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Mircea Eliade – Exile and Diasporic Identity

Abstract:

This article is about Mircea Eliade's rapport to exile, both his and other Romanians'. His approach of the exilic experience allows an incursion into the "diaspora" semantic field in the study Theorizing Diaspora by Jana Evans Brazilier and Anita Mannur and a look at Eliade as a "diasporic subject". To Eliade, the relationship with homeland and the diasporic identity assume religious significance. He urges members of the Romanian diaspora to hold the native country sacred as a 'Jerusalem in the Sky'. A strong believer in the salvaging power of cultural creation over the political factor, he wanted his work to be a response to the communist regime in Romania.

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Motto: "The spirit creates especially when faced with great challenges." (Mircea Eliade, *Incercare labirintului*)

Perhaps the greatest challenge that the world-famous Romanian-American historian of religions Mircea Eliade had in his life was his exile, a condition he assumed after World War II, when the political regime changed in Romania. A distinction Mircea Eliade felt important to make with respect to his situating in the world was that he was an exile not an emigrant. He thought of himself as an exiled writer and in that condition he would compare to other exiles, like Ovid and Dante.

Eliade did not like the sadness and desolation in Ovid's poems, and preferred to remember Dante, who found strength and inspiration in the pain of his exile in Ravenna where he wrote *Divina Commedia*. While Ovid remained uncomfortable in his loss of imperial Rome, Dante, on the contrary, mastered his fate bravely. "He too suffered to the depth of his being the split with his Country, but accepted no compromise to return. Exile did not bring him down, didn't even lessen his spirit. Romanian writers in exile should remember Dante more, Ovid less. It is Dante's model we should follow" (*Impotriva deznadejdii* 133).

Eliade spoke against writing nostalgically like Ovid, and against ill feeling and resentment that cripple creativity and spoil the quality of life. On the contrary, he advocated among the Romanian diaspora to accept the rift with the native country, and turn the crisis into a battlefield of creativity. "Creation is the response we can give to destiny, to the terror of history" (*Incercare labirintului* 85). He believed that it was the duty of Romanian exiles to use their freedom to create: "We, who are outside the Iron Curtain, free and safe, have the duty to keep and continue the Romanian cultural tradition. It is

the only intelligent political action we can take” (*Impotriva deznadejdii* 66). In his view, literature and arts constituted a weapon, a political instrument that in time would have a political effect, in the sense of changing human conscience and giving hope.

In some of his exile articles, Eliade insisted that exiled writers and poets suffered more than any other exiles.

“They take with them everywhere the image of the lost Country. (...) or they are rather carried and nurtured by it, by the faded icon of the Country; as only the longing for it, the melancholy and crying keep alive these uprooted who cannot get roots anywhere (...) Because they cannot keep their spiritual integrity unless they create, and poets, writers – unlike engineers, musicians, painters – use language to create, that is they are destined to write only for their own. Therefore, anywhere they may be, they can write only thinking of the Country and of those left there.” (*Impotriva deznadejdii* 133)

Eliade himself resorted to writing his fiction in Romanian in an attempt to reconnect with the lost country: “From time to time I would feel the need to regain my origin, my homeland. In exile, one’s native land is one’s language and dream. And then I would write novels” (*Incercare* 80).

Exile was a hard choice that involved hard decisions: “I had to choose between despair and hope, and as I am always against despair of political, historical nature. I chose hope. I said to myself that this would also be a trial – we know very well the trials of history, we, the people in Romania, also in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, as we are in between empires” (*Incercare* 72).

Exile is accepted, dislocation is assumed and valorized as an initiatory experience. “To me, exile was no break from my past or from Romanian culture. To me, exile was part of the Romanian destiny” (*Incercare* 81). Eliade sees in the shepherds of the old a Romanian pre-diaspora (*Impotriva deznadejdii* 20-21). The pastoral masterpieces in Romanian folklore, as the *Miorita* ballad, such quintessence of Romanian culture and spirituality, are exemplary creations.

Eliade appropriated exile and was determined to help his country through his cultural work. Surviving through culture was seen as the only way: “Culture is a condition typical to human beings. One cannot be human without being cultural” (152). He was convinced that in the absence of culture, Romanians and all people would be crushed by history. And while traditional societies used to participate directly in religious phenomena, “we, products of the modern world, are condemned to receive every revelation through Culture” (*Incercare* 52).

He urged his fellow exiles to master their yearning for homeland and understand their condition as a “hard and long initiatory trial” aimed at transforming them. In his view, any suffering may turn into an initiation that eventually leads to a revelation otherwise inaccessible in the profane existence. If at times an exile may feel lost that condition equates to getting lost in a labyrinth, which in a religious sense, is but a road to a sacred Center.

Relationship with the Country assumes religious dimensions. Nostalgia for the far-away inaccessible homeland is like the nostalgia for Paradise – one can only ‘enter’ it “in spirit, *mysteriously*, but nonetheless *for real*”:

“Our Country starts being like the ‘Jerusalem in the Sky’ of the Jews in captivity: a city not less real than the other Jerusalem, the terrestrial one, but of a totally different nature. Let us remember that this is how the ‘Jerusalem in the Sky’ came into being, the true spiritual center of post-exilic Judaism: from the tears and yearning of the Jews taken captive, but seen, understood, and

explained through the genius of an elite, first of all of the prophets”. (*Impotriva deznadejdii* 134)

Therefore, the exiled intellectuals are the elite Eliade would entrust culturally and also spiritually with the fate of the future Romania. Eliade holds the image of Romania as a space of myth. His is the eternal, perennial Romania. To him, the Country remains in its fundamental, unalterable values. Eliade “visits” it in his dreams and carries its image with him in his memory space.

The country that is left behind is not lost, it lingers on as part of the inner world. In the absence of the real contact, the imaginary takes its place building onto the memory of the real. Memory preserves the past and Bucharest becomes a place of fiction: “To me Bucharest is the center of an inexhaustible mythology. Due to this mythology, I have succeeded in learning its true history. Probably mine’s too” (*Incercare* 34).

Memory preserves and brings back Romania, the world missed, in vivid images at the first sight of resemblance. In his *Autobiography* he records that once, while on a vessel going to Naples, the rhythm of the waves, or the starry sky and some mysterious sounds like whispers around, “projected me into a past hard to identify: a trip on the Danube or the Black Sea? I was fascinated by this sudden blissful regaining of the past” (151).

At a different time, in Chicago, Eliade devoted himself to working on the cosmogonic myths in Romania and Eastern Europe, to legendary figures like Dragos-Voda, and to Romanian religious folklore. “Although I didn’t realize it”, Eliade records in his *Autobiography*, “the periodical return to the study of Romanian spiritual traditions was, in a sense, a means of preserving my identity in the ‘melting pot’ of the United States” (204).

Eliade’s ‘fight’ to resist assimilation, Americanization, involves keeping the Romanian part of himself unaltered. He does not want to lose his past and be homogenized.

Asked by Claude Roquet to tell about his separation from the native country, Eliade recognizes the separation but he also sees himself in the exile posture similarly to a migrant Romanian shepherd in the old times and even to the Biblical Jews: “It is true that there was a split with homeland, but this split has already existed in Romanians’ past; it has existed also in the history of the Jewish people that constitute a kind of exemplary history and that I consider one of the models of the Christian world” (*Incercare labirintului* 85)

It is the example of the Biblical exile of the Jews that Eliade uses to urge Romanian diaspora to hold the native country sacred, as the Jews did, and likewise never allow themselves to be cut off from their ‘Jerusalem in the Sky’.

The term “diaspora”, defined as “the naming of the other” (Evans Braziel 1), is originally linked to the Hebrew scriptures. Historically it referred to people dislocated from their homelands through migration or exile:

“First used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures explicitly intended for the Hellenic Jewish communities in Alexandria (circa 3rd century BCE) to describe the Jews living in exile from the homeland in Palestine, diaspora suggests dislocation from the nation-state or geographical location of origin and a relocation in one or more nation-states, territories, countries.” (Evans Braziel, Mannur. *Nation, Migration, Globalization: points of Contention in Diaspora Studies* 1)

The term ‘diaspora’ appears to hold religious significance. In itself it is indicative also of the mission of its members that Eliade often spoke about with reference to the

Romanians in exile.

In *Theorizing Diaspora*, Braziler and Mannur link contemporary forms of diasporic movement, from travel to exile, with issues including identity, nation, and homeland. Their theorizing of the term reveals certain intriguing ambiguities: literally, on a historical level, “diaspora” has a negative connotation as it denotes “communities of people dislocated from their native homelands through migration, immigration or exile as a consequence of colonial expansion”, while etymologically it has a positive significance, suggesting “fertility of dispersion, dissemination and the scattering of seeds” (4).

Indeed, diasporic experiences are not necessarily caused by colonial expansion, although Eliade did perceive post World War II Romania as being under occupancy. Often his discourse about the duty of the Romanian exiles urged them to act to resist the “occupant” – the Soviet political regime in Romania.

Eliade himself, as a “diasporic subject”, experienced a “nostalgic dislocation from homeland” (4) and is marked by “hybridity and heterogeneity – cultural, linguistic, ethnic and national” (5). According to Stuart Hall, as cited by Braziler and Mannur, the “diasporic experience” is defined “not by essence and purity but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, and by a conception of identity which lives in and through, not despite, difference, by hybridity” (5)

Although it is difficult to quantify either the Romanian or the American ‘portion’ of Eliade’s hybrid identity, and despite his self-posture as European, in the context of his exile, Eliade’s identity is “negotiated”. He chooses as dominant version his Romanian national identity, an “essentialized”, “nativist identity” affiliated to the construction of the Romanian nation and his home country. However, by definition, also, as a diasporic subject, Eliade experienced at least a “double identification” as part of the hybrid identity. This may very well be the scholar and the writer, the diurnal and the nocturnal mode of his creativity, the American and the Romanian (to stop just at the two halves of his life).

In a theorized approach of the diaspora, various starting points are taken into account, as well as essentialist notions like: homeland, national, ethnic identity, geographical location, deployment, hybridity and heterogeneity. In his own rapport of exilic experience, Eliade often seeks refuge in clear-cut essentialist categories like the ones just listed above. In a similar approach as that of scholars of Jewish diaspora, Eliade sees himself and the Romanian diaspora “grounded in the fixed or metaphysical-geographical foundations of home, identity and exile” (6)

Theorists of diaspora talk about “boundaries” demarcating nations and diasporas. Eliade also uses the term but extrapolates its meaning. According to him, no matter where on earth, one may find oneself in a “boundary situation” which is not only historical but “which man discovers in becoming conscious of his place in the universe” (*Images and Symbols* 39), meaning in relationship to God. In that sense, every man is an exiled, if estranged from the source of meaning in life.

Going back to an exile’s position with respect to the native country and to the host country, R. Radhakrishnan’s essay “Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora”, included as a chapter in *Theorizing Diaspora*, identifies the ‘symptoms’ of a diasporan citizen who opposes homogenization in the host country by taking recourse to “some mythic” homeland. “We turn our diasporan gaze back to the home country. Often that gaze is uncritical and nostalgic” (Evans Brazier, Mannur 128)

Radhakrishnan is concerned with diasporan citizen’s “obsession with the sacredness of one’s origins. (...) The diasporan hunger for knowledge about and intimacy with

the home country should not turn into a transhistorical and mystic quest for origins” (128) He advocates a balanced view, which should accept the possibility of change in identity, a natural result of travel and mobility in the contemporary world. As with every exile, “the home country is nor ‘real’ in its own terms and yet real enough to impede Americanization, and the ‘present home’ is materially real and yet not real enough to feel authentic” (123).

Eliade’s homeland is the archetypal Romania. When he told Claude Roquet “I know my country very well”, he meant not only geographically and culturally, he meant a deep knowledge of its spiritual values, its history and beliefs, the very identity of a people that makes it different from other people and at the same time that is universal and part of humanity.

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