
P A R A D I G M S

*Unde Malum? Dualist(oid)
and Gnostic Imaginary, from
Folk Mythology to Modern
Romanian Literature*

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*“L’inconscience est une
patrie; la conscience,
un exil.”*

Cioran

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of communication) (2008).

OUR STUDY relies, on the one hand, on the identification of a continuity phenomenon in European culture—the perpetuation, under various forms, over several centuries, of a paradigm of dualistic-gnostic imaginary—and, on the other hand, on the insufficient, rather sporadic representation of its Romanian component in the reference literature in the field. Dualistic mythology, once widespread across all continents, subsisted in European folklore until the 20th century only in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, particularly in the Romanian space (Eliade 1995; see also Pamfile 2006; Cartoian 1974). Dualism has stood the test of time over the centuries, until today, being often assimilated by other philosophical and religious trends, including the different versions of Gnosticism (Bianchi 1976, 1978; Ivanov 1976; Marrou 1983; Jonas 2001; Culiianu 2002). We believe that it is precisely this reminiscent and diffuse background of the autochtho-

nous mythical mentality that constituted, in the 19th–20th centuries, one of the premises—not necessarily the most relevant one—for the reiteration of dualistic imaginary in the Romanian classic literature, in specific forms (Bogomilism, Gnosticism), contaminated by the Western bookish tradition.

Dualistic cosmogonies are the only relict of pre-Christian folk cosmogony in Europe (Eliade 1995). With ancient, yet unsolved origins, spreading over an extremely vast area in cultural geography and history, dualist myths have been traced back to Finno-Ugric, Ural-Altaic, Iranian, Slavic, Amerindian peoples and even later, in the Christian era, to European heretics such as the Bogomils (who contaminated the medieval Romanian spirituality) or the Provençal Cathars and their Italian successors, until the 15th century (Bianchi 1976, 1978; Ivanov 1976; Culianu 2002; Culianu 2005; Eliade 1995). In the form that they assumed within the “Western dualistic gnozes,” dualistic myths resurfaced in the 18th century with Goethe, Hegel, *Sturm und Drang* and the Romantics—themselves “creators of apparently gnostic myths” —, and in the literature of the 20th century (Culianu 2002, 2005; Bloom 1996). Ugo Bianchi was the first to highlight this “enigma of the history of religions,” consisting of the “repeated reactivation,” after the 1st century A.D., of ancient pre-Christian dualistic myths within those mythical-religious systems that Ioan Petru Culianu designated by the term “dualisms of the West” or “dualistic gnozes of the West” (Culianu 2002; also Bianchi 1976, 1978). Finding the continuity of these mythical-imagistic structures, from ancient Gnosticism to the Romantics and later, Harold Bloom diagnoses a “purified Gnosticism” that almost turned, over time, into “a literary religion,” “an aesthetic and, at the same time, spiritual discipline” (Bloom 1996, 33). Like the other Western dualistic trends, Gnosticism is a “phenomenon of counterculture” (12). We should mention the fact that our interest lies not (necessarily) in the religious dimension of Gnosticism, but—as more appropriate to our corpus of analysis—in its functioning as an intellectual and existential paradigm.

Our intention is to identify and analyze, in the wider context of the history of ideas and mentalities in Europe, the persistence of these ancient dualist(oid) structures of the imaginary in the work of representative authors of Romanian classic and interwar literature, as well as of the postwar diaspora. We have already explained part of our conclusions and arguments in previous contributions, hence we shall not repeat them in detail, but we shall rather attempt to complete and nuance them (Popa Blanariu 2008, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c).

Such a mythical-imagistic paradigm, of a dualistic-gnostic type, may be identified in the work of Goethe, Blake, Byron, Shelley, Leopardi, Baudelaire, with the Russian symbolists, Dostoyevsky, Kafka and existentialists, with Beckett, Thomas Mann, and Mikhail Bulgakov. Thus, it has been confirmed that “the

modern intellect resorts to old ways of thinking” which “confirm its laceration” (Friedrich 1969, 44; Pagels 2013, 204–206; Culianu 2002, 41–56; Culianu 2006; Bloom 1996, 2007). In Romanian literature, reminiscences and allusions to the dualistic-gnostic imaginary or even explicit references may be found with Mihai Eminescu, Alexandru Macedonski, Lucian Blaga, Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Eugène Ionesco and, to a certain extent, with Ion Barbu or Mihail Sadoveanu (see Blaga 1969; Balotă 1976; Culianu 2006; del Conte 1990; Cifor 2000; L. Petrescu 1992; Petreu 1991; Borbély 2003; I. Em. Petrescu 1993; Paleologu 2006; Laurent 2015). It is interesting to note that—as a symptom of the interwar intellectual context in Romania—in his lectures on metaphysics delivered at the University of Bucharest, Nae Ionescu, the mentor of the generation of intellectuals that emerged between the two wars (with everything, good and bad, that this quality contributed to Romanian culture and history), analyses *Faust* by Goethe from a dualistic perspective (N. Ionescu 1996). In our opinion, the works of Eminescu, Macedonski, Blaga, Eliade, Cioran, and Ionesco illustrate, in various ways and to different degrees, the actuality in literature of a dualistic *Weltanschauung*, especially Bogomilic or gnostic, that is one of the “paths of utopic imagination” (see Wunenburger 2001, 227–228).

Without dualistic motifs having a relevant presence in his work, Tudor Arghezi nevertheless unmasks the “jester,” the “ juggler,” the “crazy” God (*One Hundred Poems*), who displays a family similarity with the *trickster*, the “evil,” “charlatan,” “rogue” Demiurge from dualistic mythology. Published during the rise of proletcultism and “marked by the fingerprint of time: war, draught, confrontation with forms of hostility against culture” (Academia Română 2004, 234), the volume *One Hundred Poems* is a confession of despair, within a troubled and hostile historical context that Good God has abandoned or, in an image inspired by Nietzsche, in which the Good God has already “died”: “One single tyke, a small sphere/Like a hedgehog, like a fish,/Rolls stealthily./And a coffin hangs in the air:/Of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit” (“Deserted Fallow”). The figure of the divine “buffoon,” of a rogue God is the opposite of the one awaited in the *Psalms*—another symptom of the poet’s dual nature, which critics had already highlighted and which he himself admitted: “I am an angel, and also a devil, and a beast, and others of such kind...” (“Portrait”).

With Ion Barbu, there returns, under different forms, a fundamental orphic-gnostic motif, *sōma-sōma*: the body, the creaturely condition—historical and material—as a “prison” of the soul, as a spiritual enclosure. “There’s the gaol in burnt, worthless earth,” and “our heads, if they exist,/Stand as chalk ovals, like a mistake”—Ion Barbu summarizes, in “Group,” the anthropological basis of our gnostic ontology. A eulogy to the uncreated, to the not yet manifested virtuality is recurrent in Ion Barbu’s poetry—also a possible reminiscence from

a dualistic *Weltanschauung*, which contaminates his poetic imaginary: “Guilty is all the created...” Other orphic-gnostic motifs, especially characteristic of the Valentinian gnosis, have been identified by Ioana Em. Petrescu in “Uvedenrode,” “The Dogmatic Egg,” “Rhythms for necessary weddings,” “King Crypto and Enigel the Lapp” (1993, 97–111). Ioana Em. Petrescu “deduces” (to re-contextualize an emblematic word for the initiatory poetics of *Second Game*) Barbu’s orphic-gnostic vein from a possible influence upon the poet—as the poet himself confesses—of a “Hellenism of decadence,” “an incursion into the holy ray of Alexandria.” (The toponym, by no means an accident, evokes an extremely receptive and creative intellectual environment, where late Antiquity, along with other schools of thought, was syncretically defined—with relevant consequences for the Western history of ideas and beliefs—the philosophical, religious and mythological synthesis of Gnosticism. Its origins, its constitutive elements seem to be found, nevertheless, further back in time and space, with reverberations from the Middle East at the beginning of our era and even before.)

The opposition between the saving “golden bough” and the infernal drama of the world—a vulgar and cruel circus like the arenas of Byzantium at the twilight of the Roman power—is the basis for Sadoveanu’s orphic-gnostic interpretation of a motif from Virgil’s *Aeneid*. There, more specifically in the epic’s “Book the Sixth,” the Sybil explains the Latin meaning of the golden bough: only the one who was meant to achieve it may return from the world of the dead. In his novel, Sadoveanu adds a gnostic soteriological meaning to Virgil’s “golden bough”: associated with “Light”—a saving, acosmic principle to which initiatory knowledge leads (*gnosis*)—the “golden bough” allusively designates with Sadoveanu a means to resist the death—the humiliation, the perversion—of the soul and of feelings in the worldly inferno. At least this is the sense made by Kesarion Breb, upon separation from Maria, former Empress of Byzantium: “—So, is it true, that you stayed at the Egyptians’ temples?/—Indeed, there I met *light*. . . Here, we shall part. The delusion that is called body will also be broken. But what is now between us, tried by fire, is a golden bough that will shine in itself, beyond time” (Sadoveanu 1969, 145, 27). We shall not rush to the conclusion—nor have we found enough undebatable arguments in this respect—that Sadoveanu makes, in *The Golden Bough*, a profession of faith for some dualistic doctrine. We can only highlight the fact that at the purely literary level, the imaginary of this novel is impregnated with a fundamental gnostic theme: the “adventure of the soul is an exile or a dramatic odyssey” (Ribes 2000, 34).

In *Master Manole*, Blaga transforms the plot of the popular ballad, in an expressionist sense, by resorting to the dualistic-Bogomilic imaginary. Proof is the name of a central character in the play, the monk Bogomil. Similar influences may also be found in Blaga’s essays—for example, in the interpretation to Eminescu’s

The Evening Star—and in his *Poems of Light*: “From where does Heaven have its –/ light?—I know: Hell illuminates it/With its flames!” (“The Light of Heaven”); “to dance/flushed upon by amazing effusions/to let God breathe freely inside me,/ without murmuring:/I am a slave in prison!” (“I want to dance!”).

The hypothesis of a vein of dualistic-gnostic imaginary in Macedonski’s work may be verified from a dual perspective: that of the Romanticism from which his work emerges and, respectively, the Symbolism which he prefigures in the Romanian context. As long as Symbolism is, up to a point, Neo-Romanticism, there is a predictable and explainable area of dualistic-gnostic interference in the imaginary characteristic of the two trends. Quite known is the relevance of a gnostic element in Russian Symbolism, by means of which Blok, Bely, Vyacheslav Ivanov, are affiliated with the mystical, messianic philosophy of Soloviev, inspired by gnostic thought. In fact, despite its aestheticizing excesses, in the direction of “art for art’s sake,” even French Symbolism, denied as a model by the Russian symbolists from the second generation, has, through Baudelaire and his “correspondences” influenced by Swedenborg, a relevant connection to the mystic and dualistic (gnostic-alchemic) tradition of the previous centuries (Popa Blanariu 2015b). Thus, there are highlighted, from another perspective, Macedonski’s filiations and homologies with the French and European Symbolism. “The Poem of Rondeaux” or “December Night” are illustrative in this respect.

The recurrence of the dualistic-gnostic imaginary with Eliade—a paradigm to which he explicitly refers in his so-called ‘fantastic’ short stories—has already been remarked or systematically analyzed, without being, nevertheless, exhausted (Borbély 2003; see also Petreu 1991; L. Petrescu 1992). The critics of Eliade have approached, almost exclusively, Eliade’s prose (one exception being Ghițulescu 2008); however, we have been rather interested in the writer’s drama poetics, as it is particularly outlined in the metadramatic considerations from his short stories (Popa Blanariu 2010a, 2015c).

An intellectual and at the same time existential experience, a historical phenomenon and ontological symbol—of the condition of being “cast” into history, into a hostile biography—exile is displayed by Eliade, Cioran, Ionesco like a “personal myth” or, at least, a sum of “obsessive images” (Mauron 2001). There may be identified, with Eliade, a “substratum orphism, corrected through gnosis” (Borbély 2003, 60), dominated by the gnostic myth of Sophia and the “Saved Saviour.” Our hypothesis, which we shall immediately support with arguments, is that during his time in Paris, Cioran reconsidered his models, the philosophers of the decline (Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Spengler), from a dualistic perspective upon history—that of the Gnostics and Bogomils, to which he often refers. In the imaginary of the postwar Romanian diaspora, the representations of history and exile, the figures of identity (as alterity—alienation, self-

aberration—and “double alienation,” from the world and from transcendence, as Jonas argues) are, more than once, gnostic (Popa Blanariu 2010b). Motifs such as “the fall into time,” the “fault of having been born,” the “Evil Demiurge,” the “temptation of being”—present in the very titles of well-known essays by Cioran—are also of gnostic inspiration. Elements of gnostic imaginary frequently occur in Eliade’s prose: “*agnostos theos*,” the soul captive into matter, the “alien” God (a “camouflaged” Spirit, “unrecognizable”). Sometimes, the gnostic myth is associated with the orphic one (Eliade), the myth of the Grail (Eliade) or the alchemical imaginary.

Dualistic, explicit or allusive references may be found with Cioran in his essays written in Paris—*La Tentation d’exister* (1956), *Histoire et utopie* (1960), *La Chute dans le temps* (1964), *Le Mauvais démiurge* (1969)—constantly marked by the consequences of his ideological affiliation from the fourth decade of the century and the need to make his past forgotten or tolerated. From *The Transfiguration of Romania* (1936) to the postwar essays, the change of tone and message is obvious. The first one claims the “‘transfiguration’ of the country through totalitarian political methods” (Petreu 2011, 394). Hence, the Nietzschean vitalism, the eulogy of “revolution” and of the affirmative power of vast, exemplary cultures (Cioran 1990, 120–121), the messianic enthusiasm, the prophetic urge to “put on a new face” by means of “fanatical” trust, able to propel Romania into History, through “an eruption,” the more belated the more powerful. After the war, in the years of philosophizing in the attic, all these became an “abandonment,” a devitalization, a refuge in—and consent to—historical inertia, to the “eternal activity without action” (as Wordsworth argues, citing Cioran about Coleridge). Briefly, blaming history and the demiurgic initiative, as long as the small Demiurge of this world is only—as Cioran asserts, explicitly referring to the gnostic and Bogomilic dualism—an “evil,” “ignorant,” “arrogant” and irresponsible one. The eulogy of heroic action, of violent political intervention, which Cioran makes in the *Transfiguration* and his articles from the Romanian press of the ’30s, is replaced, in his French essays, by an apology of capitulation, the picture of a tired withdrawal from an absurd, incomprehensible history. After the war, although abhorring the system—as he himself declares—, Cioran seems to turn his dualistic (gnostic and sometimes Bogomilic) ideas into a metaphysical explanation of his option for the denial of interfering with history. Nevertheless, it was a belated option, as long as he had openly sympathized with the far right of the ’30s. Given the political context of this conversion, we may suspect Cioran of a certain ideological opportunism.

Cioran’s “putting on a new face,” immediately after the war, is partially authentic—a late clarification and honest repentance—, to some extent calculation and posturing as part of a strategy meant to avoid his extradition to Romania

and ensure his acceptance into French intellectual circles. In the autumn of '33, Cioran began his fellowship in Germany and was seduced by the image of the Nazi youth marching, like a ghost of change—already a prefiguration of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*—on the streets of Berlin (Cioran 1995a). The exalted affiliation to the doctrine of the far right (as shown by the articles and messages sent to the country, during his scholarship, between November 1933 and July 1935) was also partially a juvenile, speculative choice of an individual carried away by the wave of an ideology with perversely messianic accents and, on the other hand, (yet) another opportunistic act of Cioran, of ideological enrolment into a camp that seemed to gain ground in Europe. The context of the epoch may eventually provide certain mitigating circumstances for the young Cioran, given his fervent, passionate attachment to Romania's cause, for which he hoped—not fully convinced, but highly motivated—to find a solution to its coming out of anonymity, out of its historical sleep of a “thousand years,” that had caused him anxiety and insomnia. In his view, only in this way, the country's (re)entrance into the history that matters, the condition of Romanian intellectual could avoid failure, whose specter terrifies Cioran as much as Ionesco. In his twenties and thirties, while writing the manuscript of the *Transfiguration* (which he would publish at twenty-five) and the articles for which he would have to explain himself for the rest of his life, the manifestation of his ego, modelled by his Transylvanian education in the spirit of national values (received in the house of his father, archpriest archimandrite), is closely connected to Cioran's reflection on how Romania may rehabilitate and reassert itself in Europe. With his leaving the country and his programmatic detachment from the Romanian issues, while in Paris, the Messianic accents disappear and Cioran reinvents himself in terms of themes, attitude and type of discourse. (Regarding the differences between Cioran's convictions and the doctrine of the Legion, see Petreu 2011, 322–325).

It seems, nevertheless, that Cioran's vast intelligence was not so practical and political, but rather speculative and rhetorical, or “aesthetic,” as he himself admitted. Cioran's view on politics, his way of engaging in public matters manifests a Neronian extravagance, the perspective of the aesthete that has the voluptuousness of projecting his performance—of staging his action—at the scale of history, one on one, in order to admire a burning Rome (hence the manifesto from the *Transfiguration*). It is not by accident that Cioran evokes Nero in his essays: “Quand on fréquente les vérités extrêmes des gnostiques, on aimerait aller, si possible, encore plus loin, dire quelque chose de jamais dit, qui pétrifie ou pulvérise l'histoire, quelque chose qui relève d'un néronisme cosmique, d'une démente à l'échelle de la matière” (Cioran 1973, 144).

In this respect, the circumstances of the emergence of Cioran's extremist inclinations are well known; besides the Romanian '27 generation, many of the intel-

lectuals of inter- (and post)war Europe were faced with them, as a result of having allowed themselves to be seduced—some reluctantly, others less so—by the wave of left or right-wing extremisms that had agitated the continent in the first decades of the 20th century. Ionesco himself recorded, in 1945, the “change” of Cioran, of “Sock” the philosopher (the English word *sock* means “ciorap” in Romanian, “Ciorap” is a pun on the writer’s name, “Cioran”), as he had designated him with antipathy: “Cioran is here exiled. He admits to having erred, in his youth. It is hard for me to forgive him” (apud Petreu 2011, 491). His twinges of conscience (aggravated by the vain attempt of saving, together with Jean Paulhan, Benjamin Fondane from his death into the concentration camp at Auschwitz, where he had been taken, together with his sister, in the last convoy) would haunt Cioran until the end of his life: “I... am... not... anti... Se... mite...” (Mirodan 1977, 247–248; Petreu 2011), he denies with his last breath, on his hospital bed, when his memory eroded by Alzheimer is revisited by the specter of the past and of his exalted choice, a card on which he had betted—as seen after the war—all his life.

Cioran’s affinity with gnostic and Bogomilic dualism—strongly claimed in his postwar essays—has, therefore, a pragmatic foundation on the one hand (that of signaling indirectly his delimitation from his political engagements and sympathies of yore) and, on the other hand, an intellectually unbiased one. Highly Cioranian through the contradiction it hides, namely that escape from time by mentally taking refuge in a mythical, archetypal, timeless situation—an acosmic condition, prior to Creation and the “fall into time”—this is but one of Cioran’s ways of adapting to the new times, the new geographical and political environment, where he struggles to find his place, his legitimacy and a new (editorial) tribune for his ideas. A lover of aphorisms and paradoxes, Cioran has succeeded in creating yet another one—this time, not on paper, but in life.

In fact, Cioran’s settling, in his postwar essays, into a perspective of timeless judgments, formulated in mythical-archetypal terms, is the sign of his returning to the apolitical creed of the ’27 generation, which Eliade had formulated and which most of its followers would recant in the fourth decade: “We want the rise of the values that spring neither from political economy, nor from technology, nor from parliamentarism. Pure, spiritual, absurdly spiritual values” (Eliade 1927). Similarly, in a letter from July 1933 to his friend Bucur Țincu, therefore only a few months before his adherence to the far right, which will happen in the autumn of the same year, Cioran declares his lack of political calling: “I am such a vain man, with such a full-grown sense of eternity, that it would be absolutely impossible for me to do politics” (Cioran 1995b, 62). A conviction stemming from an a priori disappointment: “Democracy is not the only wrong system, all political and social systems are equally wrong” (ibid.). In a way, Cioran’s path and his postwar transformation may be identified in Zevedei’s adventure, Eli-

ade's character from his short story "The Cape"—a generic character, in whose "cape" there is probably "camouflaged" (with an emblematic word for Eliade's reflection upon the relation between "sacred and profane," between history and un- or transhistorical structures) an element shared by the destinies of some members of the group gathered around the *Criterion* magazine. After a biographic path marked by the consequences of certain political sympathies and ideological affiliations, Zevedei eventually becomes engrossed in the "problem of Time." The political phenomenon (related to the "fall into time" which Cioran deplures) is no longer of interest to him. He is finally interested only in what transcends the conjectural, the essence, not the accident; not history as such, where he had rather played the part of an additional and collateral victim, but its *telos*. Thus, Zevedei seems to be putting into practice an imperative that Pantazi, another character of the short story, summarizes in "the lesson of von Braun," with an allusion to Romanian history: "The winner is only the one who can see far away," "beyond time."

During his stay in Paris, Cioran's affiliation to dualism is a more or less conscious symptom of his need to unburden his conscience, be it even through self-mystification, his consolatory identification with a mythical—explanatory and legitimate—situation. It is an attempt to be somehow exonerated of responsibility, eventually through a symbolical refuge into a mythical ontology. Thus, the personal mistake would be forgiven—as Cioran seems to be insinuating—by its resorption into a fatal mechanism of the universal mistake, which is, in Western dualistic gnoses, Creation itself. According to the Gnostics, Creation is only the emanation of an absurd, failed demiurgic will. Cioran's biography, with its ideologically attributable mistake, thus implicitly becomes a small avatar of the original Mistake, which the "Evil Demiurge" commits, at the explanatory level of the dualistic cosmogony. This first mistake inaugurates the creature's ordeal. No less, as Cioran regrets, than the ordeal of memory and conscience, of individuation as trauma of the detachment from the indiscernibility of beginning: "L'inconscience est une patrie; la conscience, un exil" (Cioran 1973, 145). Only the beginning—acosmic, unhistorical—is inactive and hence exonerated of all responsibility; hence, the eulogy of "inaction" (224, 153). Legitimated by the acosmic transcendence of the gnostic supreme divinity, unaccomplishing in duration—which the Evil Demiurge has betrayed through his Creation—"inaction" is, as Cioran proclaims, "divine." Thus, a certain type of "laziness," to which he bluntly admitted, neither more nor less than a pious *imitatio Dei*, the devotee of which Cioran presents himself to be.

In the proper gnostic sense, Cioran is a perpetual exile, with the nostalgia of preconscious innocence and a lost unhistorical homeland. Wherever he may be geographically, he perceives his belonging to the world and history like an ir-

reparable alienation: “Pas un instant où je ne suis extérieur à l’univers” (Cioran 1973). “Au plus intime de lui-même, l’homme aspire à rejoindre la condition qu’il avait *avant* la conscience. L’histoire n’est que le détour qu’il emprunte pour y parvenir” (146). In the most obviously gnostic spirit, the Creation is, for Cioran, the product of a continuous deterioration, regression, incurable “devolution” (Bianchi 1976, 1978; Culianu 2005): “Tout phénomène est une version dégradée d’un autre phénomène plus vaste: le temps est une tare de l’éternité; l’histoire, une tare du temps; la vie encore, tare encore, de la matière” (Cioran 1973, 144). What remains then for the creature to do? Almost nothing, “tâchons donc d’inventer quelque chose de mieux que l’être” (Cioran 1973, 138).

An absolute error, committed out of vanity and ignorance by the “Evil Demiurge,” history is, for Cioran, only the “product and symptom of a divine pathology” (Cioran 1973, 146). Unlike the Gnostics who, detaching themselves from the world and its uninspired Creator, take refuge in the idea of an acosmic God (“Father”) of Pleroma, Cioran refuses consolation. For him, the “Evil Demiurge” remains “evil,” and the infinitely good, “unknown Father” of the Gnostics is no longer of interest, as long as he cannot interfere efficiently and justly in Creation. A similar dilemma torments Ivan Karamazov, eventually driving him mad. “Qu’est-ce qui est alors normal, qu’est-ce qui est saint?”—Cioran asks himself, with words that could also belong to Ivan. The answer comes, as usual, without illusions: “L’éternité? Elle même n’est qu’une infirmité de Dieu” (Cioran 1973, 146). Like in Ionesco (as we shall shortly see), in Cioran there occurs, during his Paris stay, a motif which he himself places among those able to define him, at the point of contact between dualism and the eulogy of the non-manifestation from *Vedanta* and, especially from Buddhism (Chenet 2015). By contemplation and meditative retreat, the conscience of individuality, the feeling of presence within a purely conjectural, accidental reality is diminished—a fugitive domain of the historical phenomenon, of the immediate present, inconsistent in duration.

Cioran explicitly speaks of the dualistic gnosés as a founding discourse—an underlying mythical and metaphysical pattern—of his thinking: from the “Gnostics’ extreme truths” (Cioran 1973, 142, 144, 193), from “popular dualism,” Thracian and Bogomilic (30), from “Russian Byronism, from Pechorin to Stavrogin” (132), as long as the gnostic “Evil Demiurge,” the “Prince of Darkness” and of the historical world, is present, especially as Lucifer, as well as in the apology made by Byronians for him. “Thraces et bogomiles—je ne puis oublier que j’ai hanté les mêmes parages qu’eux, ni que les uns pleuraient sur les nouveau-nés et que les autres, pour innocenter Dieu, rendaient Satan responsable de l’infamie de la Création” (30). From the revolution vehemently clamored in the *Transfiguration* and his Romanian articles from the ’30s, Cioran has

declares himself the follower of a status-quo and against political action, in his postwar Parisian essays. The old impulse of (and instigation to) violent action is sublimated in metaphysically justified contemplativeness, from the perspective of a dualistic philosophy of history. The agent of change, the Evil Demiurge, nestles subversively in the heart of every meliorist utopia or illusion, eventually compromising it, as Cioran suggests in his French essays. Essentially, this is the equation of Cioran's intellectual and political biography: the utopic desideratum of the violent, even "permanent" revolution—as Cioran borrows (also) from the jargon of the Marxist left—leads him to a deadlock in history and in his own existence:

Fallen angel, turned into a Demiurge, a Satan serving Creation, turning its back on the Father and showing himself to be on earth stronger than Him and more at ease; far from being a usurper, he is our lord, legitimate sovereign who, if the universe were reduced to man, would conquer the Exalted. Therefore, let us have the courage to recognize our true shepherd. (Cioran 1992, 104–105)

The great religions were not wrong: what Maya gives to Buddha, Abriman to Zoroaster, the Evil to Jesus is the earth and worldly power, realities that actually depend on the Prince of Darkness. So that, if we played his game, we would be his accomplices . . . if we wanted to establish a new order, a generalized utopia or a universal empire. (105)

So, many emblematic motifs of the gnostic imaginary are resumed, in one form or another, in Cioran's postwar essays: the progressive devolution, the exile in a "failed universe" (Cioran 1973, 149), the "certainty of being just an accident" (128), alienation, the feeling of estrangement and the nostalgia of the uncreated—of the acosmic, unhistorical, "slumbering" stage of conscience (a term which Ioana Em. Petrescu uses to describe Ion Barbu's poetic universe) —, the search for salvation, the unknown "Father," the God alienated from his Creation and the history for which he is not responsible (as long as they are exclusively the product of the Evil Demiurge). On the other hand, Cioran's Parisian essays—of a "mystic without God"—are an unusual mixture of nihilist attitude and gnostic language. Therefore, above Cioran's inner universe, described in gnostic terms and images, there lies a sky abandoned by gods: "Tout este rempli de dieux, disait Thales, à l'aube de la philosophie; à l'autre bout, à ce crépuscule où nous sommes parvenus, . . . tout est vide de dieux" (Cioran 1973, 177). Or, at the antipode of nihilism, pure and tough Gnosticism hopes unconditionally, until the end, for the saving hand of transcendence. Cioran metaphysically enjoys the Apocalypse, like a reparation that is due to the creature that—like in the gnostic

myth—unjustly bears the guilt of Genesis. With Cioran, the apology for the end of civilization, the thesis of the absurdity of history experiences not only neo- and post-Romantic philosophical influences (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Spengler) (Petreu 2011) but, to an equal measure, also a dualistic-gnostic vein of thought.

Dualistic motifs, similar to those of Cioran, occur under different forms in the work of Eugène Ionesco, within the same mixture of nihilism and gnostic imaginary: the exile, the Evil Demiurge, the fall into time, the journey into the inferno, the light of knowledge that reveals and saves, leaving this light behind. With a complex of the lost paradise, with a (quasi)gnostic nostalgia of sharing from an obscured truth, on the numinous-luminous essence of the being, Ionesco evokes, under various forms (direct confession and allusions in plays) the “obsessive image” (Mauron 2001) of the supernatural light that bursts out, one day, somewhere, suddenly transforming them completely into “something else” (Van der Leeuw 1948, 9), with the fascinating and disturbing nature of the numinous; something that reminds of an “irruption” of the sacred into the profane, in Eliade’s terms (Otto 1929). This episode from Ionesco’s biography is directly connected to a trauma on which his work is built to a large extent and that corresponds to an archetypal situation which Jonas (2001) finds with Gnostics and Existentialists alike: the original trauma of “being cast into the world,” of the break from the Gnostics’ original luminous paradise or from the Existentialists’ first and last “nothingness.” In fact, Eliade (1986) interprets Ionesco’s imaginary in a mystic-initiatory note, as we shall shortly see, somehow joining, in this respect, Marguerite Jean-Blain (2010).

Ionesco repeatedly confesses to the feeling of “strangeness” and “unreality” experienced by him as a result of belonging to this world. This determines his “only authentic problem” worth considering, namely “the meaning of our existence”: “why is there something rather than nothing” (Ionesco 2007). His drama is the expression of the consternation caused by the fact that he accidentally participates to the world, but not, essentially, to its meaning, which he does not find. His “absurd” drama is but the mirror of the world’s absurdity, its ontological vacuity. “By means of language, gestures, games, accessories,” Ionesco intends “to express emptiness” (Ionesco 2007), as the old people in *The Chairs* express it, by crowding the stage with pieces of furniture, filling in the emptiness of their lives with a staging of their own disappearance. Thus, it seems that they are attempting to give a shape—that of a final ceremony—to an existence without purpose or whose meaning refuses, in any case, to reveal itself. Lacking ontological consistency, the world is “too easy,” “too empty,” as Ionesco finds, yet “suffocated” by the pressure of the accidental, by time, matter and by what takes the form of spatial-temporal conditioning, by the “objects” “endlessly pro-

liferating, invading everything,” replacing real life and authentic being, like the chairs from the play.

Although treated in an ambiguous register, there transpires, in *The Chairs*, the old motif of Light, interpreted from a gnostic view. Awaited like an alternative to the cloistered universe where a pair of old people lead their lives and get ready for a spectacular death, (like) on a stage, Light arrives along with the mysterious Emperor—a kind of God(ot) falsified *à la* Ionesco. The space of the last performance of the two is “overcrowded” by a “bunch of absent presences” (Ionescu 1970, 169) installed in their seats. From this space, the protagonists, the two old people, can escape only in one way, through a double suicide—which eventually happens. The mad teacher from *The Lesson* seems, in his turn, a variation on the theme of the Evil Demiurge, an ignorant, oppressive, absurd authority. In many ways, an “Evil consubstantial to the world” (Ionesco 2010, 242) creeps in almost all of Ionesco’s plays and corrodes the ludic dimension of the dramatic universe. More often than not sarcastic and sometimes with resignation, in a register of disorientation, despair or contained anger, the playwright or some alter ego character watches this invasion of evil into everyday life. Alien(ated) par excellence, the “man with bags” from the eponymous play is “a character who no longer recognizes his country,” who “feels endangered everywhere and does not meet love” (Ionesco 2010). Frequent in folk mythology (Popa Blanariu 2008), analyzed by Eliade in one of his essays (Eliade 1995), the motif of the dualistic partnership between the rival divinities is taken and re-contextualized by Ionesco in *Journeys among the Dead*:

Arlette: Who would have an interest to hide something like this from us?

Mrs Simpson: Perhaps the Devil!

Arlette: Or, maybe, good God!

Mrs Simpson: They may have made a deal, or a pact. . .

Mrs Simpson: I believe that the sky is, in fact, another world. Completely somewhere else.
(Ionesco 2010, 153)

In a way, Ionesco’s work “may be read” like “a journey through the Inferno” (Ungureanu 1995, 111). Moreover, according to Ionesco, who had read Cioran, the “Evil Demiurge would be one of the happy formulations helping us understand what happens with us” (109). In his late years, after he was able to overlook the juvenile ideological slippage of his countryman, Ionesco ventures to make a prophecy: “none of the writers of our era, including me, represents a spiritual value, except the negativistic ones like Emil Cioran” (apud Ungureanu 1995, 106). Similarly forgiving and prophetic is Ionesco with regard to Eliade: “The 21st century, as Malraux argued, would either be

religious or not be at all: it will be, thanks to Eliade and his teaching” (apud Ungureanu 1995, 107).

In a perhaps less predictable manner, Eliade (1986, 31) identifies, in Ionesco’s dramatic imaginary, a “large number” of essential mythical-religious structures: “labyrinth, center, shadows, paradise, infinity, going out of time, light, bliss,” meaning “almost” “half of the themes from the history of mysticism and the history of religion” (31). For example, in *Exit the King*, there transpires the “influence of two major spiritual references: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and one of the most important *Upanishads*.” The playwright had read them—Eliade assures us from his double position, as Ionesco’s intimate and specialist in the history of religions—, as he had also read the Holy Fathers of the Eastern Church (31). The structure of the labyrinth returns obsessively in Ionesco’s plays, which leads to a possible interpretation of them in an initiatory note, as long as “one of the most dramatic initiation tests is this very entrance into the labyrinth, at the risk of getting lost, namely of dying” for himself, the neophyte (32). In his conversations with Claude Bonnefoy, Ionesco attempts, on his own, a hermeneutics of the labyrinth, which he assimilates with “time, space and the infinite, whereas paradise is, on the contrary, a round, full world that already contains everything, neither finiteness nor infinity,” where the “problem finite-infinite” is “not even raised” as a matter of fact (Ionesco, apud Eliade 1986, 40).

Jonas has found, as already mentioned, a certain parallelism between Existentialism and the old Gnosticism (Jonas 2001). One example which Eliade indirectly offers to him in support of this closeness is Ionesco himself: he “is one hundred percent a modern man, ‘cast into the world’” and, at the same time, “always renewed or inspired by this world of traditional values,” which he rediscovers “either in dreams or imaginary experiences” (Eliade 1986, 40). Among these “traditional values,” we may include the dualistic imaginary with the underlying dualistic speculation.

In *A Hell of a Mess...!*, the character precipitates anxiously in search of the breakfast that nobody brings to him any longer, to surprisingly find himself completely alone. Starving, unrestrained, his voice is but the indication of a physical discomfort, a panic-stricken outburst of elemental nature. Gradually, as he calls out vainly, his voice falls silent and the character, with his sonorous halo, moves away from the great “nonsense,” detaches himself from the imperative of the physiological and loses himself in the “light that pours in from everywhere,” towards the “very strange” “nothingness”—that also envelops, in the end, the dying person from *Exit King*.

—*Portress! Where’s my breakfast?! Portress! Portress! Breakfast! He runs on the stage, in all directions. Where’s my breakfast?! I want my breakfast! . . . Obviously, he receives no answer. The character looks around, utterly stunned.*

What's going on? Is there nobody here! Hey! Hey!...

He rushes, he grabs the bottle of brandy, he throws the bottle of brandy.

—I will die of hunger! I will die of thirst!

He looks around one more time; the space is empty. There is nothing else but the light pouring in from all sides.

—What does this mean! There's no use, there's nobody left. I understood nothing, I don't understand anything. Nobody would understand. And yet, I am not surprised. It is a wonder that I am not surprised. Very strange.

(Ionesco 2008, 224–225)

The tree from the background of the play (possibly the mark of an intertextual dialogue between Ionesco and Beckett) and the light that finally invades everything seem to be two opposing symbols of transcendence. They signal, at the same time, two distinct attitudes towards it: on the one hand, the transcendence of mystics (a living God, God-Light) and, on the other hand, the absent or already “dead” God of the (post)Nietzscheans, whom Beckett calls Godot. In *Waiting for Godot*, the tree on the stage is the substitute of a *Deus absconditus*, to which there yet cling, self-deluding in their long wait, as long as their existence, the two avant-garde grand-grandchildren of the picaro, Vladimir and Estragon.

In this investigation we have provided evidence of the continuity of the phenomenon that constitutes the object of our analysis (the dualistic imaginary in popular culture and modern Romanian literature), highlighting its long-term manifestation, at the crossroads of the history of literature and that of mentalities. Becoming aware of ancient dualistic mentality structures makes possible the understanding of certain (sub and counter) contemporary cultural phenomena. Also, it makes possible the understanding of certain Romanian cultural phenomena (linguistic, mythological, literary etc.) by placing them within a universal context. Such an approach goes beyond the relation between the literary phenomenon and the “short,” “event-like” duration of the immediate context, drawing attention to slow social phenomena, highly inert (such as mentality changes) that, in their turn, influence the history of literature.

□

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Abstract

Unde Malum? Dualist(oid) and Gnostic Imaginary,
from Folk Mythology to Modern Romanian Literature

Our contribution attempts to respond to a gap in the investigation of the reminiscences of dualistic imaginary in modern literature and also in the Romanian reflection on the phenomenon. By approaching more thoroughly a theme that we have already discussed, from other perspectives, in our previous contributions, this article aims at identifying and analyzing, in the context of the history of mentality and the history of the imaginary, the persistence of certain dualist(oid) structures in the work of authors who are representative for Romanian classic and interwar literature, as well as for the postwar diaspora.

Keywords

myth, Dualism, Gnosticism, Bogomilism, Eminescu, Macedonski, Arghezi, Blaga, Sadoveanu, Ion Barbu, Eliade, Cioran, Ionesco