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The Faustian Myth in Shakespeare’s and Ibsen’s Tragedies:

Hamlet, Othello, Brand, Peer Gynt

PhD Thesis

Summary

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**THE FAUSTIAN MYTH IN SHAKESPEARE'S AND IBSEN'S
TRAGEDIES:
HAMLET, OTHELLO, BRAND, PEER GYNT**

The thesis entitled *The Faustian Myth in Shakespeare's and Ibsen's Tragedies: Hamlet, Othello, Brand, Peer Gynt* forms part of the comparative literature field. T. S. Eliot says that the field of comparative literature possesses the ability of revealing the significance of a unitary whole of each literary work. We also find important Vasile Voia's vision in what regards the relation between the field of comparative literature and the literary-spiritual phenomena. The main goal of this research thesis aims at revealing other faces of the Faustian myth from the perspective of mythocriticism. There are various literary studies that consider Goethe, Shakespeare and Ibsen in the broader process of finding semantic similarities between various literary characters, but the number of studies that advance the theory of identifying Faustian similarities in the tragedies of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* is relatively small. Therefore, we mention Vasile Voia's impressive *Tentația limitei și limita tentației. Repere pentru o fenomenologie a mitului faustic (The Temptation of Limit and the Limit of Temptation)*, in which the professor discusses the modern aspects of the Faustian myth, reuniting Shakespeare and Ibsen, while simultaneously questioning a series of philosophical concepts, such as good, evil, knowledge, identity, otherness, etc. We also refer to Harold Bloom (*The Western Canon. The Books and School of the Ages, Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human* and *The Anxiety of Influence*), who offers a broad framework in order to understand the relation between Goethe, Shakespeare and Ibsen, without referring strictly to the Faustian myth, but arguing the place of Shakespeare as center

of the canon, and highlighting not only the contemporaneousness, but also the modernity of his writing. The presentation of Shakespeare as *magister ludi* offered us the opportunity of extending this concept to the literary characters taken into account in the present thesis. Moreover, the analysis of a large conceptual framework is offered by Ileana Mălăncioiu in *Vina tragică. Tragicii greci. Shakespeare. Dostoievski. Kafka (Tragic Fault. Greek Tragic Authors. Shakespeare. Dostoyevski, Kafka)*, and the relativity of some of these concepts was understood from a philosophical (Martin Heidegger, Immanuel Kant) and a theological (Nikolai Berdiaev, Dumitru Stăniloae) perspective.

Cesare Brandi synthesizes in an elegant manner the relation between language and referent, and states the fact that each language has its own manner of segmenting the significations. Moreover, the same matrix does not create an identical sense in all languages¹. The transfer of this judgment in the field of comparative literature makes plausible the theory according to which each writer reinterprets the primordial mythic structures, adding new meanings/representations. This vision allowed us to advance the theory of the collaboration between the activism of the Faustian myth's theoretical paradigm and the activism of the Faustian tragic character, in order to prove the fact that the Faustian myth becomes a pretext for discovering the personal myth. Therefore, our aim was not that of considering the literary work or the literary character as imitations of the Faustian myth, but that of revealing the *logos* of the tragic character as main element of arranging the *mythos*. In order to achieve this thing, we referred to the concept of *mathesis*

¹ Cesare Brandi, *Teoria generală a criticii*. Translated by Mihail B. Constantin and Victor Ieronim Stoichiță. Preface by Victor Ieronim Stoichiță. Bucharest, „Univers” Publishing House, 1985, pp. 32-33.

universalis, as our discourse is a triple one: literary, philosophical and theological.

In order to highlight the personal myth as a version of the Faustian myth, we presented the theoretical paradigm of the latter, and then we made a brief presentation of its morphology. Therefore, our investigation started from the double quality of the myth: the iconization of truth by means of a false *logos* (Theonas) and placing the man in the world by giving him self-consciousness (Malinowski). Moreover, in order to analyze the manner in which the myth is reiterated in a specific imaginary of writing, we need to take into account the relation between word and image, a relation mediated by the concept of idea. Hence, we brought into discussion the theories belonging to Mircea Eliade (*Aspects of the Myth*), Gilbert Durand (*Mythical Figures and Faces of the Work*), Jean Burgos (*For a Poetics of the Imaginary*), or Northrop Frye (*The Anatomy of Criticism*), and we created the idea of understanding a literary work through the active and passive elements subsumed to the myth. The originality of the thesis resides in identifying the manner in which the classical elements of the Faustian myth can be reordered and restructured. Moreover, one of our objectives is that of proving the fact that the field of tragic goes beyond the so-called „classical” characters of the tragedies, reaching the image of Iago as a tragic character. This image is supported by a double perspective on the literary character, as resulted from the writings of authors such as George Banu (*Shakespeare – the world’s a stage*), Coleridge (*Coleridge’s Essays and Lectures on Shakespeare and Some Other Old Poets and Dramatists*), A. C. Bradley (*Shakespearean Tragedy*), Mihai Rădulescu (*Shakespeare – a modern psychologist*), or Alexander Crawford (*Hamlet, an Ideal Prince and Other Essays in Shakespearean Interpretation*). This direction of our analytical discourse was determined by the presentation of the tragedy’s interior

mechanism and the mutation that the tragedy and the tragic character suffer as a result of the manner in which the reader perceives the writings. In order to achieve this, we used Northrop Frye's dissociation between the high mimetic mode and the low mimetic mode, our will being that of proving the arbitrary character of the tragic. Therefore, we considered the feminine principle in a direct relation to the tragic evolution of the masculine principle, the latter bearing the distinction of an intrinsic Faustianism which led him from hero to anti-hero and then to the final image of the underground man. In order to capture the identity formula of this Faustianism, we considered the essence of the Faustian myth as going beyond the simple pact made between Faust and Mephistopheles.

The first part of the thesis (*Morphology of the Faustian Myth*) begins with a short presentation of the Faustian myth from a diachronic perspective. In what regards Goethe's *Faust*, we acknowledge the relation between predestination and free will (Jaroslav Pelikan, *Faust the Theologian*), the idea of the Faustian struggle generated by consciousness, the positivation of demonism, man's impossibility of being himself, or the idea of imposing limits to what we prefer to call knowledge. We brought into discussion the idea that modern tragedy incorporates the struggle between man and fate (a struggle which is common to ancient tragedy), but it subsumes it to man's struggle with himself, the being having the feeling of its own classlessness (George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*). The being does not become tragic when leaving the profane familiarity, but when acknowledging the impossibility of turning back to the old principles. An argument for putting together Shakespeare (symbol of Renaissance) and Ibsen (symbol of Modernism) is that of the common point where they meet: the general issue of human being. The human being (therefore, the tragic character also) is placed between fatality and a freedom dominated by suffering (J. -M.

Domenach, *Return to Tragedy*). As a result, we have two manners of perceiving the literary character: as sign (an explosive confrontation between its creator and the second creator of meaning – the reader) and as image (it needs to be seen, to become). Another argument is the relation between identity and otherness (Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La mort*). Bringing into discussion Tolstoy's opinion on the Shakespearean literary work, Harold Bloom (*The Western Canon*) highlights the open character of Shakespeare's literary work, underlining the importance of erasing the constraints imposed by moral or religious overdeterminations, a feature that can be applied even to Goethe and Ibsen, without turning them into imitators of Shakespeare. We aimed at discovering the core of demonism, bitterness and rebellion which is specific to the tragic character. The existence of the tragic character revolves around the absolute ontological problem (to be or not to be), and the impossibility of knowing the inner self makes it relative. The distinction between conceptual and dramatic literary characters (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Burchell, *What is Philosophy?*) had offered us the possibility of shaping, in the context of the deconstruction and reconstruction of the Faustian myth, the triumph of idea over action or that of the concept over drama. We considered the impossibility of living the tragedy to its very end to be the essence of the Faustian spirit. Because of this, the reader might feel the incompleteness of the Faustian character, placed somewhere between concept and being, between work of imagination and ontological representation.

In the second part of the thesis (*Temptation of the Pact*), we start from the idea that the discontentment and unfulfillment are two features of the Faustian man, the focus being on his vulnerability in the confrontation with temptation and in his rebellion against the primordial forms of organization. When referring to the Faustian bargain, we bring into discussion the fact that

it determines a type of living according to the personal ideal, the result being both the disproportionality between expectation and reality, and a moral crisis. The unfulfillment in the field of love triggers the tragic consciousness, in the linguistic sense of an incompatibility between the protagonists of the communication act (Gretchen and Agnes die, Ophelia goes mad and commits suicide, Desdemona is killed, and Solveig is abandoned), therefore love cannot fulfill the archetypal pattern of perfection in the mundane dimension. We brought into discussion the idea that the Faustian bargain generates activism. Therefore, in Hamlet's case, the encountering with his father's spirit signifies the actualization of a world, and setting the truth back on the ground of the being, as Heidegger states. But the king's spirit cannot be fully equalized to the image of Mephistopheles, as we can find reminiscences of the Mephistophelian principle even in the paradigm of the *fatum* concept. By deciding that he is the one chosen by fate to reorder the external reality, Hamlet makes the supreme ontological act (G. Liiceanu), and his throwing beyond the boundary transforms him in the architect of his own individuality. The Prince understood this hypothesis of being and thus became fit for the field of the sublime. In Othello's case, the shift from passivity to activism is generated by Iago, as an architect of life who, at the end of his creation, does not speak anymore. In the case of Peer Gynt, the character himself plays the part of Mephistopheles, his tragedy being the impossibility of being himself. The character slides in the field of empiricism, as he perceives as absolute freedom the possibility of being himself. Brand believes that self-accomplishment derives only from the loyalty to the individual essence, trying to dissociate himself from the common man, and this action will stand at the basis of his fall. Taking all these into consideration, we tried to highlight the consubstantiality between

good and evil, perceiving the Mephistophelian principle as the alter-ego of the Faustian man. For example, Iago can be perceived as Othello's alter-ego.

The character living on the edge between suffering and rebellion, wishing to understand the world in its absolute and aspiring towards a conception of life, are enrolled in the horizon of a Faustian destiny, and we discussed the *Confrontation with the Limit* of such a character in the third part of the thesis. The Faustian man's aspiration towards the unknown can be translated as the aspiration towards everything that exists beyond the self, as finitude. Knowledge means observation and giving a sense to the observed nature, therefore it is a three-folded kind of activism, concerning love, beauty and power. Othello's knowledge is limited by his own image used as a model for understanding the nature of the other. Despite all these facts, he also perceives himself through Desdemona (symbol of the canon), and her acceptance becomes a symbol of his inclusion in the epoch's canon. In the case of Hamlet, the certitude of truth brought by the king's spirit determines him to engage in the process of knowing himself. The Prince's activism becomes obvious in his discussion with the gravediggers or in his fight with Laertes in Ophelia's grave, the latter scene becoming a transposition in the active dimension of the well-known „to be or not to be“ soliloqui. In the strict terms of the play, at least to a certain point, Hamlet and Laertes speak from opposite positions. In other words, the *logos* of the two literary characters shapes them as rivals, while the *mythos* offers them a conjoint ontological paradigm. But, if we perceive the nature as being, in fact, the *logos* of the human being, then the two Shakespearean characters' *logos* and *mythos* derive from the same primordial ontological dimension. In other words, Hamlet does not imitate Laertes, but he (re)finds himself in the image of his rival, and subconsciously acknowledges this bond, in the end being able to act according to his mind and spirit. Moreover, from a

theological perspective, the term *logos* has a very high importance, as it includes both the otherness and the individuality, by means of the plural form *logoi*². Therefore, we considered that the main theme of the play is not revenge, but the deinstitutionalization of revenge. In the case of Brand, the dominating knowledge is that by means of an exacerbated reason and it bears the core of the existential tragic of a single alternative, just like in the case of Peer Gynt. He runs away from Solveig with the hope of finding his true self and of breaking human nature, because, if not, he would have to humble, and to renounce to himself in favor of the otherness. Othello perceives Desdemona as object of his love, and does not consider her subdued to limitations; therefore, her presupposed betrayal cancels Othello's knowledge on the world. Hence, the knowledge of love generates the paradigm of the sacrificed woman, the main symbol being Gretchen who, aprioristically sacrificed, is submitted only to the public opprobrium, and not to the divine one. We underlined a triple hypostasis of the woman (Eve, mother and lover), recognizable in Gretchen. The woman cannot be challenged, as this process would equal that of challenging the world (G. Durand). The first one to sacrifice Ophelia is Hamlet, but the Prince transferred to Ophelia the sense of an ontological activism, and the symbol of that is the girl's madness (by means of which Ophelia idealizes Hamlet's image, enrolling in the field of praxis). Hamlet's madness can be ontologically understood as an attempt to free from the immediate necessity of the mundane. In this sense, Ophelia is superior to him, because Hamlet's desire becomes true in her case. Until the decisive act of the suicidal – as an

² Ioannis Zizioulas states the fact that the concept of *logos*, with his plural form *logoi*, denominates both plurality and unity, the otherness and the individuality and has become a key-notion in theology, in *Comuniune și alteritate. Ființarea personal-ecclesială*. Translation from English by Liviu Barbu, Bucharest, „Sophia” Publishing House, 2013, p. 43.

altered form of *theosis* -, Ophelia had been „decided” by all those around her, except herself. In death, however, she regains her individuality, but, ironically, this decision is denied to her by Gertrude’s attempt to transform it in something accidental. Desdemona possesses (by contamination) something of Othello’s overdetermination or of Iago’s rebellion, and she is, therefore, one of the most unconventional feminine characters analyzed in this thesis. Gertrude and Brand’s mother are symbols of the deviate motherhood principle, while Agnes is the symbol of the universal mother. Moreover, Gertrude’s tragic character resides in the incapacity of rising to the goal that she had been created for, that of impersonating the motherhood principle. Just like Solveig, Agnes chooses to appropriate a destiny that is not her own, and to live it to its very end, in a more veridical manner than Brand and Peer Gynt. The symbiotic relation between communion and otherness arranges the relation between the feminine principle (longing for communion) and the masculine one (longing for solitude).

In what regards the knowledge of beauty, it can be perceived as the equivalent of exuberance (see N. Frye), and from this perspective, all of the tragic characters can be included in this paradigm, as the exuberance does not necessarily have to refer only to happiness. There is exuberance in suffering also, maybe more veridical than in happiness. Harold Bloom advances the concept of *magister ludi* in what regards the Shakespearean game between suffering and pleasure in receiving the literary work, but this concept can be applied to the tragic characters analyzed in this paper as impersonations of those holding the power, advancing, at the same time, the hypothesis of a *supra-magister ludi* in the concept of fate. The tragic characters become variations of *homo ludens*. Moreover, as *magister ludi*, the Faustian man initiates emotion and aesthetical experience, in the form of the desire of eternalizing the delight, due to its cathartic effect (at least in the

case of Iago). Trying to find its individual essence, Peer Gynt becomes the slave of the will to power. On the other hand, Gertrude resembles more the masculine principle, in the sense of exerting her free will and an autonomy Hamlet does not understand, because they contradict the image of the paternal authority. Because he does not succeed to identify himself with the maternal image (hence, with the power), the Prince finds it impossible to get contaminated with that force that he recognizes in his mother. The only way in which he can confront it is through the *logos*, the literary character (and the reader also) enrolling in a horizon of expectances (aspirational and temporal), as Domenach states. Moreover, it is exploited the abyss between person and personal ideal. The symbol of this abyss is the disgust of Hamlet and Faust regarding the limited condition of human being and the disgust of Brand towards a limited God, who obliges him to find his self-sufficiency in an artificial divine hypostasis. In what regards the ontological freedom, between the two concepts - freedom and ontology – we find fear: not the fear of acting, but the fear regarding the transformation of the tragic character after acting in a certain direction. For example, we considered Iago to be a tragic character, possessing a double freedom: that of the personal truth and that of the general truth of the human being, these two types of truth being enrolled in an ontological conflict.

The last part of the thesis, *Dialectics of fatum – hybris – arbitrium relation*, takes into account, first of all, the relation between consciousness and a series of concepts such as: fate, will and tragic fault, the latter possessing the ability of setting the show of the ontological fault inside the tragedy³. The tragic character gains self-consciousness through tragic consciousness (Othello), which can be mediated by the consciousness of

³ Gabriel Liiceanu, *Tragicul. O fenomenologie a limitei și depășirii*, Bucharest, Bucharest, „Humanitas” Publishing House, 1993, p. 98.

duty and that of classlessness (Hamlet and Brand). Therefore, we considered the motif of paternity as a sensitive point of the Faustian tragedy, being also related to the issue of Faustian identity. For example, Hamlet confronts the image of an altered image of power and paternity, as the ontological fear of suffering transforms king Hamlet in a symbol of vulnerability, and this feature will also reach Hamlet's ontological dimension, without becoming a main fundament of his action, either mental or physical. Personal suffering is placed above general suffering. Hence, Hamlet's destiny is intrinsically related to the personal dimension of existence. In what regards the duality of human being and the good-evil antinomy, we started from the theoretical premise of the human being's triple tendency of carrying out the evil (Kant) and the triple manner of developing the good (Frye). This dualism possesses the ability of saving the human being from total degradation, perceived in an ontological sense, being acknowledged from the beginning by Faust, Hamlet and Brand, and only in the end by Othello and Peer Gynt. In the end of the tragedy, Othello is a warrior, not a suffering man. Willing to make justice by killing Brabant's daughter, the Moor subconsciously desires to reestablish an external law, without taking into consideration his internal one. Because of this, the end of the tragedy does not portray Othello in his battle against Iago, in order to establish an external equilibrium, but portrays Othello in the battle against himself, in his desire to reach again the primordial harmony of his ethics. We also advanced the image of Iago's duality, from the perspective of the positivation of his intrinsic essence, and this vision is also shared by the theological sphere (D. Stăniloae) and the literary criticism one (A. C. Bradley). These two dimensions perceive the Mephistophelian principle as being not the absolute evil, but the evil facing the good from which it derives. Iago's *Weltanschauung* develops between the two critical perceptions regarding his character, as this literary character is driven by a

tragic passion, just like Brand. In Brand's perception of life, there is no room for compromise, and this leads to the essence of his tragedy: the will to gain the human being, simultaneously with preserving his personal individuality. Peer Gynt, unlike Brand, lives in a world of fairytales, as reminiscences of an epoch filled with the perfection of the beginning, and this obsession is sustained by a continuous *regressus ad uterum* of the character. However, he does not end in despair, being able to sit next to Hamlet or Faust. Hamlet's *Weltanschauung* is dominated by a sadness which spreads to all tragic literary characters in the play, and his view of the human being becomes his view of life. Hamlet oscillates between two ontological possibilities, between God's „to be" and Mephistopheles „not to be", going through the intermediary stage of an identity lack of certitude.

In conclusion, we cannot talk about a universal sense of the tragic when it comes to the Faustian character, as each character relates to its own individuality, the tragic being placed inside the ontological paradigm. Only in the confrontation with the limit, the Faustian character steps away from the comfort of the self towards the path of his becoming. Being exposed to two types of fault – the tragic fault and the personal fault -, the reconciliation of the Faustian man with the self is, in fact, a variant of reconciliation with the world.

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