

UNIVERSITATEA “ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA” IAȘI
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LITERARY MOTIFS
IN
ALAIN-FOURNIER’S WORK

Ph.D. Thesis abstract

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The present work proposes the investigation of Alain-Fournier's imaginary universe on the way traced by the significations of literary motifs. Why did we choose this topic? Why Alain-Fournier and his work? The argument lies in the actuality of a creation which, a century after its apparition that sparked off positive reactions in the cultural media of the time, continues to gave rise to theatrical and film adaptation and arouses readers' and literary critics' interest. Over the last decade, French-language criticism registered at least a study by year, but in Romania the number of critical approaches is low.

The Ph.D. Thesis, structured in six chapters, was designed from an initial plan whose aim was to conduct to the development of a personal scheme of the main thematic directions of the author's work. We tried to highlight links between symbolic values of the fundamental elements, efficiency of

the initiatic process, mythical substrate and religious connotations. In order to realise a more comprehensive research, we analysed the rough drafts and the notes of *The Lost Estate*, the autobiographical material and the portraits drawn by contemporaries, as well as the integration of the work in the context of that time.

In the first chapter we followed the stages of biography because we had noticed that events and life coordinates produced artistic reverberations in his texts, so that the landscape of the “called life” (fictional world), anchored in the subjective present, is more real than life itself, as the young creator wrote in a letter to Jacques Riviere. From the temporary and apparently arbitrary correspondence of the two friends we could make stand out some literary motifs which will come back in the pages of the novel. Paradoxically, the opposite phenomenon of the immersion of art in reality area occurs when the

man Alain-Fournier keeps the artists' clothes, writing "Yvonne de Galais" – the character's name – in an epistolary context which imposed that the real person receive the name "Yvonne de Quievrecourt". Moreover, in another confession to the same correspondent, the author declares that the young woman he loves is, for him, "the entire art, literature and yet the entire life".

The biographical elements and the cultural tendencies specific to the beginning of the XXth century marked Alain-Fournier's work. He is intensely concerned about the problem of faith developed by Charles Peguy and Paul Claudel, and the spiritual quest is realised in the form of the literary motif of renouncement as gesture of the true Christian love. Symbolists' thirst of mystery, purity, dream and escape finds its echo in his particular approach guided by the desire to create his identity through a self-analysis with therapeutic effect. Even though his ambition is great, the young

writer looks humbly into his work, guiding himself after the principle according to which writing shapes the concrete, the particular, and not the abstract ideas in which Riviere took interest.

In the second chapter we dwelt upon some precisions concerning the notion of “literary motif”, often used in the same context as the concept of “literary theme” and related to the sphere of symbols and images. In order to clarify the concept, we reminded contradictory points of view expressed by Paul van Tieghem, Joseph Courtes, Boris Tomashevsky, Tzvetan Todorov, Wolfgang Kayser, Pierre Brunel, Dim. Pacurariu, Claude Bremond and Georges Leroux. We chose to consider the literary motif as “a concrete element illustrating the abstract sphere of the theme”. In the same chapter we drew a short history of the notion of “myth”, highlighting the difficulty of defining it and some interpretations of it over the time.

The third chapter, *Analysis of literary motifs in Alain-Fournier's work*, is made up of two subchapters: *Psychoanalysis of the fundamental elements* and *Diurnal Order and Nocturnal Order of image*. The subchapter dedicated to the psychoanalytical study of the significations that qualify the fundamental elements in *The Lost Estate* seemed to us to be useful, since we did not find in the consulted bibliography an analysis of the elementary in Alain-Fournier. The four Aristotelian elements indicate a narrative construction based upon the initiatic journey of Augustin Meaulnes and François Seurel. The literary motifs identified are organised around two main semantic fields: purification (essential condition of the initiatic process) and psychical transformation (consequence of a successful initiatic route).

The most significant motifs group together in the episodes which present the discovery of the Land without a name. The symbolic values that

they receive are linked especially to the lyric or nocturnal component introduced by the symbolism of inversion, intimacy and euphemisation, but they keep the optimistic nuances of the diurnal upward symbols. Given that any initiatic experience leads to a new beginning, we could declare that the Adventure is grafted onto the cyclical and progressive valences of future. Moral height and purity characteristic to the “Diurnal Order” are necessary conditions to get in the mysterious Domain and meet Yvonne. The same motif or the same image can borrow aspects of the diurnal configuration and of the “Nocturnal Order”. So, the bridge supposes a diairetic value, but also intimate tones. Reading the Bible provokes a dream flight impression that implies the upward imagination and the idea of intimacy. A certain kind of symbolism could be also described by the isomorphism of a “constellation of images”: e.g. the intimate atmosphere is rendered by three elements:

accommodation (including the house on water – the boat – and other vehicles: the caravan and the horse-drawn wagon), best-beloved and death.

In the fourth chapter we followed the blend between epic and lyric in the mythical texture of the novel. Superposed to a space apparently defined by real toponyms and to the misleading temporality of 189..., the mythical time-space a road that the reader could follow in order to make the difference between “close” and “far”. The orientation is difficult especially in the diffuse light of the miraculous setting at the strange party whose participants seem to come from an atemporal world.

Wrong tracks and lack of landmarks does not stop the reader to consider the impossible as a threshold of the possible and to aspire to a trip to imaginary lands bathed by the memory of marine waves, dreaming to a return to the lost childhood innocence, as Augustin Meaulnes.

The initiatic process to which the main character is subjected is developed through the reduplication of the hero by a companion-confidant who dashes forward, bravely, in the same passionate quest. One by one Rescuer, Victim or Persecutor by free will or without knowing it, the novices bear the weight of their mysterious adventure. Each of the three main male characters (Meaulnes, François and Frantz) could pass through the hypostases of the triadic relation proposed almost half a century ago by the psychologist Stephen Karpman. We demonstrated that the three roles are interchangeable and enter in a complex game of symmetries, and they pass through the three apexes of the equilateral triangle both clockwise and counter-clockwise. In the case of Meaulnes the reduplication is realised also by shimmering in the fishpond's water, which not only provides to the adolescent an instrument of idealisation of his face, transforming him for a few

moments in a Narcissus impressed by the perfection he is looking at, but also makes him think about his inner being. The image “as tilted on the sky” and the castle “with unequal wings, as a church” give birth to the vision of a world in which the man is the actor of his own role. Perception in the mirror allows passing from identity to otherness and decoding a superior reality characterised by a first symbolic penetration of the transcendent in the group of motifs that punctuate Meaulnes’ itinerary.

The aim of the initiation – make the neophyte feel the intensity of living a truth for the first time – touches the possibility of motif or myth to repeat and report to a situation whose origin could not be specified partially or integrally. The recurrence of mythical elements and cyclical symbols in the deep significant layers of the text, but also the symphonic resonances of leitmotifs allow decoding a poetics of renewal.

The lyric decor contributes to the construction of bridges between emotion and expression and to the aesthetic transfiguration of soul landscapes that the author wants to “search”, “feel” and “see”, fascinated by the hidden depths of an ordinary man’s heart.

In close contact with the space where she evolves, the angelic woman is assimilated to a house, to a chapel, to a hamlet or to the entire lost estate. In the final version of the novel, she always evolves inside the enigmatic region. More than a courtly ideal, the eternal feminine is a way to the candour of the childhood paradise and the perfection of the moments of happiness. The woman, as the death, places the human condition under the sign of the chiaroscuro of an inseparable duality. The permanent and painful exam of conscience confers a particular aspect to the crystallisation and quest of love. Woman’s reduplication comprises a mystical side: without

fitting into a love triangle, Yvonne and Valentine accept the irrevocable intervention of destiny, dedicating themselves to the renouncement and self-sacrifice.

The fifth chapter presents the miraculous Domain as *locus amoenus* being part of a mythical geography. True centre of the story, this *hortus conclusus* is the ideal of Meaulnes' claustrophilic visions and, in the same time, an island of Euthanasius that he can not abandon without feeling the nostalgia for the paradise. The end of the strange party and the abandonment of the castle transform the adolescent's life in a quest of an eternal elsewhere. Borrowing a characteristic of myth through reintegration in the primordial state of the one who arrives at the "Domain without a name" and proposing an echo to the extraordinary medieval quests, Meaulnes' adventure resembles to the Grail's story. The object of the highest aspirations is here a feminine figure, incarnation of

forgiveness and sign of a Christian isotopy. The way Meaulnes and Yvonne look one at the other remembers Auguste Rodin's "Cathedral" which joins in a spiritual ideal the tenderness of two lovers. The winding road of the young rebel makes for a "religion" of the woman-child holding the absolute.

In the sixth chapter we stopped on the myth as source of character's identity, insisting on the representative mythical figures that survive in the studied novel. The heroes of chivalrous novels, King Fisherman, Tristan and Isolde bring to the fore, under the mask of characters placed by the narrator at the end of the XIXth century, the courtly love from the time of troubadours and its medieval code, the clash with the unknown, the mystery of the ruined castle that can not be found any more.

The characters that we described borrow at least a trait of Hermes' character, the literary motif of voyage appearing constantly in the story dotted

with “roads” and “bends” which open unlimited perspectives in front of the reader. Most of the portrait lines of the journeyer god are combined in Meaulnes’ image, the young man who seems to be destined for a continuous pilgrimage, given that the way he moves does not keep count of geographical aims, and the road he followed does not link two points on the map, but it represents a world in itself, composed of winding paths and interventions of the hazard, of the unexpected. The qualities of guide and conciliator of conflicts, the cunning and the contempt for interdicts remind of the Greek divinity’s attributes. Both characters’ facts and appearance show the union of opposites symbolised by Hermes.

The mythological influences registry includes also physical and behavioural Dionysiac particularities, that we discover in the portrait of Frantz, the young with “extraordinary ideas” whose attempt to suicide seems to be part of a Bachical

scenario drawn upon a choreography combining dance and murder and turning things upside down.

Alain-Fournier's reader is enabled to choose between more reading levels: the level of the autobiographical story marked out with a series of rites of passage to adolescence, the level of a poetic daydream of a traveller in unknown lands, the level of the mythical novel and the level of the confession of a writer who considers the feminine soul's nobility as a window to the beyond world's whispers. By its thematic diversity and mythological richness, the book remains current not only for the researchers passionate by lyricism or by the epic canvas of the adventure novels, but also for those concerned about the philosophical-theological problems.

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