Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iaşi
Faculty of Letters
Department of PhD in Philology Studies

IOAN PETRU CULIAN’s Literary Fiction
Summary of the PhD Thesis

Candidate:
Andruşcă (married Matei) Anca Ramona

Advisor:
Lăcrămioara Petrescu, PhD
Professor

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The PhD thesis entitled *Ioan Petru Culianu’s Literary Fiction* is a monographic study based on the fictional texts written by Ioan Petru Culianu, as an extension of his scientific studies. The originality of the exegetical approach is initially rendered by the authentic research material. This thesis aims at revealing an overall image of the fictional worlds imagined by this uncomfortable writer, who tried to substitute a “gap” in the existent interpretations that were especially interested in his scientific work. This privileged position has generated, on the one hand, the liberty of exploring an “unmapped territory,” thus an exploration in the absence of constrains (even the unconscious ones), imposed by prior “visits,” and, on the other hand, it has generated the danger of “wandering” in the labyrinth of a text whose possible routes have only been suggested.

Moreover, the originality of the thesis can be viewed in the personal manner of approaching the object of research. Exceeding the simple narration of the facts resulted from the analysis and the interpretation of these fictional games apparently “innocent,” the thesis entitled *Ioan Petru Culianu’s Literary Fiction* aims at identifying the elements that render unity and coherence to the entire work, establishing a unique system of meanings developed through a stimulating meditation on the world and on human condition. Exploring the thematic critical studies, the mythocritique, as well as other hermeneutical studies (the theory of the novel as an instrument of knowledge, cultivated by Milan Kundera, who continued Hermann Broch’s views, the outlook that defines the novel as a meditation on the “real impossibility,” formulated by Philippe Forest, the theory of the “mind games,” delivered by “the last” Culianu), the thesis concluded that the writer’s profound intention was to open a horizon of a hypothesis on the being’s possibility to be redeemed.
From a structural point of view, the thesis contains eleven chapters (the first is the argument of the thesis, and the last one reveals the conclusions of the interpretation) that suggest a progressive entrance in Culianu’s work and biography. The second chapter, entitled **The Division of Periods of Ioan Petru Culianu’s Works and Biography**, reveals information about the difficult evolution that many works (both scientific and literary) had from the moment of publication to the end of it. This entrance in Culianu’s literary laboratory is significant as it helps the reader on the one hand to connect the literary text to the scientific context of the author, and, on the other hand, it offers us a “diagnosis” of the themes and subjects that were approached in a certain period of his creation. The literature, the scientific work, and the biography are, in Culianu’s case, dimensions that are mutually influenced and that form a coherent unity.

The division into periods that is frequently invoked in the analysis of Culianu’s work belongs to Horia-Roman Patapievici, the exegete who speaks about the “caesure” of 1985 (and then he establishes an interval of caesure between 1986 and 1990), and who divides the creation into two distinct stages. “The last” Culianu, the one who possesses a *mathesis universalis* through the theory of the *mind games*, suggests that he had discovered “a new path of access for the unity of the world” (Horia-Roman Patapievici). Sorin Antohi elaborates on Patapievici’s scheme, believing that between “the first” and “the last” Culianu there exists a period of transition, that is approximately between 1982 and 1985, and that connects the “erudition and the idea through the «methodological anarchism»,” promoted by Paul Feyerabend.

The third chapter (*Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu: Models of Initiation*) reveals the dynamics of the relationship between the disciple and the master, this relationship being interpreted through the initiation stages –
passion, “death,” “rebirth.” At the beginning, Culianu’s devotion towards Mircea Eliade was complete, but in time it was diminished through certain scientific, political and even literary disjunctions. Although in some occasions, he was laudatory, and in other he was distant and ironical, Culianu speaks about the “Eliade model” as being the most significant dimension in his writings that has always provided him the ways to find his own identity; still, he was aware that although he is tremendously indebted to the master, his personal “path” can only truly be found through an act of self-assertion. Although having certain successive discoveries, that demonstrate the fact that Eliade was close to the legionary movement lead by Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, Culianu continues to protect the detractors, justifying the master’s option as being a political “naivete.”

In relation to the history of religions, young Culianu believes that, following Eliade’s steps, this privileged discipline has existential implications which invoke a more profound knowledge of humans and an “openness to the being.” Nevertheless, the disciple will outdistance Eliade’s morphology of the sacred and he will adapt the study of the religious facts to the new methodological acquisitions. “The last” Culianu’s method – morphodynamics – is not only applicable in the history of religions field, but it becomes an universal method, through which any field of knowledge can be approached. Religion, philosophy, science, literature are, in “the last” Culianu’s cognitive view, complicated games of the mind, systems of ideas that progressively develop from a simple set of generative rules. Although these “ideal objects” have a complete evolution in their logic space (the multidimensional space of the mind), we perceive them in a fragmented manner because of their intersection with the temporal dimension of history. This way, the similitudes between different religions, the circulation of myths and religious symbols can no longer be explained through the
persistence of unconscious archetypes, but they are justified through the unity of the mind that produces them. The methodological distance towards Eliade’s approach is, this way, obvious.

A special consideration was offered to Culianu’s manner of interpreting Eliade’s literary work, this “reading” rendering, in our view, the signs of the profound meanings of the analyzed fictions. The same issue of the ways of redeeming the being, that the disciple identifies in the master’s work, is considered in this thesis and becomes the main conclusion of this research. The interpretation is also justified through the identification in Culianu’s literature of an intention to produce a radical change of modern man; this is a similar action to the “mystagogical attitude” that the young exegete had deciphered in the “philosophical anthropology,” disguised in Eliade’s writings. In his works (both literary and scientific), Culianu does not only consider an unique answer, but he practices, in always recurrent forms, the “running away” art, in the attempt of contemplating the fragmented system of all the possibilities produced by the mind.

Ioan Petru Culianu – Theoretician of the Literary Text is the title of the chapter in which we analyzed the personal manner in which the author approached the literary theory. Starting from the definition of the literary text offered by Culianu (“scenario with phantasms that offer themselves to those consumers who are capable of causing phantasms”), and from the Aristotelian theory of the fantastic spirit, intermediary between soul and body (illustrated Eros și magie în Renaștere), we concluded that this writer’s literature is “phantasmagoric” as it deals with phantasms that are appropriate to the creative ego and to the reader, understood as an image of the alterity. Moreover, the fictions that Culianu imagined have a strong symbolic feature that transcends what is strictly personal in order to venture into “the world of transpersonal symbols.”
This chapter also reveals young Culianu’s contributions to the defining of a new “method” of investigating the literary text. Without making any reference to Gilbert Durand’s mythocritique, Culianu discusses the necessity of “the mythoanalytic exercises,” which have the meaning of a pragmatic step that “discerns the latent myths in the literary text and interrogates them in order to establish some possibilities that belong to their semantic area” (Fantasmele libertății la Mihai Eminescu). Considering these declared methodological “preferences,” mythocritique becomes a necessary instrument (but not unique) of investigating Culianu’s literary fiction.

The fifth chapter Capitolul al V-lea (Disguising Politics in the Fictional Texture: the Zorabs’ Intervention in Jormania and the Free Jormania) emphasizes the interpretation of those texts that have a political background, and that must be correlated, on the one hand, to the “Police-State” theory – the prototype of the dictatorial regimes which is the opposite of “the Magician-State” – the western world model, and, on the other hand, to the author’s civic-political journalism. The two analyzed political parables represent a veritable form of antinomy, of liberty towards the norms imposed by the totalitarian regimes. These fictions belong to the “visionary literature,” and they have the appearance of those flashes from the future that strike through their ominous dimension (for instance, the fall of Ceaușescu’s regime was anticipated in 1986 and it was considered a KGB in association with the Romanian Security plan).

The chapter informing about the fictions that reveal the need of escaping from the world, in the volume Arta fugii, emphasizes the analysis of the mythical invariants. Inaugurating a new narrative genre by using Bach’s “running away” model, Culianu explores some elements that belong to the gnostic imaginary: man’s anguishing condition, the mitem of the world as prison, Demiuge’s hypostasis, the creator of a
degenerated cosmos, Sophia’s image. The protagonists of these fictions (in which even the author finds himself a place), are initiated in the game with the worlds and they become real “power experts” who remind the reader of the Renaissance magician.

The seventh chapter (Hesperus or the Future Game) exposes Culianu’s truly personal manner of transforming the specific science fiction elements in order to create an “extrapolative” fiction (Radu Pavel Gheo), which reveals the speculative philosophy area. The reader confronts a possible world in which the dream of a technological happiness would come true. This Utopia becomes a dystopia, and the “perfect” civilization of the hesperiens is nothing else than a “caricature of the paradise” in which man – reduced to the level of an automat - lives his fall into a deep, total ignorance. The author explores in this fiction, as well as in some versions of the novel Tozgrec, the gnostic myth of the Great Ignorance. The art of Transforming, that is, the capacity of composing an infinity of universes through mind games, becomes the alternative solution that the author proposes for the redeeming of mankind. The novel Hesperus, a playful as well as a criticizing text, uses the science fiction elements to frame a parable of the western destiny.

The four versions of the incomplete novel Tozgrec represent the research object for the eighth chapter. A veritable textual puzzle for (re)reading, this fiction is composed through the transformation of certain subjects that the author, as a historian of religions and mentalities, approached. The theme of magic and of control over masses is doubled by a series of gnostic myths (for instance, the myth of the Great Ignorance), and elements that belong to the author’s biography (the exile trauma, the adversity towards a totalitarian regime, the sinuous relationship with his master, Eliade), and it generates a tumultuous meditation on the existential difficulties that modern man encounters. The
incomplete novel *Tozgrec* is a fiction of the self, which has a speculative feature and which becomes a veritable knowledge and self-knowledge instrument (Milan Kundera).

The ninth chapter aims at analyzing the fictions that belong to the volume *Pergamentul diafan*. The formula of the puzzle-novel, characterized through an apparent nonhomogeneity, was correlated to the mind games theory of the intellectual games that represent the basis of any creation, a theory explored by “the last” Culianu. The unity and the coherence of the fictional field are rendered by a series of recurrent mythical elements. The polyvalent symbol of emeralds infuses all these puzzle pieces, suggesting the ability of certain initiated people to surpass the immutable limits and the opportunity of travelling to other worlds. The evanescent feminine appearances (Mekor Haym, Alicia H., Miss Emerald, Tara – The Green Goddess, Lea) were interpreted through the Jungian archetype of anima, and through the gnostic myth of Sophia. The experts in cratophanic sacred, true dimensions of the Manipulative Magician, are privileged characters who use magical procedures to manipulate common people’s phantasms. Moreover, these fictional illustrations of the spiritual archetype have the capacity to construct, through mind games, an alternative world, totally different from the visible universe, which is an imperfect creation of the proud Demiurge. The metaphorical expressions become the only modality of approximating the essence of the “other” world, an impossible to depict reality through common language.

The last chapter (*The Emerald Game of the Past*) depicts the novel *Jocul de smarald*, a historical metafiction with policier elements, having as background the Toscany Renaissance. The text is constructed as a ludibrium (a riddle of the late Renaissance which can reveal the mysteries of the world, if solved), *i.e.*, the author disguises, through the fictional games, the thesis elaborated in *Eros şi magie în*
Renaștere.1484: the appearance of modernity and the scientific spirit is an answer to the abolishment of the phantasms, to the “censoring of the Renaissance imaginary,” an action released by the Reform and Counter Reform. The conclusion in Eros și magie în Renaștere, according to which a “new reform,” a new profound transformation of the imaginary “would cure us of all anguishes, of all existent divisions,” corresponds to the final message of the novel (the rescue of the painting La Primavera), in so much as both are subordinated to the author’s intention of revealing a meditation on the possible human kind redeeming through an inner “rejuvenation.”

Conclusions

Culianu’s literary fiction describes the essential coordinates of the fact-of-being-in-the-world, experimented by modern man. The fictional games are not unfounded, their aim is to “awake” the consciousness from ignorance and to reveal warnings related to: the self-destruction of the entire humanity, the reduction of “subjective power” to the forms of pure aggressiveness, the illusions of every utopia, man’s spiritual impoverishment generated by the capitalist nihilism, the negative effects of both individual and collective manipulation.

Culianu’s literary fiction does not offer the readers a unique solution to the existential dilemma of modern man, but it proposes a variety of scenarios for escaping the world, and having a humanitarian intention of maintaining the possibility of redeeming the still open being. The escape through dreams, Eros or through extatic experiences, imagination and phantasms knowledge rehabilitation, man’s inner change through conscious religious transformations, most especially the unrestricted freedom of thought, through which man could outdistance the limited dimension of reality and live
creatively in infinite worlds – all these aspects represent hypothetical solutions provided by Culianu’s fractal literature.

In conclusion, the main aim of this thesis is to demonstrate the manner in which the analyzed fictions generate a tumultuous meditation on human existence and on the world, setting the data of a “fundamental anthropology” (Toma Pavel).
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