

THE PERSISTENCE OF MYTHS IN CONTEMPORARY POETIC LANGUAGE

Radu Vancu

„Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, Romania; rvancu@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper observes contemporary poetry's capability of absorbing mythical structures and dealing with mythical issues. Ever since the beginning of modernity, poetical language has obeyed the legacies of modern meta-narratives in what concerns the secularization and renunciation of the mythical thought and vision(s), trying to cope with the *Entzauberung* of the world. But, not altogether surprisingly, postmodern world seems to develop its own myths – as some theoreticians of the present world, ranging from Jean-Marie Domenach (*Le Retour du tragique*, 1967) to Gilles Lipovetsky (*Le bonheur paradoxal*, 2006, or *L'Occident mondialisé: Controverse sur la culture planétaire*, 2010), have quite convincingly shown. And, also not surprisingly, contemporary poetry seems to develop and envisage new manners and protocols for dealing with the newly elaborated myths: while it pretends to be a biographical secularized annotation of the everyday life, it nevertheless dissimulates a deep mythical structure, composed of remnants of ancient myths combined with recent cultural myths, mostly received via Anglo-Saxon cultural channels. Thus, contemporary poetic language experiences an acute discrepancy between the apparent secularization of the world and the formation of new mythical and spiritual structures (the New Age spirituality, mainly – but not exclusively) which poetry has to react with.

Keywords: *contemporary poetic language, mythical structures, secularization, postmodern myths, psychologization of the sacred.*

Sacred in modern poetry

Originating in the ancient performance of the sacred, indeed so close to it as to be considered one of its main by-products (the other being the theatre), poetry has preserved an intricate and almost physiological relation with both the sacred and its vehicles and tenors – namely myths and their subverted derivatives dissimulating the sacred in everyday life: tragedies, fairy tales, legends, dithyrambs, etc. Even when socially accepted as an elevated ornate discourse, pedagogic and educational enough in order to be taught in school, its dangerous potential (because sacred may be, as a matter of fact, socially and educationally disruptive) has never been neglected by those who understood that the function of poetry is not merely decorative, or that of pleasing an audience with its elaborate and adorned structures. (Plato's reaction towards poets is instructive enough in this respect – as they are all inspired by gods or *daimoni*, poets are dangerous, potential terrorists who may endanger the reasonable social order and must be cast away from any reasonable society. Or, if called back from their banishment – which Plato actually did –,

they should be kept under strict observance in carefully designed and guarded areas¹. Again, like potential terrorists always likely to act disruptively in the name of the sacred.) For the understanding eye, poets are all *mystikoi* – since *mystikos* means in Greek *hidden*, and poetry relates with the hidden remnants of the sacred in the quotidian. Poets are, with Jerome Rothenberg's memorable and influential phrase, "technicians of the sacred"², highly aware of the things hidden after the making of the world, while poetry is this highly dissimulated technique of the sacred, aiming at surreptitiously re-introducing it into a desecrated world *via* its seductively polished and seemingly inoffensive word lacery. Which, of course, eventually proves much less inoffensive than it seems in the first instance. But we shall see more specifically about that in the following pages.

Now, I am obviously aware that, from the perspective of the contemporary reader, this hypothesis of an intricate relation between poetry and the sacred may seem quite anachronical, as one of the main projects of modernity insists exactly on the secularization of public discourses, from the political to the literary ones. And it is already general knowledge the fact that modern poetry not only followed, but even preceded and sometimes designed the processes and phenomena of the secularization and of the *Entzauberung* of the world. And it has done it to such extent that, at the half of the past century, theorists of literature considered as the main characteristic of modern poetry its compromised relation with the sacred. In his extremely influential study, *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik* (*The Structure of Modern Poetry*, 1956), Hugo Friedrich coalesces all the characteristics of the otherwise extremely heteromorphic modern poetry around the central concept of the "leere Transzendenz"³, that is, of the empty transcendence of which poetry written after the first half of the nineteenth century witnesses. When a modern post-Baudelairean poet writes about transcendence, it cannot be but empty; when a modern post-Rimbaldian poet writes about Christianity, this cannot be done but in the form of a sedition against the inherited constraints of Christianity – which is, of course, a „Christianity in ruins"⁴. As Hugo Friedrich synthetically puts it, the modern poet's relation with the sacred is, just as his relation with the world as a whole, only conceivable in terms of „negative categories”.

But, of course, in the almost sixty years which have passed since the publication of Hugo Friedrich's study on modern poetry, things have changed, and poets' relation with the sacred has become if more complicated, then at least less antagonistic. Ironically enough, it was a German theorist (namely Friedrich) who observed and discussed the progressive elimination of the sacred from the modern world – while in general German thinkers are said to be more biased towards mysticism and more prone for the reception of the *mysterium tremendum*; and, for the irony to be perfect (and perfectly symmetrical), there are some French theorists (philosophers, actually – who are said to be usually chronic and inveterate rationalists) who observe and discuss the progressive recovery of the sacred into the contemporary

¹ V. Platon, *Republica*, translated by Andrei Cornea, in Platon, *Opere*, vol. V, ed. by Constantin Noica & Petru Creția, București, Edit. Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1986 (2nd revised edition, București, Teora, 1998, 2 vol.).

² Rothenberg, Jerome. *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania*, University of California Press, 1985.

³ For further reading on the subject, one may use the extremely useful Rowohlt edition of Friedrich's study: *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik. Von der Mitte des neunzehnten bis zu der Mitte des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts*, Hamburg, Rowohlt, 2006.

⁴ See the introductory exemplifying analytical chapters on Baudelaire and Rimbaud in Hugo Friedrich's study.

postmodern world – mainly Jean Baudrillard and Gilles Lipovetsky, in some of their most recent and authoritative works, which I am going to discuss below.

Sacred today. *Sacer consumericus*

In his work's symbolic economy, Jean Baudrillard's *Mots de passe* (Pauvert/Fayard, 2000) plays a role similar with that of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* – as both books aim at explaining the main ideas of their authors after their work is complete, and therefore a few years before their physical (or psychic, in Nietzsche's case) disparition. Both *Mots de passe* and *Ecce Homo* are self-explanatory books, conceived by their authors as some *vademecums* of their philosophical works. But, while Nietzsche, in his *Ecce Homo. How one becomes what one is* (translated with much gusto into Romanian by Mircea Ivănescu), summarizes in a few pages his most important books taken chronologically one after another⁵, Baudrillard chooses to present his *vademecum* under the form of a dictionary of the most important concepts in his influential books – the passwords (*mots de passe*, indeed) of his system: *l'objet, la valeur, l'échange symbolique, la séduction, l'obscène, le virtuel, l'aléatoire, la transparence du mal*, etc⁶. What results from this rather lexicographical technique is a sort of keywords not only for Baudrillard's system, but for the entire postmodern society – keywords which, as a matter of fact, both describe and generate it.

It struck me from the very first pages that, in this simili-testamentary book, Baudrillard's discourse is much more openly related and connate with certain aspects of the mystical one. For example, in the definition of the very first *mot de passe*, namely *l'objet*, the object which coagulates the whole world around it, Baudrillard states: „Les objets ont toujours été considérés comme un univers inerte et muet, dont on dispose au prétexte qu'on l'a produit. Mais pour moi, cet univers-là avait quelque chose à dire, qui outrepassait son usage. Il entrait dans le règne du signe où rien ne se passe aussi simplement, parce que le signe est toujours l'effacement de la chose. L'objet désignait donc le monde réel mais aussi son absence – et en particulier celle du sujet”⁷. What Baudrillard describes here as a postmodern world is, as we may see, a world inside which objects speak in ways which surpass by far their usage about the real world and, even more significantly, about its absence. Objects prove referential for an absent or hidden world, more significant than the visible one – and now it is time that we remember what I have just said a few pages ago about the *mystikoi*, for which things hidden from the making of the world are much more important than the visible ones. Despite the seemingly rationalist tone of the definition, it is quite clear that a mystical spirit animates Baudrillard's understanding of the object – and, subsequently, of the world.

It is indeed extremely surprising to identify this mystical bias at a philosopher who has undertaken in his previous books Marxist analyses of the production or of the language, for example. But, despite the previous Marxist leanings of the French author, his language nevertheless bears some quite

⁵ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Ecce homo. Cum devii ceea ce ești*, translated by Mircea Ivănescu, București, Humanitas, 2013

⁶ Baudrillard, Jean. *Mots de passe*, Pauvert, département des Éditions Fayard, 2000. I am using the second edition, published in 2007.

⁷ Baudrillard, Jean, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

obvious marks of this final mystical conversion – two pages after this definition of the object, he speaks openly about a „Rédemption de l'objet”⁸ (yes, with capital *R* in the French original) – which is not possible, he admits, but the mystical terminology of the discourse is here of much more interest and significance than its semantics. Another two pages later, speaking about the notions of *valeur* and *échange*, Baudrillard notes: „les choses ne s'échangent jamais directement entre elles, mais toujours par la médiation d'une transcendance”⁹ – again, I am not interested (at least not yet) in what he really says here, but in the vocabulary he chooses to use, because it bears the imprints of a mystical understanding of the world which I dare say was absent in Baudrillard's prior books, which he now claims to summarize and synthesize. Which is indeed what he does, in their very letter – but the spirit itself is strikingly different, adding this mystical extra dimension which was missing in the original books themselves.

But we need not only read in between the lines in order to grasp this new relation with the sacred. Baudrillard sometimes states it openly, as in this paragraph: „la forme fondamentale, la forme radicale, est toujours celle du défi, de la surenchère, du potlatch – donc de la négation du valeur. Du sacrifice de la valeur. Ainsi, nous vivrions toujours sur un mode sacrificiel, sans vouloir désormais l'assumer. Sans le pouvoir non plus, parce que sans les rituels, sans les mythes, nous n'en avons plus les moyens”¹⁰. „The sacrificial mode” is, it's worth insisting, not only etymologically related with the sacred – it refers to the persistence in the world's substance of some fragments of the sacred, namely of some structures derived from the sacrificial rites, in which the subject sacrificed (which etymologically means „made sacred”) is now the value. However, these remnants of the sacred cannot act as catalysts of a mystical existence; one cannot fully assume „the sacrificial mode”, because the performance of the sacred cannot be realized in the absence of myths and rituals.

One can now understand the irony of our relation with the sacred as it appears in Baudrillard's thought: we live immersed between remnants of the sacred, but we cannot recognize them, as our organs for the sacred have atrophied after the entrance in modernity; and even if we eventually manage to recognize them, we cannot assume a „sacrificial mode”, because we lack the performative instruments of myths and rituals, which are the means („les moyens”) of the sacred; and, finally, even if we re-invent the means, we still cannot remember what the end of the sacred is. As one can see, there is a certain amount of surreptitious gnostic despair in Baudrillard's otherwise rational and limpid pages: while reading his words concerning (and concerned with) the loss of the myths and rituals necessary for the performance and assumption of the sacred, I could not refrain comparing their sound with the sound of some Valentinian pages about the people who have lost their *gnosis* and would not be able to recognize and assume the divine Pleroma.

But this despair, just as the gnostic one, is oriented towards an answer: Baudrillard ends, exactly like the gnostics, by imagining a world in which the *gnosis* is bestowed once again on the mortals. He imagines an alternative world, whose principle of organization is as it follows: „J'imaginerais volontiers, comme contrepied de cet univers complètement informatisé qu'on nous donne à voir ou à prévoir, un

⁸ Ibidem, p. 14.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 16.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 25.

monde qui ne serait plus que coïncidences. Un tel monde ne serait pas un monde du hasard et de l'indétermination, mais un monde du destin. Toutes les coïncidences sont en quelque sorte prédestinées (...) La prédestination dirait: tel moment est prédestiné à tel autre, tel mot à tel autre, comme dans un poème où on a l'impression que les mots ont toujours eu vocation de se rejoindre"¹¹. So this is how the ideal alternative world looks like, according with Baudrillard: a poem where everything coheres, giving the impression that everything is destiny, and where there's no room for the aleatory and stochastic. The description of the poem-world made me think that Baudrillard would have gladly countersigned Pound's poem which reads: „it coheres all right / even if my notes do not cohere” (Canto CXVI)¹². A world where it all coheres all right, even when it does not cohere – this is Baudrillard's understanding both of a poem and of an ideal world, able to acknowledge and assume its „sacrificial mode”. In such a poem, and in such a world (in such a poem-world), the means of the sacred (namely myths and rituals) meet their ends; the poem itself, or the world itself, is a myth (even if or even when it does not hold any ostensible mythical scenography), performing the sacred while transforming it into a set of coincidences – that is, into a destiny. The perfect collocation of the words, seemingly predestined to meet each other in the poem, is the succedaneum of the predestination from the Greek tragedy, with the only minor difference that the notion applicable then to humans is now functional for words. As if the reality of the world has been completely absorbed into the reality of the words.

It is important to observe here that this „predestination of words”, this transformation of the possibility of random aleatory verbal combinations into the realization of a perfectly ordered range of words, is an adaptation of the myth of the labyrinth to the means and ends of literature. The ultimate coherence of the poem, resulted from the initial verbal chaos, is the linguistic equivalent of the ultimate coherence of the labyrinth, a chaos made crystalline once its principle of organization is discovered. This labyrinthine condition of the poem (and of the poem-world) will be significant and even essential in my case study of Mircea Ivănescu's poetry, as I have shown some place else¹³.

The other French philosopher who, while observing and describing our contemporary world, thinks that we are witnessing a recovery of the sacred is Gilles Lipovetsky. But what he envisages is not the well-known type of sacred for the *Homo religiosus*, saturated with *mysterium tremendum*, full of trembling and fear; indeed, what Lipovetsky speaks about is a sacred for the *Homo consumericus* – a concept coined by the French philosopher and sociologist, designating the contemporary man of the transmodern epoch. It is more a „sacred for consumers”, a *sacer consumericus*, I would say, which is not opposed anymore to the secularized consumer society; or, in Lipovetsky's own words: „Même la religion ne constitue plus un contre-pouvoir à l'avancée de la consommation-monde. (...) Tandis que les idées de plaisir et de désir sont de moins en moins associées à la 'tentation', la nécessité de porter sa croix sur terre s'est effacée. (...) D'une religion centrée sur le salut dans l'au-delà, le christianisme est passé à une

¹¹ Ibidem, pp. 70-71.

¹² V. Canto CXVI, in *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, New York, New Directions Publishing, 1996; for further reading on Canto CXVI and Pound's understanding of coherence, see Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1973, p. 526 *sqq.* and 548 *sqq.*

¹³ see Vancu, Radu, *Myths and Mythoids in Mircea Ivănescu's Poetry*, in *Transilvania*, no. 11-12/2013.

religion au service du bonheur intramondain mettant l'accent sur les valeurs de solidarité et d'amour, sur l'harmonie, la paix intérieure, la réalisation totale de la personne¹⁴. And, more synthetical and explicit: „l'univers hyperbolique de la consommation n'a pas été le tombeau de la religion mais l'instrument de son adaptation à la civilisation moderne du bonheur terrestre¹⁵.

There is no wonder that this sacred adapted to the consumers' needs (namely, to their pursuit of terrestrial happiness) is treated by the same consumers as a merchandise. Maybe more valuable than the others – but nevertheless a merchandise. For the consumer, *sacer consumericus* is merely related with the wellbeing; they expect from physical exercise to bring them benefits in body-building, and from spiritual exercise to bring them similar benefits in the fields of soul-building or self-building. Lipovetsky clearly states this: „C'est de plus en plus la recherche de la réalisation psychologique du sujet qui se trouve au centre tant des expériences de croyants proprement dits que des nouvelles 'religions sans Dieu'. Ce qui fait la valeur de la religion n'est plus sa position de vérité absolue mais la vertu qu'on lui attribue de pouvoir favoriser l'accès à un état supérieur d'être, à une vie subjective meilleure et plus authentique¹⁶. I think the keywords in this quote is the „psychological realisation of the subject”; if sacred proper was supposed to initiate the believer in the afterlife and prepare him for it through the scenario of death and rebirth, the consumer sacred has transferred the scenario at the psychological level, preparing the subject (for he is not anymore a believer in the strong sense of the word) not for the afterlife, but for the present one.

To conclude with, let us now summarize what we have learned about the sacred in contemporary society from Baudrillard and Lipovetsky:

1) we still live in a „sacrificial mode”, submersed in fragments of the sacred, which we cannot assume as we lack the performative instruments of myths and rituals;

2) the ideal of this „sacrificial mode” is to make the world coherent and crystalline like a poem, with all the connections between events-words perfectly justified (non-aleatory and non-stochastic), transforming the chaotic labyrinth of the events-words into a predestined trace;

3) sacred is transformed into *sacer consumericus*, a subverted form of it aiming at the psychological realisation of the subject which to ensure him a more authentic inner life; sacred is not anymore transcendental, its manifestation and functions are comprised in the fields of immanence.

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¹⁴ Gilles Lipovetsky, *Le bonheur paradoxal. Essai sur la société d'hyperconsommation*, Gallimard, 2006, pp. 146-147.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 148.

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Radu VANCU is a lecturer at the Faculty of Letters and Arts at the „Lucian Blaga” University from Sibiu and an editor of two cultural magazines, *Poesis International* and *Transilvania*. He has published six books of poems and two book-length essays on Mihai Eminescu and Mircea Ivănescu. He is also the author of *Mistica poeziei* (2013). Together with Claudiu Komartin, he is the co-editor of the anthologies *Best Romanian Poems of the Year* (2010, 2011, and 2012). He has translated novels and poetry (two ample selections from Ezra Pound and John Berryman).

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