

Mircea Eliade, the Ideal Type of Lecturer

Mariana Andrei

Abstract: *One can hardly say what was Mircea Eliade's primordial vocation; that multi-dimensional personality of the Romanian literary history and philosophical thought, who was possessed, in general, with the vocation of study and creation, of erudition and problem-seeking-and-solving, was not only a novelist, a scholar, a thinker, but also the ideal type of lecturer, who gave lectures, conducted seminars, assuming the function of a spiritual rector.*

Key words: *Mircea Eliade, multi-dimensional personality, absolute freedom, titan, models, dream / reality, lecturer, honours.*

Mircea Eliade, the diplomat, the essayist, the memoirist, the folklorist, the novelist, the playwright, the philosopher of culture and the historian of religions, can be characterized by his own words referring to Bogdan Petriceicu-Hasdeu, in which we can also recognize the model of the man who came to be the best-known Romanian worldwide: *Mintea lui uriașă a străbătut toată întinderea cunoașterii omenești. Într-un secol bântuit de pozitivism și searbădă specialitate – Hasdeu a avut destul geniu și destulă putere de muncă pentru a nu se mulțumi să rămână numai un literat sau un istoric, un filosof sau un folclorist. El a vrut să cunoască totul și să cunoască bine.* [His vast mind embraced the whole compass of human knowledge. In a century haunted by positivism and bland specialization – Hasdeu had enough genius and working power to be unsatisfied with being a mere literary man or historian, a philosopher or a folklorist. He wanted to know everything, and know it well.]

And, really, was he not the man who, out of the desire to know as much as possible, determined to refrain from getting involved in the host of *mărunte* [trivial] preoccupations that could distract his attention, diverting him from his intended purpose, namely reading as much as he could? And if he failed to fully reach that design, he blamed it on wily sleep, which hindered him on his way to self-improvement. His *Memoirs* show that young Eliade, urged by the craving for knowledge and an iron will, really managed the incredible feat of not sleeping more than four hours a night – obviously, to the detriment of his health, and especially of vision. *Din clasa a V-a încoace și până la încheierea studiilor universitare, mă deprinsesem să dorm din ce în ce mai puțin, câteodată mulțumindu-mă cu trei-patru ceasuri pe noapte.* [As early as the fifth grade, and up to my graduation from university, I had inured myself to sleeping less and less, being at times contented with a mere three or four hours every night.]

Fighting sleep was part of a broader self-discipline programme, paralleled by o *încercare eroică de a depăși condiția umană*, [a heroic attempt to surpass human condition itself], to conquer *libertatea absolută* [absolute freedom]. The future author of the Yoga study *Liberté et immortalité* was convinced that human possibilities, which are limitless, could be entirely put to account by educating one's willpower. *Omul poate face orice cu condiția să vrea și să știe cum să-și controleze voința*, [Man can do anything he chooses on condition he wants to, and knows how to get control of his willpower], he would say, intent on strengthening his involvement in the process of building his own self, which he had begun from childhood.

We do not think that Mircea Eliade's school record has any relevance, despite a few failed exams. What is relevant is his ambition, manifested from an early age, aiming at becoming a universal spirit, *un polihistor*, [a poly-historian], having as models such titanic characters as Iorga; Hasdeu, *fermecca* [who charmed] him through [the vastness of his culture and the audacity of his historiographic hypotheses], [1:125] Voltaire, Goethe or Balzac.

Eliade remained, all along his life, a symbol of perseverance and wish for training, assertion, of the desire to dream with eyes wide open, to have the courage not only to set an ideal, but also to follow it, turning it into reality.

An arch through time, and the triumph of being *încoronat într-o Academie din Apus* [invested with honours in a western academy, which was the dream] of teenage Eliade, and was actually *trăit* [lived] in his 14-year-old imagination, would become, after several decades, a much more impressive reality.

In an excerpt from an early version of *Romanului adolescentului miop* [The Novel of the Short-Sighted Teenager], the then teenager dreams of a huge room where, ashamed, colleagues and teachers witnessed *rușinați la triumful meu: De câte ori obțin câte un insuficient și mă ceartă mama – sunt încoronat într-o Academie din Apus... eu mă aflu pe estradă, zâmbitor, înconjurat de cei mai iluștri savanți din occident. Unul din ei se apropie, îmi strânge mâna, mă sărută și îmi așază o coroană pe cap.* [my triumph: Every time I get a next-to-fail school mark and mother scolds me – I am crowned by honours in a western Academy... I am standing on the raised platform, smiling, surrounded by the most reputed scholars in the western world. One of them comes near, shakes my hand, embraces me, and puts a wreath on my head.]

The wreath that filled the 14-year-old teenager with enthusiasm would be magnified, over the time, through the acknowledgement of his value by many famous universities, including the title of Doctor Honoris Causa.

In *Fragmente dintr-un jurnal*, [Fragments from a Diary], Eliade immortalized the counterpart of his teenage dream, wishing to demonstrate, if proof were necessary, that the ideal had become reality: *Ne urcăm pe estradă noi, <onorificii>, luăm loc în primul rând. Președintele Kingman Brewster Jr – ne cheamă, unul după altul, și ne citește caracterizarea scurtă, puțin aulică. Despre mine a zis următoarele: <Aparțineți universului. În prima dumneavoastră tinerețe ați călătorit prin Europa spre înțelepciunea interioară a Estului și, după ce ați sondat esența spiritualității hinduse ați creat pentru a face Estul mai inteligibil Vestului. Venerând marile mistere exprimate în mit și simbol, ați contribuit să găsiți un limbaj uman al adevărului veșnic. Yale vă conferă gradul de doctor în științe umane.* [We, 'the honoraries', get onto the platform, and sit down in the first row of seats. President Kingman Brewster Jr. – calls out our names, one after the other, and reads the brief, if a bit aulic, characterisation. Here is what he said about me: 'You belong to the Universe. In your first youth, you travelled throughout Europe towards the inner wisdom of the East and, after sounding the essence of Hindu spirituality, you created in order to make the East more intelligible for the West. Venerating the great mysteries expressed in myths and symbols, you have made a contribution to finding a human idiom for the eternal truth. Yale University awards you the degree of doctor of humanities].

Mircea Eliade understood that it was essential to give a meaning to existence, having the right and the duty to attain self-fulfillment by achieving his own dreams.

So, throughout his existence, he pleaded for achieving a culture of an encyclopedic type, declaring himself contrary to narrow specialization, and still hating erudition *per se* – which he actually made the butt of irony.

In this connection, it may be illustrative to remind that, while attending a congress in Spain, in October 1944, where he was facing several historians, linguists and philologists, whom he had studied carefully, he said: *Gândul că odată aş putea ajunge și eu, ca oricare din ei, îmi amorțește sarcasmul, întristându-mă. Oamenii aceștia, probabil, știu foarte mult despre foarte puțin, căci așa definea cineva savantul: un om care știe din ce în ce mai mult despre din ce în ce mai puțin* [The thought that, one day, I could be like any of them benumbs my sarcasm, making me sad. These people, most probably, know very much about very little, as someone used to define a scientist: someone who knows more and more about less and less]. [2:270]

And, as Mircea Handoca stated in the above-mentioned study, Mircea Eliade *nu s-a mulțumit niciodată să <oficieze>, într-o specialitate îngustă, inutilă și lipsită de perspective.*

*A năzuit să știe, să cuprindă și să domine **totul** în acest veac de fragmentarism și de diviziune a muncii [was never satisfied with 'officiating' in a narrow, useless specialized field, lacking perspectives. He craved for knowing, encompassing and dominating **everything**, in this age of fragmentariness and division of labour.] [3:270]*

That process, Eliade would later note, involved ongoing effort, inner discipline, work, and asceticism.

Having got his PhD *with great praise* (or *magna cum laude*), Mircea Eliade became professor at the University of Bucharest, in the Department of Logic and Metaphysics, being considered *ca un element de capacitate intelectuală* whose place can only *în sânul universității noastre* [an element of great intellectual capacity, whose place can only be in the bosom of our university.] [4:4]

The success he achieved with his inaugural lesson exceeded all expectations, causing him to remark: *Nu puteam crede că toată lumea aceea înghesuită pe coridor venise să mă asculte pe mine. [I could not bring myself to believing that all those people crammed in the corridor had come to listen to my lecture.] [5:274]*

That complete success forms the starting point of a eulogizing article published in *The Ramp: D-I Mircea Eliade vine la Universitate nu numai cu o cultură vastă atât filosofică cât și estetică, dar – ceea ce este și mai important – cu o personalitate autentică și bine definită. [Mr Mircea Eliade comes to the University not only with a vast culture, both philosophical and esthetic, but still – what is even more important – with a genuine, well-defined personality.] [6:1]*

During the five years he remained as a professor at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy in Bucharest, Eliade shone as a conspicuous figure, impressing through his extraordinary culture, his characteristic erudition and originality, but also through the manner in which he would deliver his lessons: his gestures, the brightness of his eyes, but also *vârful degetelor care vibrau întregind trăirea pe care voia să ne-o comunice. [the tips of his fingers, which vibrated, completing the state of mind that he intended to convey to us.] [7:67 - 68]*

Emil Cioran noted: *Fervoarea pe care o risipea în articolele sale o regăseai, din fericire, în lecțiile sale, cele mai însuflețite, cele mai vibrante pe care le-am auzit vreodată. Fără note, fără nimic, luat de o amețelă de erudiție lirică, asvârlea cuvinte convulsive și totuși coerente, subliniate de mișcarea crispată a mâinilor. O oră de tensiune, după care, veritabil miracol, nu părea epuizat, și poate nici nu era. [The fervor that he would scatter in his articles could, fortunately, be found in his lessons, the most inspired, the most vibrant I have ever heard. Without notes, without anything, seized by a dizziness of lyrical erudition, he would throw convulsive and yet coherent words, underlined by the contracted movements of his hands. One hour of tenseness, after which, a real miracle, he did not seem exhausted – which he maybe was not.] [8:281]*

The lessons were resounding successes. Seized with enthusiasm, Edgar Papu noted: *Cursurile lui de la Universitate erau fascinante. Avea o putere unică de comunicare cu publicul, un fluid care se desprindea din întreaga ființă. Dădea parcă din el bucăți din propria-i viață pe care noi, auditorii, le absorbim. A fost tipul ideal de conferențiar. [His courses at the University were fascinating. He had a unique power of communication with the audience, a fluid that seemed to be emitted by his whole being. He seemed to be giving off bits of his own life, which we, the members of the audience, would take in. He was the ideal type of lecturer.] [9:67]*

But it was not his achievements, deserved to the last drop of sweat, that brought about other, greater, successes, but... the accusation of pornography, generated by a few *tari* [crude] scenes in *Domnișoara Christina* [Miss Christina, that had been published with destructive intentions. Needless to mention that there followed a hail of protests, coming from the students, the teachers, the most reputed writers, against those allegations, protests that tried to censure ineptness, demagoguery and imposture, considering the

imoralul [immora] Eliade as figura cea mai completă a generației noastre [the most complete figure of our generation].

Emil Cioran's attitude is remarkable in the context: in an article, suggestively titled *Crima bătrânilor [The crime of the old people]*, he censured *ideea sinistă de a elimina pe Mircea Eliade din Universitate sub pretextul pomografiei, [the sinister idea of driving Mircea Eliade out of the University under colour of pornography]*, noting *gradul de imbecilitatea a unei generații de la care n-am învățat decât cum trebuie să fim [the degree of imbecility of a generation from which we have only learned how to be]. [10:2]*

Newspapers and magazines, revolted at the unjust accusation, contributed, as well, to the court decision that eventually cleared the Romanian scholar.

And yet it was not in Romania that he reached the climax of celebrity, as was natural, but in Chicago, USA, as a professor of history of religions; there, he never ceased to be, as he himself admitted, *român: scriitor de limbă română. Eu nu pot scrie literatură decât în românește, limba în care visez (...) limba în care pot mărturisi unei femei că o iubesc [Romanian: a writer in the Romanian language. I can only write fiction in Romanian, the language I dream in (...), the language in which I can confess a woman that I love her].*

After the inherent adaptation period, he integrated the American education system, becoming a brilliant teacher, praised by students and colleagues alike.

În fața unei imense săli arhipline, vorbea liber, era captivant. Niciun alt profesor de istoria religiilor nu s-a bucurat în America de o așa popularitate. Țin minte ovațiile pe care le-a primit în octombrie 1973, când a conferențiat la Chicago, în fața a peste o mie de profesori universitari [Before an audience tightly packed in a cram-full hall, he would speak freely – he was captivating. No other professor of religion history enjoyed such immense popularity in America. I can still remember the ovation he got in October 1973, when he held a lecture in Chicago, in front of more than one thousand university professors.] [11:11]

We do not know if becoming a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the British Academy, and other academies, caused his longing for his native land to be effaced – the longing *for de câmpiile bătute de maci, de peisagiile copilăriei mele, de câmpul și de cerul românesc [the field studded with poppies, the sceneries of my boyhood, the Romanian countryside and skies.]*

We would like to believe that the Romanian scholar always treasured his native country in his soul, for the mere reason that a work of such worldwide scope and significance as his own can only be built on kindness, honesty, generosity, and modesty.

Study and creation, in a process of continuous, consuming combustion, propelled Mircea Eliade up to pinnacles never before reached by other Romanians, as he managed to be, through the whole of his activity, more than human in a world of humans.

REFERENCES

- [1] Eliade, Mircea, *Memories*, Madrid, 1966; the volume is part of *Memoirs*, volume I, 1907-1960. Edited, and with a foreword by Mircea Handoca, Bucharest, Humanitas, 1991, p. 125
- [2] Handoca, Mircea, *The Life of Mircea Eliade*, Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 2002, p. 270
- [3] Handoca, Mircea, *op. cit.*, p. 270
- [4] A new doctor, the "literary life", year VII (1933), July - August 30, no. 184, p. 4
- [5] Eliade, Mircea, *Memorii*, second edition, Bucharest, Humanitas, 1997, p. 274
- [6] Adana, Alfons, *Mircea Eliade at the University*, in *Rampa*, an VI (1933), November 30, p. 1
- [7] Papu, Edgar, in *The Life of Mircea Eliade*, Mircea Handoca, p. 67 – 68
- [8] Cioran, Emil, *Les Debuts d'une Amitié*, in *Cahiers de L'Herne*, 1978, p. 281
- [9] Papu, Edgar, in *The life of Mircea Eliade*, Mircea Handoca, p. 67
- [10] Cioran, Emil, in "Time", X, June 20, 1937
- [11] Ricketts, Mac, in "Vatra", no. 12, December 1983, p. 11.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Senior Lecturer dr. Mariana Andrei, PhD, Department of Literature, University of Pitesti, Phone: +40723327111, E-mail: cate.topo@yahoo.com

Докладът е рецензиран.