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The biblical myth in the modern novel

Cain and Abel

- Summary of the doctoral thesis –

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SUMMARY

For the modern man, mythology can play a part in revealing human depth, which is lost for the modern man to whom sacred knowledge is rejected, a man of the temporality, of the factual reality, considered as a product of history, opposed to the archaic man, a product of the myth for whom the irreversibility of history did not have any importance. Mircea Eliade believes that the non-religious man of the modern time represents an accident in the order of the spirit, because even from the archaic levels of culture, “to live as a human being is a religious deed in itself”.

As we have noticed, a thorough definition of myth becomes impossible because the mythological phenomenon is very complex. The definition provided by Mircea Eliade is often used as a starting point for many of the studies in the field, a myth always refers to events which took place in the past and this story of what happened in *illo tempore* has a moral character as well: “this manifestation is at the same time creating and exemplary”. For Roland Barthes, myth is a mirror of society, a material which is always reused in which certain human types are recognized and for Giambattista Vico, myths are ways of acquaintance, expressions of the “primitive fantastic thinking” as well as Georges Gusdorff who believes that the myth is tightly connected with the mythical thinking, with the first knowledge acquired by man about himself.

Therefore, in an attempt to join some characteristic properties of myth, we can conclude that myth is history, a sacred, true story, about an archetypal hero and always refers to *realities* which took place *in illo tempore*, in a sacred time of the beginnings and in a privileged space, seen as a *centrum mundi*. In this sacred time, man could find again his roots, for this reason, myth influences further on so much the life of the modern man, as it was noticed by Lucian Blaga, who defines in *Trilogy of culture*, the myth as “a revealing, veiled and stylistically structural metaphor”.

Myth is at the basis of art and cultural history, of the social and individual imaginary in general, preserving the values of human spirituality, consequently, it will permanently represent an important benchmark. Myth takes man down towards self-understanding and has constantly represented man’s dream to transcend his status of mortal and to integrate his existence into a sacred universe. Beyond the solutions offered

to the different problems by these stories, we discover deeper, paradoxical meanings. Therefore, literature finds in myth affluent matter which answers to the main questions man has ever had.

Being described by Claude Lévi-Strauss as “fundamental patterns of the imaginary”, myths continue to represent a model for the modern writers and the constancy of myths is proven by the presence of the *re-mythization* in the modern novel which is founded on that mythical function which lies in every man. In this direction, Michel Meslin, in *Le Mythe et l’Homme*, points out that the process of the deterioration of myth is not an irreversible one. The modern world needs myths, the idea of “the eternal return” of things to origin is tightly connected with the idea of perfection and happiness, elements which will always be subject to man’s attention.

The hypostases of myth in literature are under the sign of re-mythizations or of demythizations. Even its entry into the space of literature can be seen as a demythization through the desacralization this phenomenon involved. The excessive rationalization of myths, their transformation into fiction leads to a cancellation of the initial meanings, the myth gradually loses its sacred character. Losing its initial function, the myth is considered and addressed from other points of view, all of them included in the aesthetic, as a primary function of literature, myth was thus added aesthetic values. The processes of transformation undergone in the space of modern literature are often under the sign of *desacralization* and *demythization*, but the intentions of some writers who exploit myths by *resemantizations* and *remythizations* are not alien either. As Mircea Eliade pointed out, the presence of myth in the space of literature, even if under a “hidden” form, indicates, however, the fact that myth is still alive. Literature achieves an updating of myth by means of a process of recast of the mythical matter into new structures, configurations without myths.

With a view to drawing up the thesis entitled *The biblical myth in the modern novel. Cain and Abel*, a correct approach implies an interdisciplinary dealing with the topic. Taking into account the specific characteristic of the topic, in the first place, this lies at the meeting between theology and the sciences of literature. For us, the analysis and the criticism of myth take precedence, but the theological perspective for the purpose of understanding the whole phenomenon cannot be disregarded. The present work is

included in the space of the sciences of universal literature, but our approach is a comparative one to the extent to which, being faithful to the principle according to which comparative and general literature is open to the study of the relation between literatures and societies, of the connections between literatures and artistic and cultural practices, our view follows a diachronic axis.

At the same time, the work tries an applied hermeneutics. By joining the methods of mythocriticism and of hermeneutics, our approach follows the specific manner in which 20th century writers such as Hesse, Steinbeck, Butor and Saramago symbolically re-establish and organize new meanings and values to the biblical myth of Cain and Abel according to the plan and artistic spirit of each of them. Following the approach of mythocriticism, combined, where possible, with the analysis of myth, does not mean that we will disregard the other points of view, by equally using narratology, mythopoetics, literary history and criticism.

G. Durand identifies two ways in which mythic themes manifest themselves and act: in an evident way, by the explicit repetition of its homologous content or contents and in a hidden way, by the repetition of its implicit deliberate pattern, but with certain “shifts”, being concealed by distant contents. Joining analytical methods and instruments of the archetypology and of the mythic criticism, we aim at a hermeneutics of the myth which should catch its irreducible specific character in parallel with its resemantizations and desemantizations. According to the direction proposed by Durand, we will especially aim at identifying the mythical nuclei and their development into networks of communication, highlighting the dynamics of the mythical imaginary for the myth of Cain and Abel. Moreover, as modernity favours the image of Cain, the work outlines a brief “biography of an archetype”, according to archetypology of Corin Braga, probably the most relevant for the area in which our research is placed, the cultural archetype being the one which allows connections between different periods of history, different geographies, work on it being possible inside it from the intertextual and intercultural point of view. By using the mask of the archetype, we can decipher the connections that have been established for a long time between civilizations and mentalities. Last, but not least, the openness towards the related fields (the history and the philosophy of religions,

the cultural anthropology etc.) are evident and the permanent connections become more than necessary.

Irrespective of the way in which it was interpreted and re-interpreted, constructed and deconstructed, the biblical myth of the rival brothers, Cain and Abel, acquired its constancy in the universal collective thinking, going beyond the space and time contexts, becoming *an exemplary story*. This unmistakable story continued to keep alive the interest of the writers throughout the centuries and nowadays, we can find it present as well.

The value given to this myth followed different directions throughout time. If in Christian Antiquity, literary works were kept within the limits of theological interpretations, literature coming to their support, once with the Middle Ages, the two biblical characters come out of the ecclesiastical space, entering the scene of the religious theatre and thus become literary characters. With numerous mythical nuclei which constantly arose the interest, literature will find in this history rich material for portraying the dilemmas of each specific period since the Renaissance imaginary which seeks to set free the repressed mythical material and up to modernity, which witnesses a “return of the myth”, periods which evince a special freedom of interpretation, combining canonical elements with those of the Apocrypha and up to the periods in which the spirit of time is kept with exactness within the limits of canonical interpretations.

The myth involves the notions of sacred and profane, with the relation man-divinity at its centre and the way of considering it throughout different periods influences the interpretative variants. As far as the period in question is concerned, we can notice that in a modernity which cancels the vertical dimension of the relation of man with God, certain mythical nuclei are privileged. Considered only from a horizontal point of view, Cain is rehabilitated, seen as a model, is the initiator of art and technique, a “marked” man whose destiny is under the sign of journey and search. Being away from the face God, the modern man only has to search alone for the way of life. Beyond Cain’s wandering and runaway, we identify the hypostasis of the voyage which can be defined as an “exit” from the old habit in search of a new condition. On the vertical plan, this represents for Cain a “fall” from the initial condition, that of a direct relation with divinity, it is an “escape”, a “hiding” from the face of God. On the horizontal plan, Cain’s

journey represents the loss of something and the attempt at accomplishing something, Cain builds another life for himself, under the new circumstances, building up a city and founding arts and technique. Acknowledging the evil in this world, as a consequence of breaking up with divinity and of the loss of meaning in a world which became alien, will find a representation in the novels of the chosen writers, in the image of the runaway, of the wandering Cain. In this way, his exodus becomes the symbol of modernity.

The placement of Cain's exodus in the turmoiled space of modernity is not at all accidental. Beginning with Byron, the revolted Cain gradually becomes a symbolical character of the modern world. Due to his attributes, Cain overlaps over the image of the modern man. His first characteristic property, that of revolt, becomes the specific attitude of modernity: its critical relation to what tradition represents. Cain is a new man who was not subject anymore to the divine laws. This attitude brought to him banishment, breaking-off the connection with God, like the modern man, marked by his religious crisis. Cain's life after exile is a constant runaway and turmoil by losing the meaning of life. The lack of the same benchmarks turns the modern man into a finder, a nervous, anxious man. The consequence of Cain's sin was also the reluctance of nature he felt. The breaking-off of the communication links appeared on all the levels, both the spoiling of interpersonal relations, beginning with God, brother, parents, fellow men (he will be marked in order not to be killed, a sign of shame, a burden of the gesture he made), but also of the relations with the world (nature becomes reluctant to him, he will farm the land with tears and sweat and it will delay bringing fruit as the work proceeds). By the special progress of science and technique in relation to which man begins to be sometimes afraid because he feels he can't control fear completely, "to the death of God", sharpened by modernity, is associated the breaking-off of the relation with the world, with nature. Based on these coordinates, the journey of the modern man is alike the first murderer of humanity. On these similarities relied many of the writers of the concerned period, who addressed the meanings of the biblical myth which they cast into other patterns in their works.

"The biography" of this runaway-traveller will highlight different issues. Cain is a wanderer, a finder in the world. The first meaning we can associate to journey is that of way of life. The journey can be looked upon as a metaphor of the ephemeral man passing

through the world. Descending from Cain, a traveller in search of his destiny is Emil Sinclair, the hero of the novel *Demian* by Hermann Hesse. Resemantizing the biblical myth of Cain and Abel from a gnostic point of view, Hermann Hesse confers new valences to the mythical topics used. The central symbol of the novel is Cain's sign, changed into a distinction of the chosen ones. In Hesse's novel, the doomed Cain becomes the initiated one, the bearer of a distinguishing feature, is the father of those who will search for enlightenment. Sinclair is a bearer of Cain's sign and the novel pursues his whole journey from novice through to initiate. The novel is built around the gnostic motive of life-search for oneself, but Hermann Hesse creates numerous interferences with Jung's psychoanalysis, he also finds himself in the nihilism of the time, to which he nevertheless tries to propose a solution: the interior strength of the gnostic, the value of the individual who has written in himself what nature wants from man. Beside the personal transformation of the main character, Emil Sinclair, the novel portrays, in parallel, the reorganization of the world on the eve of the First World War, a necessary reorganization because the old world was far too directed towards the past and could not see its own way any longer, its own responsibility. In this world, the bearers of Cain's distinction had the goal of building a new world.

Being only considered in its horizontal dimension, in literature, this mythical nucleus of Cain's wandering, will also illustrate the journey of the undertaker, of the finder of ways, of new opportunities which life can provide. The journey can represent a goal, defining the life of some people, in opposition to those who are afraid to come off the comfort of their "home". Cain's exodus becomes a search for a promised land as it is suggested by Steinbeck and Archer's literary resemantizations.

Considered as a reference book of the past century, *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck changes the angle of interpretation of the biblical story, providing a modern perspective on the conflict between Cain and Abel. The couples Charles and Adam, respectively Caleb and Aron, are deliberately constructed as images of the biblical brothers, the references to the situations of the biblical story being numerous. Steinbeck weaves a story in which history and myth interfere. After the testimony in the author's journal, by writing this novel, he meant to narrate one of the greatest stories "about love and hatred, beauty and ugliness". Appraising the topicality of the biblical myth, the

author thinks that the story of the enemy brothers offers him rich material in order to develop the great themes of modern literature within the novel: love, death, survival in adverse conditions, family relations, creation, good and evil. From greatness to decay or self-destruction, from fight to resignation, from guilt to liberation, the novel is constructed by means of reinforced parallels with the Book of Genesis, the semantizations aim at giving value to the scriptural truths. Being integrated into the objective and realistic prose, Steinbeck's novel represents a lesson about essence and appearance, reason and instinct.

On the one hand, travelling means seeing new things, new people, but it also means being seen by others. It means placing in congruence the informational baggage and the being which we already have with what we encounter on our way. Identity and otherness are the two profiles which shape a traveller. The travel involves assimilation or exclusion. Jaques Revel from *Passing time* by Michel Butor, will also be a traveller, but he will fight against assimilation, he practises self-exclusion. In both cases (integration or exclusion), the traveller bears in him the image of the world from which he comes with its lights and shadows, which distance will highlight deliberately or will blot out according to the mood of each character. For Revel, journey is a passage, therefore, his attitude will be one of rejection from the beginning. This closed journey, as far as space and time are concerned, will turn the residence city into a labyrinth. Bleston, the city of Cain, exerts its seizure powers on the newcomer, for this reason, the hero will fight in order to preserve his identity, placing himself, in a postmodern spirit, under two symbols: that of Cain and that of Theseus. In tight connection with the symbol of Cain's city is the foundation of arts and technique, Cain, the murderer is considered as the father of art. Thus, there is a tight connection between crime and art. The creation necessarily follows a sacrifice, but Abel's sacrifice made possible the building of the city by Cain. J. Grenier, in his work *The Art and its problems*, senses the connections of sacrifice with the complex process of the creating act. The traveller Jaques Revel, who will fight against "oblivion", searching for his own story of Ariadna in the lines of his journal, will also be under the symbol of art. His symbolical crimes only foreshadow the need for "murder" of the old man who dwelt within him in order to leave place to the new man, for the purpose

of managing to emphasize the being unspoiled by the “vices” of this world. *Passing time* is not a “guide” through an English city, but a guide through life.

Another mythical nucleus favoured by modernity, deliberately taken in a fragmented way, a choice dictated by the mentality of the age, is “the image of the Father” which can only be a negative one: the gnostic image of a whimsical, vengeful testamentary veteran God (*Demian*, Herman Hesse, *Cain*, J. Saamago) or hypostatized in the figure of the natural father, with the same preferential attitude, incapable of attaining harmony between his sons (*East of Eden*, Steinbeck). The wanderer Cain of Saramago will peregrinate through the different sequences of the Old Testament in search of the image of the Father. In a postmodern style, pursuing the plurality of meanings and discussing history as “possible”, declaring himself against a religion which confines the spirit, Saramago’s attitude is purposely a demythizing one. The author wants to break the “the spell” with which religion has strived for so long to cover the eyes of the believers. Being a revolutionary spirit, Saramago becomes “the advocate” of the aggrieved Cain, who was unaccountably rejected by divinity and sues it, bringing plenty of proofs against divine justice. In his personal vision, by this desacralization of myth, Saramago challenges the reader to reflect on human condition beyond any religious pattern or lens.

The modern remakings are used on the basis of myth, but is interesting the way in which this form of story is changed from its primary meaning to the experience of modernity. Following the kerigmatic value of myth, we can consider that by means of these semantizations, resemantizations and desamentizations, one of the characteristic traits of myth is emphasized, the repetition, as Claude Lévi-Strauss said, has the property of making its structure visible and these literary creations are only examples which prove the perennial character of myth and the fact that literature represents its privileged space, a mythogenetic space.

As we could notice in this work, literature, like a mirror, unfaithful to myth, reflects the mythical persistencies as well as the semantizations, desamentizations and the resignifications of this myth, illustrating both the specific traits of each period and the preferences of each author for certain mythical nuclei which he correlates in a personal network of significations.

The analysed authors indicate to us the fact that myth is still kept alive. The myth interpreted in the novel makes possible the realization of a pervasion and of a transfer of stylized signs. Literature can achieve an update of myth even if each author interprets it by placing it in its own matrix, recasting the mythical matter into new structures. The authors who use the myth as a starting point for their novels first emerge as modern readers of myth by means of interpretation. Further on, as author, he purposely relies on myth from a personal point of view. In this way, each text achieves a unique and unrepeatable relation with the myth. Literature, which presents the attitude of an age towards myth in general, and towards other myths, in particular, as well as that of each author, acts only to reveal to us a certain way of relating to myth.