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Romanian Mythopolitics in the 20th Century

The year of the Great Union, 1918, and the coronation in Alba Iulia, a few years later, of King Ferdinand and Queen Mary, are the supreme moments of united and independent Romania. This was Romania in the superlative, the myth turned into reality.

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A FEW YEARS ago, I had the opportunity to read Raoul Girardet' outstanding book *Mituri şi mitologii politice* (Political myths and mythologies, trans., Jassy: Institutul European, 1997), but it was only at the beginning of the third millennium that I felt the desire to see how the political myths and mythologies inventoried by the French author might actually apply in the case of Romania. He discusses four myths that are plainly manifest within the collective Romanian psyche: the Conspiracy myth, the myth of the Savior, of the Golden Age, and of Unity. In the following pages, I shall elaborate upon the four myths described by Girardet, trying to determine how they are reflected in the Romanian political mythology, especially in that which operated in the 20th century (it must be said that, at least in part, these myths have also been approached in the works of Lucian Boia).

1. **THE CONSPIRACY myth** postulates the existence of an occult power which, like a malevolent spider, operates from the shadows. At world level, the most famous such

plots are those allegedly devised by the Jews, the Jesuits, and the Freemasons (occasionally, two such plots merge into one; communism, for instance, has also been seen as a Judeo-Masonic conspiracy). Usually, the conspiratorial organization is seen as having a complex hierarchy, involving many accomplices who take an oath of fealty, become initiates, and can recognize each other with the help of secret passwords and codes. However, the plot involves not only oath takers, but also spies and informants, the general goal being world domination. Plotters are cryptically referred to as people of the shadows and foreigners, because usually they are not natives of the place where the conspiracy is being put into effect. "People of the shadows, the agents of the Plot systematically elude even the most elementary rules of social normality. Within any community aware of its coherence, they constitute an alien group, mysteriously abiding by their own laws, following only their own imperatives and desires. Protected from elsewhere or from nowhere, the fanatical conspirators are the very epitome of the Alien" (Girardet 1997, 30). Plotters are usually designated by analogy with crawling, slithering, insidious beasts: snakes, octopuses, leeches, rats, and especially spiders. As a body, the conspiratorial organization is symbolized by the gaping mouth and the tentacle-like hand (the octopus of the Mafia kind). At religious level, the conspiratorial organization is seen as an anti-Church. The idea of such a plot is used by the powers that be in a country (empire) either in order to eliminate its rivals, or in order to hide previous mistakes. Usually, the myth of the plot is the outcome of persecution mania, but this only when it is not deliberately engineered by the authorities. Besides, those in power accuse the others (who may or may not be foreign to that county or empire) of seeking to set up a totalitarian regime, but the totalitarian regime in question is actually the goal pursued by the authorities themselves. In other words, the plot ascribed to others is actually a plot engineered by the authorities in order to eliminate their rivals: "any Plot, any clandestine manipulation tends to gain legitimacy by presenting itself as a counter-plot, as a countermeasure to clandestine actions" (43–44).

But let us see in more detail how this myth of a plot or of a conspiracy worked in 20th century Romania. Before the Union of 1918, Romanians had legitimately felt threatened by the surrounding empires (chiefly Austria-Hungary and Russia). After 1918, during the interwar period and during World War II, at a time when fascist far right ideas were quite popular in Romania, there was talk about a Jewish conspiracy (also under the influence of Nazi Germany). Conspiracy myths thrived during the communist period. "Totalitarian regimes have a really soft spot for conspiracy theories," argued Lucian Boia (*Pentru o istorie a imaginarului*, Bucharest: Humanitas, 2000), because these regimes display the complex of the *besieged fortress* (198). First came the Western and American conspiracy against a Romania allegedly liberated by the Soviets (the accusations against this conspiracy actually marked the beginning of the Cold War, in which Romania sided with the USSR).

Within the country, the communists constructed the conspiracy of the "enemies of the people," an imaginary plot used in order to put in prisons, labor camps, colonies, and psychiatric asylums all those who were deemed anti-communist, not-communist, or indifferent, but also those communists who were not fanatical enough or had become undesirable in the eyes of the regime (historians and memoirists speak about more than half a million or even more than a million people who became political prisoners between 1944 and 1964, one third of them dying before 1963–1964, when Romanian political prisoners were pardoned). In the 1950s, following the model of the Stalinist show trials staged in Moscow between 1933 and 1939, and during which the communist leaders seen by Stalin as his rivals had been exposed as spies and executed, in Romania Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej came up with the so-called plot of the communist deviationists (Ana Pauker, Vasile Luca, and Teohari Georgescu, all holding high ministerial positions in the early days of Romanian communism) in order to eliminate all competition. Another leading communist, Lucreţiu Pătrăşcanu, seen as a sort of Romanian Bukharin, was even executed in 1954. After 1956, when the Hungarian anti-communist revolution was defeated by the Soviet troops, the authorities also began to talk about a Hungarian conspiracy, but one of Romanian extraction, and another massive wave of arrests followed, involving more so-called "enemies of the people." Another myth programmatically generated within the country was the myth of the *Securitate*, the repressive organ in Romania, created in 1948 to replace the former State Security which had operated until 1944. The *Securitate* was presented by the communist leaders and by its own representatives as an occult society and organization, capable of controlling everything through its files (the files were basically the alter ego of the actual individual investigated by the *Securitate*, consisting of both real and false data), its informants, and also through physical and mental pressure (torture). In the early days of communism (the time of Gheorghiu-Dej, considered to be the harshest of them all), the agents of the *Securitate* wore black leather coats, were crude, barely literate, operating arrests and torturing people mostly at night (they were seen as terrifying creatures of the dark, despite the fact that their victims were arrested pretty much anywhere and at any time). In the Ceauşescu period they wore standard suits, had close-cropped hair and were clean-shaven (beards were deemed "decadent," associated with the West and with "corrupt" America), and some of them were even intellectuals (in other words, primitivism had become a thing of the past). Towards the end of the Ceauşescu period, but even earlier, Romanians truly believed in a conspiracy of the *Securitate*, seen as a state within a state, as an anti-Vatican. The same Romanians, disappointed by the lasting communism and by the absence of an American intervention meant to chase away the communists (a myth which I shall discuss in the chapter devoted to the figure of the Savior), talked about a Yalta conspiracy (1945) of the three greats of that time (Stalin, Churchill, Roosevelt). The latter two, the Englishman and the American, had allegedly betrayed Romania, allowing Stalin to claim it as spoils of war. Later on, another historic encounter, the one occurred in Malta in 1989 (between George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev), was seen by Romanians as yet another conspiracy, this time a beneficial one. Following this pact between Americans and Russians (which symbolically marked the end of the Cold War), the communist system collapsed in Eastern Europe, Romania included.

Conspiracy theories flourished after the communist period. The Revolution of 1989 was described as a conspiracy engineered by the KGB (though the agency of Ion Iliescu and of the second echelon of the communist regime, who took the power in December of 1989). Also, it was seen as a conspiracy of some reformist elements from the *Securitate* and from the Army, who had deliberately misled Nicolae Ceauşescu into convening the Bucharest rally of 21 December 1989 in protest against the rebellion that had broken out in Timişoara. Allegedly, these reformist elements had counted on a more or less spontaneous revolt of the people of Bucharest (there has been a lot of talk about the dispersion of the people gathered for the rally, with protesters coming together and adopting a more radical position in University Square; this because, had Bucharest failed to support Timişoara, Ceauşescu might have been able to stay in power). The nationalists came up with the idea of a Hungarian conspiracy, starting from the fact that pastor László Tőkés and those who supported him had triggered the revolt in Timişoara. There was even talk about a CIA conspiracy meant to overthrow Ceauşescu. Conspiracy theories were also associated with the issue of the so-called "terrorists" of December 1989. They were considered to be groups of Arab mercenaries, recruited by the *Securitate* and trained to defend Ceauşescu with their lives. According to another version, the "terrorists" were orphans raised by the Army, adopted by the *Securitate* and educated in the cult of Ceauşescu and of his wife, presented as their "father" and their "mother." Later on, it emerged that the most accurate theory was the one whereby the "terrorists" had been people from the *Securitate*, from the Army, or from the Militia, used to create diversions and generate the feeling (especially in Bucharest, after 22 December 1989) that the National Salvation Front was the only legitimate body that had organized and led the Romanian revolution. The political outbursts of 1990, namely, the violent election campaign (with the denigration of the reborn historical parties, chiefly the National Peasant Party and the National Liberal Party), the events occurred in Târgu-Mureş in the month of March (violent clashes between Hungarians and Romanians), the University Square phenomenon (22 April–13 June 1990), the incursions of the miners (29 January, 18 February, and especially 14–15 June 1990), followed by the harsh first stage of the Iliescu regime (1990–1992, including the miners' incursion of September 1991), generated much talk about other conspiracies. The first election campaign, in which the National

Peasant Party and the National Liberal Party were ritually tarnished, generated in the collective Romanian mind the idea of a Western plot aimed at the exploitation of Romania, and the leaders of the historical parties were dubbed "traitors to their country" and "agents of the West." The events occurred in Târgu-Mureş led to the alleged anti-Romanian conspiracy hatched by the Hungarians; this conspiracy theory was circulated both by the authorities (interested in diverting the Romanians' attention from the controversial personalities of Ion Iliescu and of other communist high officials now comfortably leading the new institutions), and by some extremist parties. The Greater Romania Party (GRP) even came up with the idea of a Judeo-Masonic plot against Romania. When Ion Iliescu also became undesirable, the GRP presented him as the agent of a KGB plot against Romania. The continuing rally in University Square was associated by the Iliescu regime with the interwar far-right Legion. Thus, the day of 13 June 1990, when the building of the Police Headquarters, of the Ministry of the Interior, and of the National Television were vandalized (partly at the initiative and with the participation of law enforcement agencies) was condemned as an attempted fascist coup. Most frequently, the event was accusingly referred to as a "legionary rebellion." Only by resorting to such threatening labels could the Iliescu regime call in the miners, as a police force loyal to the president and to the government, allegedly in order to defend the much touted democracy. On the other hand, the leading intellectuals who had supported the continuing rally in University Square spoke about a conspiracy of the former *Securitate* and of the Romanian Intelligence Service against those who were manifestly opposed to Iliescu and to the National Salvation Front. In the case of the miners' incursion of 1999, with the declared goal of laying siege to Bucharest, there was talk of a conspiracy set up by the former *Securitate*, whose agents were presently active within extremist organizations such as the Greater Romania Party, the Social Democracy Party of Romania, and even the Romanian Intelligence Service, as the latter was still employing at least 50 percent of the staff belonging to the former *Securitate*.

2. **The second political myth discussed by Girardet is the myth of the Savior.** The Savior can also be known as the Providential Man, the Leader, the Guide: the Savior can be of common or of exceptional origin, and may or may not be an adventurer. At any rate, the Savior is a pivotal character "concentrating around his person the agitation of a community that hopes for something" (Girardet 1997, 50). Still, he is not like that from the beginning, gaining this position through a process of mythicization or "heroification," involving three stages: the time of waiting and of the call, the time of the actual presence, and finally the time of memory (54–55). "Heroification" involves the "existence of a relationship of adequacy between the personality of the virtual savior and the needs of society at a certain moment in its history" (63). The figure of

the Savior is placed under the symbol of the torch, of the sun, of the beacon and of light, the myth being structured in such a manner that the Savior comes to destroy a certain order (or disorder) in order to introduce a different one. The Savior usually appears when the balance of a nation is upset and at times of political or spiritual crisis, when a nation undergoes a crisis of identity and of legitimacy and seeks a "father" or a "guide." As such, the Savior is seen as a "messenger of Fate" (Boia 2000, 168–169). Girardet identified four types of Savior representations: a. *the Cincinnatus type*, the wise old man representing justice, royalty, the man-institution; b. *the Alexander the Great type*, the bold military commander—an adventurer, even—, a symbol of youth, usually an inspired hero, destined by fate; c. *the Solon type*, the lawmaker, the founder of a new order, and d. *the Moses type*, the priest, the prophet, a visionary of things to come, driven by a sacred impetus, acting like the leader of a religious order even if he is, for instance, a head of state; he wishes to identify or to be identified with the people, to be seen as embodying the will of the people (Hitler, for instance).

There are also hybrid types, such as Cincinnatus–Solon, where the construct of the Father, of the Protector, is essential to the political imagination. This Father of the people "is called upon to calm the situation, to restore confidence, to reestablish lost security . . .; as a guarantor of the rules of continuity, transmission, and succession, the values he embodies are those of permanence, of heritage, of legacy. His role is that of preventing the accidents of history, of avoiding the fractures caused by it, of taking responsibility for the future in keeping with his loyalty towards a past he naturally identifies with" (Girardet 1997, 70). This mythicized portrait fits, for instance, the Iliescu of December 1989 and 1990, who presented himself as the new "father" of Romania and who continued in his own fashion the legacy of communism, albeit in a style that was not visibly inspired by that of Ceauşescu; it was not by accident that during the election campaign of 1990 his supporters would chant: "The sun rises when Iliescu comes out." The same portrait also perfectly fits Stalin, the great Soviet Father, the continuator of Lenin from all points of view, and especially when it came to eliminating the "enemies of the people."

I shall try to apply each of the four Savior types to the Romanian mentality of the 20th century. There are many available candidates, from kings such as Ferdinand the Unifier and Michael I to people like Marshal Antonescu and Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, from Nicolae Ceauşescu to Ion Iliescu, Emil Constantinescu, or Traian Băsescu. In the Romanian mythopolitics of the 20th century, the figure of the Savior was quite a hybrid one, well beyond the standard representations. For instance, the Cincinnatus type includes both King Ferdinand (whose reign saw the unification of all Romanian provinces) and Corneliu Coposu, chairman of the National Peasant Party after 1989, respected for his wisdom and also for his anti-communist radicalism. However, the same type also includes a post-communist president such as Ion Iliescu (who turned out to be a false Cincinnatus, given his communist sympathies). The Alexander the Great type might include both Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and King Michael I (both worshipped for their "inspired" youth). The Solon type applies to Ion Antonescu (the marshal who restored order, the military commander and the man who eliminated the legionnaires), to Ion Iliescu (the first president after the fall of communism and the bloody revolution of December 1989), to Emil Constantinescu (the second post-communist president, expected to bring true democracy to Romania after the false democracy of the Iliescu regime), and even to Nicolae Ceauşescu (the successor of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej), apparently a reformist president after dreadful years of Stalinist repression. Finally, within the Moses type we once again find Corneliu Zelea Codreanu (who had also spoken about a religious renewal of Romania) and also Ceauşescu who, during his megalomaniac and narcissistic phase, claimed to be the incarnation of popular will, its representative, not in front of God, but of the rest of the world. Under Ceauşescu, the Romanian communist regime sought to establish a filiation of the figure of the Savior (with various nuances, from the Victor to the Punisher, the Conqueror, the Revolutionary, the Wise Man). The dictator claimed to be the continuator of characters like Decebalus, Mircea the Elder, Stephen the Great, Vlad the Impaler, Michael the Brave, Nicolae Bălcescu, or Alexandru Ioan Cuza. Ceauşescu surpassed them all in the construction of his own myth: in the 1980s, he sought to create, even archaeologically, an ancestor of the Romanians (ironically dubbed "Homo Scornicensis" by the Romanian intellectuals, because the very name of the native village of the Romanian dictator, Scorniceşti, alluded to lies, to tall-tales, to stretching the truth beyond all measure).

Sometimes, in the figure of the Leader we find the people's need to learn from the expected one, to be initiated, guided, subordinated to a higher instance. This is what Corneliu Zelea Codreanu managed to achieve as a "messenger of Fate" and as a charismatic leader of the Legionary Movement, which exerted an incredible fascination over the interwar youth and even over some outstanding intellectuals. The Leader is bold and defiant and can even claim to be a luminary, he is a militant, mobilizing, active authority and, first and foremost, a prophetic guide. Hitler wanted to be something like that (as opposed to the Stalin, the failed priest, who always avoided any religious overtones in the construction of his own myth); according to Girardet, Hitler combines the type of the protective father with that of the fanatical prophet. As to the type of the prophetic guide, in the case of Romania, the leading representative is the same Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, whose photographs published by the right-wing interwar press were strategically staged in a prophetic vein, even when it came to his physical representation. First, we see a tall, strong, handsome man, making his electoral visits to Romanian villages on a white horse (by analogy with a local folk tale character). Another photograph shows him at the grave of some martyrs, holding a human skull (here he posed as an initiate in the matters of life and death, just like Christ—or maybe like Hamlet!?). Yet another picture shows him at the seaside, with the rays of the sun forming a halo over his head. Many photographs show him during marches, alongside his followers, resembling a young god, always with a proud and impenetrable countenance. This was the construct deemed a new Messiah by his disciples. His brutal assassination (at the orders of King Carol II) gave new impetus to the myth of the prophet, but also to that of the martyr (although Zelea Codreanu himself had personally carried out an assassination).

A lot could be said about the figure of the Hero and of the Savior in the Romanian political mythology of the 20th century, especially since many leaders enjoyed a dual representation. The second representation could be a positive one (with the myth revived years after the disappearance of the Savior, consolidating the first mythical layer), or it could come to accompany the original myth as an anti-myth (when the once mythical Savior later proves to be a disappointment). Marshal Antonescu gained mythical stature as the only man powerful enough to firmly lead the country after the end of the royal dictatorship, and also after the rebellion of the Legion. Later on, he became the great patriot (the great Romanian) who, for a short period of time, recovered Soviet-invaded Bessarabia. Also, after an unfair trial staged by the communists who had taken control of the country, he remained dignified in front of his executioners, taking personal command of his own firing squad, the last gesture of a great military leader. After 1990, his myth was revived, as some members of the former *Securitate* and those nostalgic for the policy of the iron fist created the image of a marshal capable of putting an end to the chaos that had ensued after the fall of communism. The renewed myth was also based on the image of the martyr marshal, executed by the communists. Completely overlooked were Ion Antonescu's anti-Semitic stance (he had been Hitler's ally) and his orders in this respect which, in certain cases, had led to pogroms.

King Michael I was also a mythical figure in his youth, during and after Antonescu's dictatorship, when he was seen as Romania's only hope of avoiding Sovietization. Then, in 1990, his figure was revived by a political minority which saw him as an alternative to Ion Iliescu. His visit to Romania in 1992 and the huge crowd of Bucharest residents who went out to welcome him (an estimated 1 million took to the streets) revived the myth of the king, the only person capable of healing a country exhausted by communism. As God's anointed, the king was the one who could have replaced the usurper, for that is how

Iliescu was seen both by those with monarchic nostalgias and by many categories of anti-communists who were no longer willing to compromise when it came to the leadership of the country. Then, in 2001, the same King Michael I proved to be a disappointment, accepting a pact with the Iliescu regime, restored in 2000. People wondered whether the king should have accepted a cooperation between two irreconcilable institutions, the monarchy and the republic, and between two opposed figures, the anti-communist king and the neo-communist president (despite the manifest difference between the Iliescu of 1990 and the one of 2000). Obviously, under these circumstances the old myth of the young savior king faded and was replaced by the image of the old exiled monarch who accepted to cooperate with a regime that had still failed to denounce the illegal abolition of the monarchy in the country.

In his turn, Ceauşescu had a double representation when it came to his political myth, and this in both respects, as an anti-myth and as a revived myth: one is the Ceauşescu of 1965, the successor of Gheorghiu-Dej who was promising reforms, followed by the Ceauşescu of 1968, opposed for one day to the invasion of Czechoslovakia and to his Soviet overlords (his actions then encouraged many intellectuals to join the Communist Party, something they had systematically refused until that moment). Another is the Ceauşescu of the late period, the megalomaniac, the fierce nationalist, the president photographed with a scepter in hand, just like a king, stirring, among other things, the mock enthusiasm of Salvador Dalí in the 1970s. But there is also Ceauşescu the victim, riddled with bullets on Christmas Day (a rather poorly chosen moment, tarnishing the Christian celebration), brutally executed. Nostalgic supporters still gather at his grave, claiming that the former dictator did a lot for the country, putting a roof over their heads and giving them jobs.

The political myth of Ion Iliescu is equally ambivalent. First comes the Iliescu of 22 December 1989, the leader of the National Salvation Front, the former apparatchik marginalized by Ceauşescu, who was expected to play the role of a Romanian Gorbachev (in fact, he deliberately projected the image of an “enlightened despot” capable of putting an end to the misfortunes of the country; peasants believe that he was the one who gave them back their lands, in a transfer that comes to conceal a distortion of the truth). Then, we have Iliescu the authoritarian neo-communist, author of the bloody repression of the marathon rally in University Square, in 1990, when he pitted one social category (the miners) against another (students and intellectuals) and created the context of a civil war and of a fratricide battle. The Iliescu who won the elections of 2000 is more refined, seemingly less communist, but still poses as a Savior, this time against the extremism advocated by the leader of the Greater Romania Party, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, his main rival in the presidential elections.

Even in the case of Emil Constantinescu we are dealing with a double myth: one is the president elected in 1996, acclaimed as a hero (in University Square, the symbolic venue of the revolution of December 1989 and of the marathon rally of 1990), speaking from the University balcony, the leader bearing a strong resemblance to ruler Alexandru Ioan Cuza and embodying the Romanian hope in a revival of the country; the other is the mediocre president and, at the end of his term, the politician seen as a deserter in the 2000 elections, when he refused to run for office so late in the race that no other strong leader could emerge to counteract Ion Iliescu. As to his attempted return to political life in 2003, it was not only risky, but downright pathetic.

Then come the leaders who tried to engineer they own myths: this is the case of Corneliu Vadim Tudor, whose extremism gained him the nickname "The Führer" (a nickname he narcissistically enjoys), and who, when running against Iliescu in the presidential elections of 2000, deliberately banked on his alleged charisma as a founding leader (even his xenophobia and racism were presented as meant to end the old order and set up a new one). The same thing was attempted by the trade union leader of the miners from the Jiu Valley, Miron Cozma, who proclaimed himself the new Eminescu and who was ironically dubbed "the coal poet" (he also seemed to enjoy the nickname). Precisely because they tried to tendentiously engineer their own myths, both failed to impose them. Both sought legitimacy as "messengers of Fate." Both sought to emulate the political myth of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu: one from an ideological point of view, the other mostly at physical level (without giving up on the god-like image used in the manipulation of the miners). In what Miron Cozma is concerned, it is possible that he may have also had in mind the model of the union leader represented by Lech Walesa, whom he wanted to imitate, especially since the leader of the "Solidarity" had become the new president of Poland after the fall of communism.

Also, it must be said that there are historical situations in which two kinds of Savior myths coexist or operate at the same time; their actions can run counter to one another, but they are at the same time complementary (Girardet, p. 63). In Romania, this hybrid model applies both to the myth of Ion Antonescu and to that of King Michael I, the old man and the young man, the military commander and the king, seen as Saviors in the same historical period. There are also myths of the Savior which do not fall into either of the categories presented by Girardet, and myths which belong to all four of them: how else could we understand the myth of the Americans' arrival, invented by political prisoners in the communist prisons, but which was also present in the mind of the anti-communist fighters hiding in the mountains of Romania? For the Americans were seen as possible lawmakers (after chasing away the communists), as wise men, and also as warriors. The only category they did not belong to was that of prophets.

I believe that the most comprehensive myth of the Savior constructed in Romania is that of King Michael I, precisely because it also suffered a strong process of de-mythicization. As we know, the royal myth alludes to a certain form of sacredness: the king is God's anointed, he is God's representative on earth or, in other cases, "the middleman" (Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *Omul politic între mit şi raţiune: O analiză a imaginarului puterii*, trans., Cluj: Alfa Press, 2000, 74), an intercessor between God and the people. The two communist leaders (Gheorghiu-Dej and Ceauşescu) who came after King Michael I ruled out any sacredness, and the transition from a monarchy to a republic was (naturally) felt in Romania as a trauma, as a sacrifice of the royal figure. It mattered little that King Michael was a very young man, as precisely his youth had given hope to Romanians: King Michael, whose patron saint and namesake was a warrior archangel, was meant to face the Soviet invaders and drive them away. But that did not come to pass. The leaders that came after King Michael I were anointed by the Communist Party, they were the incarnation or the representatives of the party, in a transition from faith to atheism (with religion deemed the "opiate of the masses"). The image of the national communist leader usurped the royal myth, as the atheistic president of the republic also wanted to be an intercessor between party and people. Despite this cannibalization of content, the myth of King Michael I continued to operate from 1947 (when the monarchy was abolished) until after 1990, when the king returned to the country, triggering, in 1992, a micro-apotheosis of the monarchy in terms of the sympathy felt by the Romanian people. Things changed after the king designated Princess Margaret as his direct successor, and the myth crumbled even further when, in 2001, the king accepted to cooperate with the Iliescu regime (with the former executioner, albeit only at a symbolic level). It must be said that the Romanian monarchy had been a phallocratic one (despite the popularity enjoyed, for instance, by Queen Mary, said at one point to be the de facto ruler of the country). Therefore, when King Michael I designated Princess Margaret as his direct heir, he changed the rule, and the Romanian people resented that change. The monarchy (or rather what was left of it in post-communist Romania, in terms of political mythology) may have gained additional supporters had King Michael I designated a male relative as his successor, even one of a more distant lineage (his grandson). Thus, the law of the firstborn son would have been adapted to existing circumstances, as, in keeping with the tradition of male monarchs, the king with no son could only designate his grandson as his heir apparent. Both the appointment of Princess Margaret and the possible one of the grandson deviated from the rule of royal succession. However, the second solution would have been better accepted by the Romanians. By designating his grandson, King Michael I would have established a symbolic continuity between what he had once been (the young "archangel" king of 1944–1947) and what his grandson could have meant for Romania. By choosing in favor of Princess Margaret, he destroyed all chances of a monarchic revival in post-communist Romania. King Michael I himself was unable to move from the Alexander the Great type of Savior to the Cincinnatus type, even if in 1990 that had been precisely the hope of a Romanian political minority.

The case of Ion Iliescu can also be discussed in the context of the myth of the Savior, because he was the partially legitimate (continuing, at least in 1990, Ceauşescu's authoritarianism, albeit disguised as a democracy) and the partially illegitimate successor of Nicolae Ceauşescu. Ceauşescu's execution fits the scenario of the assassination of the father and of the sharing of the power between the parricidal sons, one of whom would eventually prevail. Ceauşescu's execution also belongs to an Oedipus-like scenario, as Ion Iliescu (the leader emerged after the revolution of December 1989) ordered the execution of the dictator (allegedly in order to stop fratricidal violence in Bucharest, manifest between 22 and 25 December). The man who supervised this execution is a mysterious figure, or rather a vulgar-occult one, another "son," Gelu Voican-Voiculescu. Finally, with the execution of Ceauşescu we come to the stage in which the sons compete for the place left vacant by the "father": of these sons, Ion Iliescu is the most visible and widely-known. A tough election campaign, based chiefly on libel and deception, helped Iliescu to eliminate his external rivals (Radu Câmpeanu and Ion Raţiu), and also the internal ones (Dumitru Mazilu). His former accomplice and rival prince, Petre Roman, would be discarded only later, in 1991 (during the fourth incursion of the miners). On 20 May 1990, Ion Iliescu was elected president, legally taking the place of the Father, a Father who saw himself as a "social and historical demiurge," "a true mortal God, representative for the time of God's death" (Wunenburger 2000, 87).

Also worthy of attention is the myth of Corneliu Coposu who, as we have already said, belongs to the Cincinnatus type. His is one of the few myths of post-communist Romania that did not crumble and continued to operate, albeit in the past tense, the tense of remembrance. After 1990, Corneliu Coposu was portrayed as the successor of Iuliu Maniu (himself a mythical figure, at least as a martyr of the communist regime), not only because he had been the secretary (and therefore the apprentice) of the latter, but also because he had spent seventeen years in the Romanian communist prisons. During those years, he had remained vertical, never giving in to the regime that so persecuted him. The death of his wife, herself a political prisoner, and his ulterior celibacy gave him the image of a hermit, enhanced by his emaciated body. The former sturdy weightlifter had become a sort of hermit of the desert, and his physical appearance (in full agreement with his high personal ethics) demanded a lot of respect. The manner in which he revived the National Peasant Party (despite the fact that he allowed in some shady characters who reached high positions in the party) was also appreciated, especially since after his death the party was led by a politician that had no charisma and zero impact upon the people (Ion Diaconescu). Eventually, the party ceased to be represented in Parliament and split into a number of factions, nothing being left of the old party unity and of the reconstruction efforts undertaken by the late leader, Corneliu Coposu. During his parliamentary activity, but not only, Corneliu Coposu even gained the respect of his political opponents. Thus, upon his death, he was given a state funeral, and the Romanian people had one of its few moments of post-communist unity, amid bitter political bickering, violent election campaigns, and clashes between the power and the opposition. In the case of Corneliu Coposu, old age did not undermine his credibility. On the contrary, it enhanced it, for his senescence was heroic, respected (Coposu being a survivor of the Gulag), and wise.

Does post-communist Romania have other leaders that would fit the image of the Savior? Of course, the incumbent President Traian Băsescu was himself seen (and projected himself) in this light. His figure could be quite dangerous for the political imaginings (and counter-imaginings) of the Romanian collective unconscious: he is jocular and therefore popular, a man everyone can understand, an argotic actor of Romanian politics who nevertheless ended up in the top position. The former "shepherd" Gigi Becali is also seen by some Romanians as a Savior, but it remains to be seen whether a personality such as his would be able to gain sufficient votes during the elections.

It may be that the most famous Romanian athletes should have also been discussed in the framework of the myth of the Savior, since some of them left their imprint upon Romanian mentality and were even cast in such roles, with a view to their possible political involvement. Interesting in this respect would be Ilie Năstase, Ion Ţiriac, Nadia Comăneci, and Gheorghe Hagi. However, I shall limit my present analysis to the current political figures, with a direct impact upon the Romanian collective unconscious and consciousness.

3. **THE THIRD political myth is that of the golden age.** It involves the idea of protection, solidarity, order, of a clearly structured civilization with a precise hierarchy, of harmony and glory, of a legendary, archetypal, exemplary, solar past, in opposition to a corrupt, sterile, and profane present. The myth of the golden age talks about an ideal society, in which people are free and equal (but not in the distorted communist understanding of it) and where peace and prosperity rule. Lucian Boia rightfully contended that political myths "involve a distortion of the present in relation to the past" (189), and this is mostly applicable to the core of the myth of the golden age. Within this myth, order and harmony are usually guaranteed by a king.

The year of the Great Union, 1918, and the coronation in Alba Iulia, a few years later, of King Ferdinand and Queen Mary, are the supreme moments of united and independent Romania. This was Romania in the superlative, the myth turned into reality. Therefore, the Alba Iulia coronation remains the most splendid and triumphant in Romanian history, becoming, at the level of political mythology, the matrix and the *omphalos* of the archetypal coronation. The year 1918 and the later coronation of Alba Iulia marked the paradisiacal age of Romania, never recovered after 1940 and lost forever, as demonstrated by the historical events that followed. Therefore, in the post-communist period, the national day is celebrated with great patriotic pomp in Alba Iulia, the authorities seeking to confiscate the myth of the golden age: there is a transition from royalty to presidency (obviously, an attempt to legitimize the highest authority in the state, no longer "God's anointed," but anointed by the people).

But the ideal life of the golden age includes other components as well, such as the beauty and the richness of the country, a balanced nature, etc. Romanian communism destroyed all that: the country was sapped of its strength and rendered hideous, legally plundered by the Soviets, nature had to bear with massive deforestation and responded in kind with disasters such as floods (in 1970) and earthquakes (the most devastating one occurring in 1977). Therefore, the golden age is identified with "a perfection which, once lost, can only be followed by a fatal and steady decadence, as the state of happiness and perfection reached at one point by humankind can no longer be surpassed" (Wunenburger 2000, 24).

The golden age is also the age of innocence, and therefore the dissolution of Greater Romania in 1940 and the final consecration of its disintegration in 1944 (the recovery of Transylvania, but the final loss of Bessarabia) meant that paradise was lost forever. Under Ceauşescu, the Little Paris, as Bucharest used to be called, the place where young people from all over the Balkans would come to study, became a mutilated city, as indicated by the destruction of entire neighborhoods simply in order to erect the House of the People and the surrounding district (for that construction project alone, dozens of churches and historical buildings of old Bucharest were demolished). If until 1940 (the loss of Bessarabia) or 1944 (the beginning of communism) Romania had lived in the age preceding the fall from paradise, after 1989 Romania wanted to be redeemed through human sacrifice (the dead of the December revolution) and through the very death of the dictator (the Ceauşescus were executed on Christmas Day). Some talked about a fetal state of a resurrected Romania, blessed by the divine grace of God. A golden age was being contemplated as a future possibility: post-communist Romania began to be described as a little or a new Jerusalem. It was believed that, given the sacrifice of those who had lost their lives in December 1989, the country had paid the greatest tribute of all former communist states in

Eastern Europe. Therefore, Romania deserved to become once again an *omphalos*, and the huge wave of Western sympathy, manifest immediately after the revolution, fueled this desire.

The myth of the golden age, apart from the fundamental year 1918, operated in various fashions in 20th century Romania. Communist totalitarianism caused considerable nostalgia for the interwar period, seen as a time of maximum spiritual development of the country, in sharp contrast to the crude and inferior culture promoted by the communists. During the communist period, the myth of the golden age was also applied to the bucolic life of the Romanian village, considered preferable to a polluted urban environment, architecturally mutilated by the presence of factories and dull gray apartment buildings. The contrast was only a superficial one, however, as the Romanian village itself had been scarred by communism. Also present was the mirage of the free world, as Romanians yearned for the Western consumerist paradise. Two myths held the center stage here: the myth of the United States and that of Germany. The exemplary past of some Romanian voivodes, seen as luminaries, great military commanders, spiritual leaders and unifiers of the land, characters like Alexander the Good, Mircea the Elder, Stephen the Great, Vlad the Impaler, Michael the Brave, Dimitrie Cantemir, and others, was hijacked by the communist ideology in an attempt to create a link to Ceauşescu's era. The association turned out to be rather hollow, as the self-proclaimed golden age of Nicolae Ceauşescu was nothing but a colossal imposture. The figure of the great poet Mihai Eminescu, a nationalist prophet who dreamed of old Dacia and opposed it to the forms without substance imported from the West in an attempt to modernize Romania, was also taken up and placed in the service of Ceauşescu's megalomaniac communist agenda. The protochronism of the 1970s was also an attempt to artificially engineer a golden age: allegedly, original creations of the Romanian spirit had manifested themselves long before their Western counterparts, and thus Romania was a matrix of European modernity (nothing could be farther from the truth, and the actual situation was the precise opposite). The post-communist period also saw a certain nostalgia for the early period of Ceauşescu's regime, which brought with it some degree of liberalism, and Nicolae Ceauşescu was described as a good (but not a perfect) communist, subjected, however, to the nefarious influence of his wife, Elena Ceauşescu, seen as a successor of Ana Pauker (the woman commissar of the 1950s). Memoirs were published about the crazy, bohemian 1970s, the years of the so-called de-Stalinization, circulating the theory whereby Ceauşescu would have remained in power well into the 1990s had he remained committed to his early liberal policies and had he given a minimum of freedom to Romanians. The same post-communist period also saw a lot of nostalgia for the monarchy or even for the Legionary Movement or Antonescu's dictatorship.

In their turn, the Bessarabians had their own reveries, dreaming of a Greater Moldavia centered on the Suceava–Jassy–Chişinău axis, one that would have included all of the territories once controlled by the greatest voivode of this province. But all that remains secondary to the eternal prototypal dream of the golden age: Romania of the Great Union of 1918.

Three sub-myths operate within the general myth of the golden age, classified as follows by Jean-Jacques Wunenburger (28–30): the myth of the heroic race, the myth of the happy country, and the myth of Messiah's return. They adapt and apply fairly easily to the Romanian mentality of the 20th century. Of course, the Romanians of the period following the Great Union were hardly the members of a heroic race, but they are remembered as a genuine and pure nation, in opposition to the perverted members of the communist society, shameless informants of the secret police, and also different from the aggressive, frustrated, and mistrustful Romanians of the post-communist era. Then, interwar Romania was portrayed as a thriving, rich, beautiful country, and Bucharest was seen as the land of opportunity, both later ravaged by the communist regime. The ideal image of interwar Romania was the only model envisaged in the "Gipsy" Romania that came after 1989. Finally, the golden age had a "Messiah" (lawmaker and king, prophet or military commander), likely to return under a different guise. "Why don't we have our own Václav Havel?" the Romanians lamented after 1989, when they were looking for an untarnished, wise, and democratic president (even the naïve supporters of Ion Iliescu knew that, as a former communist apparatchik, he was morally unfit to lead a country whose communist regime had just been overthrown in a bloody revolution). After the disappointment represented by Iliescu's successive terms in office (1990–1992 and 1992–1996), the election of Emil Constantinescu (himself a former member of the Communist Party, but not an apparatchik) fostered new hopes, unfortunately dashed by the new president. The myth of the return of a "Messiah" once again crumbled. King Michael I, who had caused so much enthusiasm among Romanians in 1992, meant little to the country's population at the turn of the new millennium. Still, his return remained present in the minds of Romanians (as we have already indicated), the central figure here being not the king himself, but rather his grandson and potential successor. These expectations also led to nothing, as the designated heir was Princess Margaret, treated by Romanians with indifference, at best.

4. **The fourth myth is the myth of unity.** It involves communion, political, religious, spiritual unity, Order as opposed to disorder, homogeneity, coherence, the elimination of conflicts, of dissidence, of dissent. The myth of unity is defined by harmony and balance, in total opposition to dishar-

mony and schism. Quite predictably, two contradictory forces operate within the myth of unity: the beneficial ones, fostering unity, and the allegedly evil ones of dispersion and discord.

In the case of Romania, the Holy Trinity of national unity includes Michael the Brave (1600), the union of the Principalities (1859), and the Great Union (1918). Ceauşescu himself sought to pose as a unifying hero, but in the absence of any actual facts to back up his claim he slipped into megalomaniac nationalism: with nothing to unite (Bessarabia and a part of Bukovina belonged to the Soviet colossus), he set off to build the House of the People (the name says it all)—a pyramid, a mausoleum, a monstrous imperial residence, but also a monument to unity, at least according to the dictator's agenda. Michael the Brave became an artificial myth, as recent historical investigations (free from the communist distortions) showed him to have been more of a mercenary than a unifier. The figure of ruler Alexandru Ioan Cuza was also partially turned into a myth, also for reasons pertaining to national unity, the character being presented as a native, purely Romanian ruler. Antimonarchists from all historical periods constantly banked on the purely Romanian origin of Cuza, opposing him to the foreign King Carol I. Ceauşescu's regime took up the same idea in an attempt to tarnish the image of the good kings of Romania, namely, Carol I, Ferdinand, and Michael I (Carol II was usually seen as the "black sheep" of the Hohenzollerns).

In the post-communist era, the myth of unity gained a new dimension. The agony and the ecstasy of the revolution of December 1989 brought the Romanians together in a sort of apotheosis of the nation, reborn through martyrdom. However, the year 1990, with its political violence (the rough election campaign, the events occurred in March in Târgu-Mureş, the University Square rally, the miners' incursions, culminating with the events of June 14–15), soon divided the Romanians, and this in a rather violent fashion. Maybe, a union between Romania and Bessarabia would have been possible in 1991, but the governments and the neo-communist presidents of the two countries (and even their citizens) missed that opportunity: the communist putsch attempted in Moscow in August of 1991 created the conditions for a reunification of the two countries, following the German model. The supporters of the monarchy began to advocate the idea of a Greater Romania under the rule of King Michael I, but the latter failed to gain massive popular support. On the contrary, the post-communist authorities argued that the abdication of the king and the abolition of monarchy had been perfectly legal. It is also true that the image of the senescent king, deprived of a male heir, failed to stir the enthusiasm of Romanians.

In the post-communist period, the myth of unity was also used to single out the allegedly evil characters that sought to divide the country, chiefly the members of the Hungarian minority and their political party, the Hungarian Democratic Union in Romania. In response, Romanian nationalist parties like the Romanian National Unity Party and the Greater Romania Party came into being. Before the Hungarians, in previous centuries and in different contexts, the same role had been ascribed to the Turks, to the Habsburgs (this also included the Hungarians), or to the Russians. Such accusations were founded for as long as Romania remained a divided state (undermined by the surrounding countries and empires), but after the completion of the union and the introduction of inviolable borders, the Hungarian minority in the country (despite the manifest chauvinism of some of its members and despite the real conflicts which, in certain parts of the country, opposed Hungarians and Romanians) was simply incapable of threatening the territorial unity of the country. Transylvania itself was inhabited by a Romanian majority. At a different level, it must be said that the Romanian extremist parties, while waving the flag of unity in order to legitimize their own creation, showed little interest in the province of Bessarabia, abusively lost in 1940 and 1944 (in fact, the recovery of Bessarabia would have been the natural goal of honest Romanian nationalists), obsessing instead over the unlikely loss of Transylvania.

The myth of unity was also circulated by the Romanian Orthodox Church, which has always enjoyed calling itself the national Church. The revival of the Greek-Catholic denomination in 1990 (after it had been abusively banned by communists in 1948) became a thorn in the side of the dominant Orthodox Church, which shamelessly boycotted the restoration of the Greek-Catholic Church unjustly persecuted by the communists. The fears of the Romanian Orthodox Church were also stirred by the countless Christian or Oriental cults that gained a foothold in the country, once the legislation allowed for the manifestation of any form of faith that was not contrary to the existing law and order. In what concerns the Greek-Catholic denomination, it had a significant presence only in Transylvania. Nevertheless, the Romanian Orthodox Church refused to give up its comfortable dominant position secured during the communist period. In actual fact, the leaders of the Orthodox Church had cooperated with the communist regime even when it came to the demolition of churches (for instance, they gave their approval for these demolitions). Thus, in certain Transylvanian towns, the clergymen and the followers of the Greek-Catholic Church had to retake, in the actual sense of the term, certain places of worship which the Orthodox refused to return. The 1999 visit to Romania of Pope John Paul II was also planned as an attempt to reconcile the two Churches, in order to restore the religious and spiritual unity of all Romanians. Nevertheless, the Romanian Orthodox Church, annoyed by the revival of the Greek-Catholic faith, continued to present itself as the national Romanian Church. I shall not elaborate here on the plans for the construction of a giant Cathedral of the Nation at the beginning of the third millennium, despite the fact that such plans were first formulated in the early 20th century and were naturally abandoned during the communist period.

IN CONCLUSION, as argued by Raoul Girardet, we see many points of convergence between the contemporary political imaginary and the great myths of humankind. However, the four political myths discussed here stand for just as many individual psychological constants: the conspiracy myth comes to relieve anxiety and resentment, directing them towards the figure of the foreigner; the myth of the Savior involves the search for a father or for a substitute to the actual father; the myth of the golden age is related to childhood fixations and to the representations of paradise; the myth of unity comes in response to existential decentralization, to the alienation felt by modern man. I can only hope that the present analysis did indeed manage to reflect the extent to which all of these myths apply to us Romanians.

❑

Abstract

Romanian Mythopolitics in the 20th Century

Drawing on the classification of myths operated by Raoul Girardet, the paper seeks to determine the extent to which they are reflected in the political mentality of 20th century Romanians. Attention is given to four such myths: the conspiracy myth, which comes to relieve anxiety and resentment, directing them towards the figure of the foreigner; the myth of the Savior, which involves the search for a father or for a substitute to the actual father; the myth of the golden age, related to childhood fixations and to the representations of paradise; the myth of unity, created in response to existential decentralization, to the alienation felt by modern man.

Keywords

mythopolitics, 20th century Romania, collective mentality, Raoul Girardet, conspiracy myth, myth of the Savior, myth of the golden age, myth of unity