26 July 2019)

---

### **Abstract**

In this study I briefly present the contents of the play 'Men and stones', in order to explain to what extent it expresses a landmark in the evolution of the Mircea Eliade's thought. This play confirms Eliade's confession: that, on the one hand, the theoretical work cannot influence consciously and voluntarily the literary activity, but that on the other hand the literary act of the literary creation may reveal certain theoretical meanings. Certainly, for the historian of religions and the former professor at the University of Chicago, literature is a myth. Any story in which phantasms express a situation that tends to become paradigmatic - and there is no literary product, however insignificant, in which life has not been immobilized in a pattern - is a myth. The fact that one can no longer establish a connection with the ritual life of a community is the only difference between the literary myth and the religious myth. Taking this conviction, I subscribe to the idea that the analysis of literary texts from a religious point of view can constitute a serious 'bridge' of dialogue between Theology and the modern world.

*Keywords:* literature, religion, myth, epiphany, Romanian theatre

---

### **1. Introduction**

In a letter dated July 8<sup>th</sup> 1939, Constantin Noica urged his good friend, Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), to write theatre. The reason - otherwise than we imagined - was for financial reasons, plus the 'dramaturgical experience' that would have helped his powerful interlocutor 'to put down his brakes'. Here's how the epistolary text sounds: "But I come back to an older idea: why do not you try theatre? I have the impression - apart from profitability considerations, which are appreciable - that you could give extraordinary things while using dramaturgical experience. There is an immediacy in theatre, a quick indication of what it can and cannot be, which is of the utmost use, I think, to the excessively rich writers, how you are. In a word, I believe (and not with your

---

\*E-mail: dana.preda@ulbsibiu.ro

last book, but with all your literary work) that you need brakes. The theater gives them to you.” [1]

A prolific writer, Eliade also tried his talent in dramaturgy (not knowing if he only took account of Noica's advice) and, anyway, without getting rich (about the financial difficulties that Eliade suffered for a long time in the country [2]). Moreover, the plays did not even bring him literary recognition from the critics; for example, the critic Eugen Simion wrote that Eliade's dramaturgy is “reduced and inestimable in relation to his other works” [3]. This would be true of his most well-known (and discussed) work, *Iphigenia*, as well as for other theatre plays, such as *The Endless Column, 1241* or *Men and Stones*. Referring to the very last piece remembered, Mac Linscott Ricketts made a statement that made us think: “The text proves to be an authentic literary work of great importance for the history of the literary evolution of the writer Mircea Eliade” [4].

In this study I briefly present the contents of the play ‘Men and stones’, in order to explain to what extent it expresses a landmark in the evolution of the Eliade's thought.

## 2. Men and stones

Written in a relatively short time between February 29<sup>th</sup> and March 6<sup>th</sup> 1944, while Eliade was in Portugal [5], the theatre play ‘People and Stones’ is composed of two acts - the first with four scenes, the second with only one. The subject is realistic but with episodes that bring a fantastic air to the action. This is the trip that two men, a geologist (Petruș) and a poet (Alexandru) make in a cave discovered by the first one, and which was a place of worship for the ones of Palaeolithic (the cult of the dead).

This fact is quite early highlighted, but the scientific curiosity of the geologist makes them progress more and more in the depth of the cave, which turns into a true ‘spiritual adventure’ of discovering the meaning of life. In fact, the spatial regression in the darkness of the cave counterbalances the inward, gradual enlightenment of the two. Symptomatically, we discover during the course of the play more and more data about the two, which will eventually culminate with the ‘supreme revelation’.

Petruș, a geologist by profession, is a robust man, about 40 years old, married to Adriana, a painter. Although his vision of the world is a scientifically positive one, Petruș - like his wife, who often appears in the discussion - supports his colleague, Alexandru, from all his strength in the exploration of the cave. This is a 30-35 year old man, writer, and receives unconditional support from the two spouses. According to his own confession, especially in moments of mistrust and even disgust toward himself and towards his literary talent, Adriana “is in a large part the author of my poetic genius. Adriana and you. You have declared me a genius. You put me in my head that I'm a genius.” [6] Moreover, Petruș' wife is the one who “puts something in his head”: that like Shakespeare, Alexander has a universal mission – “to reveal something, to

discover something to people, to all people, from all countries and all the times” [6, p. 402]. However, along the advance in the cave, the writer’s hopelessness in his creative capacities seems to decrease more and more; Petruș is the one who constantly supports him. The metaphysical desperation of Alexandru is also doubled by his physical suffering, for between the first and the second act, the poet suffers a fall that causes him injuries and prevents him from walking.

The dialogue between the two men tells us both about the past and the philosophy of each other’s life. About Petruș we find out that he has been searching for this cave for many years, hoping to become famous by demonstrating that this Carpathian region was inhabited in the Stone Age. It is also a theory confirmed by the symbolic scenes painted on the walls of the cave, as well as the presence of an altar and other objects in the first cavern. However, these findings do not satisfy the curiosity of the geologist. He advances more and more in the cave without making any other notable discoveries, except for some troglots, the ‘fossils in life’, about which the Romanian scientist Emil Racovita wrote.

On the contrary, Alexandru had gone exploring the cave for any another reason than Petruș: to find his ‘inspiration’ in writing. The confession “I wanted to write a book, a book with the cave” [6, p. 393] is the result of the anticipation that by visiting a cave that may not have been visited by people for thousands of years, it will help him write a story about it as it hadn’t been seen. And yet, the first cavern leaves the writer without words, who regrets that he is not a painter to better describe what he sees. Then, although Petruș urges him to write down these images as long as they are fresh, alive, Alexandru is unable to write something, although his imagination is in full swing. Thus, if in the first scene he sees a virtual ancestor (some people who adore a bear in the cave, while women bring here a girl meant to be the ‘wife’ of the bear) [6, p. 397], in the second scene the images include fairies and dwarfs. This is what causes Alexandru’s disgust, convinced that it is a common and ordinary vision: “the inevitable fairy of the cave”, “what every man sees when he enters a cave, ”the same and the same things!” [6, p. 401]. His expectations were quite different, for he would have wanted a reiteration of the states that the ‘cavern people’ felt a few thousand years before, in a sort of restoration of the primary human states. (Alexander wanted to feel the fear of the people who lived in the Stone Age in the cave, “their terror of darkness”; he wants to “believe again in their beliefs, to see the world as they saw it ... To love and to hate them like them.” [6, p. 404])

As I have already mentioned, the descent into the heart of the Earth brings with it, simultaneously, a descent into the abysses of the soul. This results in an act of self-knowledge that ultimately brings true self-knowledge, the existential fulfilment of this spirit adventurer. That’s why Alexandru tells Petruș that “this allows for any regression. Up to the ultimate limit of the consciousness, to the ultimate limit of life itself. You can get down anywhere, and no matter how deep, the only condition is to come back richer, more passionate and to believe. That’s what I dreamed of doing. A poem of the cave. A new descent into the

hell. A downfall to the ultimate level of cosmic consciousness and life.” [5, p. 404]

*Descensus ad inferno* of Alexandru proves to be a genuine initiative with nihilist accents, which gradually grows. Thus, if in the third stage the meeting of the poet with the ‘living fossils’ causes him disgust (“It’s terrible! To know that life was pleased with this ... To know that the first living cell on earth raised, to collapse itself into this mess ... “ [5, p. 408]) in the fourth scene despair seems complete, for here there are nothing but stones. In this state everything disappears, meaning no longer makes sense; the cave seems to have discovered him that nothing deserves nothing, that nothing is meaningless [5, p. 417] (the platonic myth of the cave represented this geological form as a place of illusion. On the contrary, at Eliade the myth is reversed: the cave seems to awaken Alexandru from any illusion, breaks down the dream and reveals the ‘sinister fresco’, ‘the immense illusion’ in which everything lies. When Petruș asks the poet what this ‘all’ means, he answers: “All you want. Everything you think it is worth ... All, all. Life, God, love, science, morality, humanity ... All, absolutely all!” [5, p. 418])

Like a dostoevskian character, who had affirmed that if God died, ‘everything is allowed’, and the main character of the Eliade’s play swears that when he returns home he will ‘fool around’. This lability and Alexandru’s desire for immorality is in obvious agreement with Petruș’ state. Like the biblical character of the same name (Saint Apostle Peter), he shows unwavering confidence and a remarkable optimism in life and in humanity. In this way, Petruș seems to reiterate the ‘stone of faith’ that Jesus Christ had spoken of (see Matthew 16.18). However, Petruș complains not so much of personal salvation, in a Christian sense but of a collective salvation. Even if individuals die, the species continue, and this perpetuation occurs mainly through progress (for example, it has passed from the irrational fear of caves to the condition of the modern man capable of exploring the caves in a scientific way). The expedition that the two of them are engaged in seems to Petruș as a sort of a ‘return to nature’, in fact a confrontation with it for the long period of humility that humanity, in its fragility, had to suffer: we revenge what we have suffered for hundreds of thousands of years since we have detached out of stone. All the humiliations we had to endure when we lived in the caves and we were naked and weak and foolish and shivering by all the shadows, and we were afraid of lightning and night and ghosts. Well, now we’re not at all that way. Now we are strong.

The man has become a master and we are paying for this a lot. To Alexandru’s question, who is he paying to, Petruș answers: “To the world around us, which has been hostile and humiliated us. To nature, if you want. Look, to this cave, we are paying to. To this stone that was believed to be inviolable, to these rocks, where we are now entering, for the first time, and deciphering the secrets ....” [5, p. 415-416]

Petruș is seen as a visionary, convinced of man's creative ability to dominate and even transfigure the surrounding world. This is also the result of Alexandru's call to change the 'stone into poetry', and here the poet's creative talent should manifest: "I want you to show me in your later work this cave as you see it. That I told you how I see it: I see it as it is; for me, very interesting from a scientific point of view, but that's all. I want to see it created by you. That's why you are an artist, to show us the world more beautiful than it is." [5, p. 412]

The fifth scene, the final one presents Alexandru completely changed. He overcame completely the nihilist crisis he had previously plunged into, and the cause seemed to be the immediate death experience he had experienced. He felt 'falling from height', the rope that gathered around the iron rod was the one that saved him. In any case, something happened to Alexandru, who heard a popular melody in his head, and the world around him seemed 'unreal, beautiful, intense ... and so distant'. This new experience was 'as an initiation', 'as a revelation'. It is a true inner illumination of Alexandru. "Discover something within you that it may have remained hidden to the end of your life. Discover something beyond your being, of everyday life, of what we thought, absurdly, that we are. Something fundamental, something that shines from within you and changes everything around you." [5, p. 425] Alexandru himself is convinced that this enlightenment, this 'bizarre experience' and 'unexpected revelation' cannot be coincidental; it has to correspond to something 'fundamentally real'. Petruș agrees with this idea, but he believes that the source of this enlightenment should be 'life', Alexandru insists that the spring comes 'beyond life' - precedes it. It comes from elsewhere ... from beyond." [5, p. 425]

Not being able to go, Alexandru is taken out of the cave by Petruș. When they stopped to rest, Alexander, though suffering, tried to explain to his friend the new state he had gone through. But the words do not help him to convey the essence of the revelation, and anyway, Petruș seems incapable of fully understanding. He listens only half, he is impatient "to leave as quickly as possible from the cave. You will write them all when we arrive", he tells Alexandru. But the latter is fervently desperate to be listened to and understood, convinced that in any case his experience will never be written. (In theological language, this state is called apophatism). No matter how genius he has, no matter how imaginative, no man will ever be able to render this metaphysical experience in words; and yet, Alexandru will make a final attempt: "I feel better and better ... And I would create to tell you something ... Only to you ... Something extraordinarily important ... a kind of revelation, I do not know how to say ... something that comes from beyond life ... And makes it valid ... It makes it worthy of being lived ... And I do not know how to start..." [5, p. 426]

### **3. Significance and importance**

Mac Linscott Ricketts - whose summary of the play I have followed closely - was of the opinion that Eliade wrote his piece "based on his studies of

sacred stones and labyrinths: in fact, here it is more about prehistoric religions than about stones, but the key of the play is the symbolism of the labyrinth” [4, p. 461]. Not by chance during this period, Eliade is also working on conceiving his vast *Treatise on the history of religions*, where a chapter will be really dedicated to the sacred stones “Hardness, harshness, permanence of the matter represents a hierophony for the religious consciousness of the primitive. Nothing more immediate and more autonomous in the fullness of its force, and nothing nobler, more frightening than the glorious rock, the granite block that rises boldly. First of all, the stone *is*. It always remains itself and subsists; and, most importantly, it strikes. Even before you grab it to strike, the man strikes it. Not necessarily with his body, but at least with a look. He thus finds its strength, harshness, force. The rock reveals something that transcends the precariousness of his human condition: a way of being absolute. Resistance, inertia, proportions, and its strange contours are not human: They attest a presence that amazes, horrors, attracts and threatens. In its majesty and hardness, in its shape or colour, man encounters a reality and a force belonging to a world, *other* than the profane world he is part of. “ [7] Starting from the natural characteristics of the stone, Eliade points out that the prehistoric men adored stones “because they represent or imitate something, because they come from somewhere”, (and so on)” [7]. Stones acquire value by becoming ‘tools of spiritual action’ or even fulfilling a magical function. For example, it is worth mentioning the funeral stone, which becomes a protective tool of life against death. Even more, ‘fixed’ in stone, the ancestral soul fulfils a fertile role. Perhaps, however, the most important function of the stone is to achieve communication between Heaven and Earth, to facilitate access to another reality. Eliade remembers the biblical text of Genesis chapter 28, when Jacob, having slept with his head on a stone, dreamed that it was like a ladder on which God's angels ascended and descended. He will name that place Betel (‘the house of the Lord’), for indeed it was ‘the house of God’, ‘the gate of Heaven’ [7, p. 241; 8].

#### **4. Literature and religion**

All these meanings meet in the play ‘Men and stones’, are confirming Eliade’s confession: that, on the one hand, the theoretical work cannot influence consciously and voluntarily the literary activity, but that, on the other hand, the literary act of the literary creation may reveal certain theoretical meanings [9]. The exemplification is made with some obvious connections - but involuntary, Eliade says - between the scientific work *Yoga: Essai sur les origines de la mystique indienne* (1936) and the novel *The Secret of Dr. Honigberger* (1940), respectively with the way other novel, *The Snake* (written in just ten days!), illustrates certain considerations from the *Treatise on the History of Religions*. Certainly, we find - as I have shown - similarities between ‘Men and Stones’ and the *Treatise on the History of Religions*, but the importance of this theatre play arises not so much from the illustration of the ‘dialect of the sacred’ to Eliade, but from the way, from now on, it will also be reported in the scientific and

literary work. (This 'dialectic of the sacred', which is hidden in the profane, is in fact a 'dialectic of hierophany'. We are talking about a 'camouflage' and, at the same time, an 'epiphany' which is perhaps the most substantial contribution made by Mircea Eliade to the contemporary culture and Philosophy. On a theoretical basis, Eliade's reflections on the theme will be summed up in the book *Sacred and Profane*, because on the literary level the theme will be a dominant of all Eliade's writings, regardless of the genre approached: novel, short story, play, even diary! [10-13]

Moshe Idel showed that, despite what is commonly believed, the camouflage of the sacred is not a concept specific to Eliade. We find it to one Eliade's friends, a writer of Romanian origin Mihail Sebastian, in the play 'The star without a name' [14]. So, we subscribe to the opinion of Mac Linscott Ricketts that 'Men and Stones' is a landmark in the development of Eliade's creation: "Eliade has not written anything like this before. In his first fantastic short stories, the characters know the 'other realm' through different ways, but none of them has a revelation of the fundamental, ultimate reality that gives life meaning and pleasure. However, in the next few years, this theme will reappear in Eliade's literary works with increased frequency and intensity ('A Great Man', 'The forbidden Forest', 'Ivan', 'General's Uniform', 'Incognito at Buchenwald', 'The Endless Column', 'Les trois graces', etc." [4, p. 461]

## **5. Conclusions**

We conclude by summarizing the directions to which Eliade's literary work will develop. In the monography dedicated to him by his most famous disciple, Ioan Petru Culianu [15], there are two plans: one for conversations, one for a future book about Mircea Eliade the writer. Although they are only at the project stage, these plans reveal some essential facts about Eliade's conception (partially cultivated by Culianu) about the literary creation.

In the plan of the book about Mircea Eliade the writer, there are three cycles of Eliade's literary creation: the 'realistic' novels, India and the fantastic prose. The first are said to be 'the most authentic historical documents', which reveal the 'sphere of the ontic imaginary, of the lived existence and of the value dimension (and others)'. Although vanished, this world - reconstituted by literary creation - reveals its valences much better than through historical writings. In the case of Eliade, the world of his 'realistic' novels (like *The Return from Heaven*, *The Hooligans*) reflects the inter-war Romanian world in which the temptation of extremism had appeared.

The second cycle, India, is a true 'fantastic sparkle'. For Culianu, it is not important whether Eliade's writings reflect his personal experiences, but whether the author really believes in the possibility of these experiences (since they have a role of knowledge - see his study *Folklore as an instrument of knowledge* - and, we can assume, even salvation).

Finally, the third cycle of the fantastic prose knows several stages: the first one that corresponds to the Indian stage, the stories having as a character a specialist of the sacred; the second that corresponds to the idiot phase, who replaces the specialist; and the third stage would be that of spectacle and cryptography [15, p. 281]. Culianu's question is: To what extent has this evolution in the design of creation been seconded by a personally one?

We have summarized this division because, in Culianu's opinion, though real, it does not destroy the unitary character of the literary creation in general, and that of Eliade in particular. In what sense? In that, that literature, regardless of its character, possesses a unitary purpose. In the plan of a conversation book with Eliade, Culianu wrote about it: "My interpretation of your literary work is that of Eliade as a great mystagogue, who creates myths knowing very well that they are not but convinced of their existential and pedagogical value. The aim that it is pursued, in a certain sense, is a soteriological one: he wants to help man recover the lost significance of his existence, of his destiny on Earth ... " [15, p. 270]

Certainly, even without receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature Eliade was accepted unconditionally, says Culianu, in his double quality: as a scholar and as a writer [15, p. 272]. (Eliade did not conceal that he wanted much to get this award, as a doubling of the scientific recognition he felt he had really acquired – it is enough to recall the dozens of *Doctor Honoris Causa* distinctions received throughout life. Convinced that he had more chances of success, Eliade was just about to accept returning into the country and to accept a collaboration with the regime of the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. In fact, such a gesture would have been equivalent to recognizing the oppressive regime of the latter, which is why the Romanian scholar abstained from this gesture – it is true, as a result of the criticisms made by other distinguished members of the Romanian exile, such as Monica Lovinescu and Virgil Ierunca). A question that always arises in Culianu is how personal experience played a role in Eliade's literary career, marked by 'three stages on the road of life': one of a supernatural militant (1936-1940); the second of a simple man who believes (1953-1966); the third one in which he constructs and preaches 'his own myths', which have value and functionality (since 1968), Eliade being, after Culianu "a mystagogue, yes, but who does not believe" [15, p. 274].

We can find a possible answer at Eliade himself. One of the sources of his vision, centred on 'literature', was also found at the Italian writer Italo Calvino [16]. We were told about it: "... there are creators whose opera - as vast it is - presents some central motifs that are easily surprised: motifs that, in a literary work, play the role of central myths from a civilization or a culture epoch. And as the presence of the central myth in any spiritual manifestation or the historical stage of a particular civilization verifies the 'authenticity' of the entire organic growth of this civilization - so the discovery of the central, motifs' in all fragments of a literary work helps us to establish on the one hand the 'authenticity' of the work, and on the other hand the angle under which it is to be seen to show itself in all its fullness and beauty. There are works that we still



know to look at them, how to look at them. Undoubtedly, much of their beauty or significance escapes precisely because of it.” [17]

Certainly, for the historian of religions and the former professor at the University of Chicago, literature is a myth. Any story in which phantasms express a situation that tends to become paradigmatic - and there is no literary product, however insignificant, in which life has not been immobilized in a pattern - is a myth. The fact that one can no longer establish a connection with the ritual life of a community is the only difference between the literary myth and the religious myth. Taking this conviction, we subscribe to the idea that the analysis of literary texts from a religious point of view can constitute a serious ‘bridge’ of dialogue between Theology and the modern world.

### Acknowledgement

This work was supported by a project financed from Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu research grants LBUS-IRG-2017-03.

### References

- [1] M. Eliade, *Correspondence. A-H*, Humanitas, București, 1999, 230.
- [2] M. Handoca, *Mircea Eliade. Found Pages*, Lider, Bucharest, 2008, 173-179.
- [3] E. Simion, *Mircea Eliade: The nodes and the signs of prose*, Gold Encyclopaedic Universe, Bucharest, 2011, 427.
- [4] M. Linscott Ricketts, *Mircea Eliade: The Romanian Roots*, vol. II: *From Bucharest to Lisbon (1934-1945)*, Criterion, Bucharest, 2004, 457.
- [5] S. Alexandrescu, *Mircea Eliade. From Portugal*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2006, 5.
- [6] M. Eliade, *Portuguese Journal and other writings*, vol. II, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Humanitas, Bucharest, 2007, 405.
- [7] M. Eliade, *Treatise on the History of Religions*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn., Romanian translation, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2008, 229.
- [8] I. Tănăseanu-Döbler, *Archaeus*, **13** (2009) 281-306.
- [9] M. Eliade, *Autobiographic Fragment*, in *Imagination and Meaning: The Scholar and Literary Worlds of Mircea Eliade*, N.J. Girardot & M. Linscott Ricketts (eds.), Seabury Press, New York, 1982, 123-124.
- [10] B. Rennie (ed.), *The International Eliade*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2007, 229-247.
- [11] B.S. Rennie, *Reconsidering Mircea Eliade. A new vision on religion*, Romanian translation, Criterion, Bucharest, 1999, 17-26.
- [12] N. Spineto, *Mircea Eliade, Historian of religions*, Romanian translation, Curtea Veche, Bucharest, 2009, 214.
- [13] V. Ierunca, *The Literary Work of Mircea Eliade*, in *Myths and Symbols*, J. Kitagawa and C. Long (eds.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, 343-363.
- [14] M. Idel, *Mircea Eliade. From magic to myth*, Romanian translation, Polirom, Iasi, 2014, 206-209.
- [15] I.P. Culianu, *Mircea Eliade*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Romanian translation, Nemira, Bucuresti, 1998, 5.
- [16] R. Vancu, *Cenaclu de la Păltiniș*, **5(29-30)** (2013) 81-84.

- [17] M. Eliade, *The way to the Centre*, Univers, Bucharest, 1991, 270.