



# Myths and mythoids in Mircea Ivănescu's Poetry

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My case study is represented by the poetry of Mircea Ivănescu, as I presume it embodies the most adequate example of a paradoxical condition: while it pretends to be a biographical and secularized annotation of the everyday life of the everyman, it nevertheless dissimulates a deep mythical structure, composed of remnants of ancient myths combined with recent cultural myths, mostly received via Anglo-Saxon (and also French and German, even though in a lesser extent) cultural channels. The presence of this „mythoids” has been noticed before, at least by Alexandru Cistelean (in his Mircea Ivănescu monograph from 2003) and by myself, in my study on Mircea Ivănescu from 2007, but no extensive study has been made on the nature, structure, and function of this mythical underframe. The conclusions drawn from the case of Mircea Ivănescu's poetry could be extended afterwards for the most interesting cases of Romanian recent poetry – since it experiences an even more 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 Romanian poetry, sacred and poetry, biographism and myths, mythical underframes, Mircea Ivănescu



## Myths and mythoids. A definition

As I have shown some place else, this is, in a nutshell, what we learn 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.

Now, it is obvious that all this fragments of myths do not coagulate anymore in a meta-narrative, a meta-myth which to give them their sacred load and

function. Lipovetsky himself, even though he titles some of his chapters with mythological names, either ancient or modern (*Dionysos: société hédoniste, société anti-dionysiaque, Némésis: surexposition du bonheur, regression de l'envie, Superman: obsession de la performance, plaisirs de sens*), does not attempt at reconstructing with them a coherent mythology – because he is perfectly aware that there is no possibility of a coherent mythology in transmodernity. With his phrase quoted above, we cannot assume it. These fragments of myths, these subverted remnants of mythical structures, these anamorphotical mythical figures – all these are not myths, but *mythoids*. I call „mythoid” a recessive remnant of a myth, excerpted from its original structure and deprived from its function, unable to perform its originary initiatic role, but reintegrated in the process of the psychological realization of the self. Mythoids are the basic structural elements of the *sacer consumericus*, just as myths used to be the basic structural elements of the sacred proper. And, finally, while myths related and referred to a transcendental reality, mythoids only admit an immanent reference. The „sacrificial mode” of the contemporary man, such as it is, is not built with myths – but with mythoids, their succedanea and surrogates.

## Myths and mythoids in Mircea Ivănescu's poetry

While modern poetry was dealing with myths, even just in order to de-structure them (Hugo Friedrich's study may well be considered a handbook of destructured myths), postmodern (and then transmodern) poetry deals with mythoids. Thus, it is not coincidental that the first generation to be widely and programmatically interested in „the psychological realization of the self” was that of the American confessional poets. All of a sudden, a whole generation of poets ceased being interested in the high myths of modernity and started delving into their own selves, trying to achieve „une vie subjective meilleure et plus authentique”. We could date with extreme accuracy this moment as the end of modernity in American poetry and the beginning of postmodernity. And it was achieved by what we call today „the confessional school of poets” – John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Randall Jarrell and all the other psychologizing and suicidary heroes of mid-20th American century; and, as I see it, there is a profound connection between the „sacrificial mode” theorized by Baudrillard and their „confessional” school. Both concepts, „sacrificial” and „confessional”, can be understood either mystically (obviously, there is no need to explain it) and psychologically – if we hybridize Baudrillard's theory of the sacrificial mode with Lipovetsky's observation about the realisation of the self. The confession of such a poet is inherently sacrificial – literally and in all the meanings of the word, including the strongest one: that of the self-sacrifice (as a significant number of the confessional poets committed suicide). And the hybridization of mysticism and psychological realization of the self is best to be seen in the *Eleven Addresses to the Lord*, written by Berryman in May 1970 in a detox center – which is confessional poetry at its peak.

Anyway, one could expect that this turn from myths to mythoids, from the sacred proper to the „psychologized sacred”, if I may say so, would happen first in American poetry – since it was so interested with the self from the 1800. In 1840, in his *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville showed that the great future American poetry will be not about history (as the Americans had none), not about nature (as the Europeans have exhausted the subject), but about *the self* – and, more exactly, about the „inner soul”<sup>1</sup>. Fifteen years later, Whitman's *Song of Myself* was published in *Leaves of Grass* – and the major antecedency of the confessional poetry to come after one century was established.

In Romanian poetry, the shift from myths to mythoids was realized in Mircea Ivănescu's poems, first published in volume in the same year Berryman was publishing his extended *Dream Songs* titled *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* – namely 1968. And it was not at all coincidental – Ivănescu was a febrile reader of Berryman's, and he was to translate a selection of

Berryman's *Dream Songs* and *Sonnets* in 1986<sup>2</sup>. Obsessed and tortured by the image of a suicidal brother, Ivănescu's poetry is just as deeply confessional as Berryman's (obsessed and tortured by the image of a suicidal father); and his mystical and psychological sides are just as hybridized. A lonely confessional poet in his generation, Ivănescu has seminally influenced the future generations of poets, practically becoming the most influential Romanian poet after World War II.

Probably the most important mythoid in Mircea Ivănescu's poetry is that of the labyrinth – which is anyway, as we have seen, the key mythoid in Baudrillard's representation of the ideal world (in which events collocate as smoothly and „predestined” like words in a poem). It is such an intricate and developed figure in Ivănescu's poetry, that it works at several different levels. First, the very appearance of Ivănescu's poems resembles a labyrinth – with their long tortuous lines, with their profusion of hyphens sprinkled all around the lines, with their galaxies of brackets, with their infinity of commas. One does not even have to know the language in order to grasp this labyrinthine typographic aspect. Here we have an eloquent sample:

2.

dar moartea este o revedere totuși – însă de partea  
aceasta a ei, cel care rămâne își deschide  
ochii deodată – (și ceea ce vede atunci  
dacă are să uite vreodată, un popor nevăzut de furnici  
îi va mușca ochii, și nu vor mai vedea ochii lui după aceea  
decât contururi). cel care a privit moartea  
luând chipul unei ființe – vede din nou  
ceea ce nu s-a văzut niciodată de la facerea lumii,  
ceea ce se vede mereu – și oricât de repede  
și-ar acoperi ochii – oricât de tare  
ar găfâi, să-și acopere asurzitoarea lumină a tăcerii  
din ochi, din urechi – ceea ce a văzut el atunci  
a fost înfățișarea adevărată, a fost  
– dar adevărul nu mai înseamnă aici nimic –  
a fost ceea ce se privește pentru întâia dată  
și fără urmare.

(despre moarte ca revedere)<sup>3</sup>

Then, at a deeper level, there are this labyrinth-like complications of the intertextual insertions. Like Berryman, Ivănescu was himself an erudite – if not a scholar, then an exquisite and extensive translator; he translated, among many others, Joyce, Faulkner, Pound, Eliot, Berryman, Kafka, Nietzsche, Rilke, Musil, Broch, and so on, and his lines swarm with quotes, allusions, pastiches from and to all these writers and many others. As a matter of fact, these cultural quotes function as cultural mythoids, which Ivănescu's poetic self desperately strives to assume – just in the manner in which contemporary man tries to assume the remnants of the sacred in Baudrillard's vision. But, as we know, this contemporary man has no chance of properly assuming the sacred, since he lacks the performative



instruments of myths and rituals; while the poetic self in Ivănescu's poems, well, he still holds a chance, because literature as a whole represents a meta-mythoid, a secular mythology whose performative rituals the poet is aware of. The consumer sacred is, at Mircea Ivănescu, the sacred of the consumer of literature; or, with a more mythical (and emphatical, indeed) image, sacred is literature's halo, above which the poet's spirit hovers like the Spirit over the surface of waters. Thus, the huge intertextual mass in Ivănescu's poetry, far from being an amorphous ballast, is thoroughly organized (like in a overelaborated maze, actually) by this constant motion of the poet's spirit through it. Every allusion continues another one; each intertext has a continuation somewhere else; and, in general, everything continues – and it is understandable why the most recurrent quote in Ivănescu's poetry is the sentence from *La Chute* where Camus states: „J'appelle vérité tout ce qui continue”. Ivănescu's poems are labyrinths where everything continues – and where therefore truth is everywhere. Like in all proper mythologies.

Then again, there are the images of the labyrinth appearing frequently in Ivănescu's poems. An extended inventory of their occurrences would take a few dozens of pages, as all the moves and actions in his poems are done in tortuous and languishing ways and in secluded spaces, usually in series of rooms through which the poetic self wanders while monologizing voicelessly in the present of the beloved lady. But I will not choose images from this somewhat predictable labyrinths, and I will restrain myself here to one or two examples of labyrinths concocted in some implausible and unanticipable contexts, only in order to exemplify the inventivity and jocularly of Ivănescu's phantasmatical tropisms. Here we have first these lines where his poetic ego declares that he would transform himself just like Thomas Mann into a huge phrase, with the verb at the end of the sentence and with cunningly measurable syllables and rhythm, waiting for his adored lady to read him word by word endlessly:

2.

(...) sau ca thomas mann  
mă pot preschimba într-o frază lungă-lungă,  
cu verbul la urmă, cerându-i iertare,  
și pisica torcându-i ritmul, cu mare  
viclenie pendulându-mi silabele – și lângă  
ea privind-o intens, așteptând  
ca ea să citească, rând după rând.  
(*patru madrigaluri*)<sup>4</sup>

Then here I have chosen this following *conchetto* where the labyrinth is a road which transforms the whole world into a huge garden where the light breaks into littlish pieces which, while agglutinating, would start singing that song of silence where understanding is possible – indeed, it is a very complicated baroque

image, and this is exactly the reason for which I have decided to choose it: because the folklore of the literary criticism claims that Ivănescu is a poet deprived of all images and all metaphors; while the truth is that, quite on the contrary, this poet for which literature was literally sacred (a mythoid, actually, as we have seen above) had a huge veneration for the beauty of it, and has coined baroque concatenations of metaphors hidden in his wriggly labyrinthine lines:

(...) – și cu ochii deschiși, urmărind  
nebănuitele cotituri ale drumului, să mergi înainte,  
și lumea să se facă o grădină atâta de mare  
pe care să o iubești, cu mâinile întinse – dacă  
lumina s-ar sparge în bucăți mici, și îndată îmbucându-se  
fiecare, una într-alta, ar începe acel cântec  
pe care mereu îl credem fără sfârșit al tăcerii  
unde e cu puțință înțelegerea –  
(*despre învățarea uitării*)<sup>5</sup>

So, to put in a nutshell what we have seen so far, we have in Mircea Ivănescu the first Romanian poet to pass from the myths of modern poetry to the mythoids of postmodern/transmodern ones; the most consistent mythoid in his poetry is that of the labyrinth, which may be (with Baudrillard's criteria) the most consistent mythoid of our days; the said mythoid is recognizable at different levels in Ivănescu's poetry: from the graphic appearance of the poem, to the mazy intertextual references, and then to the highly frequent images of the labyrinth, often transcribed with baroque inventivity and splendour. As one can see, there is no need to analyze this mythoid of the labyrinth with references to the myth of labyrinth – I have made no reference to the Minotaur, to Theseus or Ariadna, because these great mythical figures are suitable for the analysis of modern poetry, where myth still functions as a performative instrument in the understanding and assumption of the world. In post- or transmodernity, where myths cannot generate and perform the sacred anymore, the great mythical figures become irrelevant in the analysis of the *sacer consumericus*. When I have analyzed, in my book on Mircea Ivănescu's poetry (initially a doctoral paper), its mythical insertions, it only took me a few pages<sup>6</sup> – even though the scope of the mythical figures identified there (Herakles, Orpheus, Euridike) would have required normally analyses extended on tens of pages in the case of modern poetry. The analysis of mythoids is not interested in the reconstruction of the myths whose fragments they embody, but in the psychological realization of the self – and in this respect the mythoid of the labyrinth in Mircea Ivănescu's poetry has a paradigmatic function: while crossing the labyrinth, the poetic ego's main obsession is that of the truth – the truth of literature and the truth of his own inner life – „l'accès à un état supérieur d'être, à une vie subjective meilleure et plus authentique”, in Lipovetsky's words. So, while crossing the labyrinth, the poetic ego is

interested in the psychological realization of the self – a fact which clearly shows that the mythoid is functional, performing its task with the same effectiveness and veracity with which myths were functioning in modern poetry.

### Conclusion

Almost synchronically with the American confessional poets, Mircea Ivănescu has undertaken in Romanian poetry the shift from modern myths to post- or transmodern mythoids. The main mythoid active in his poetry is that of the labyrinth, working at three different levels (graphic appearance of the poem, intertextual ramifications, imagery). Ivănescu's poetry (and confessional poetry as a whole) is highly representative for what Baudrillard called „the sacrificial mode” of postmodern existence. Obsessed with the truth of his inner life, the poetic ego exemplifies the effort towards „the psychological realization of the self”, which is (as Lipovetsky convincingly shows) the main contemporary succedaneum of the sacred, its subverted form in an immanent egomaniac society.

Besides its quality, intelligence and intensity, what impresses me most in Ivănescu's poetry is that it bears no marks of the time and place it was written. As we have seen, it seems to exemplify Baudrillard's and Lipovetsky's sociological analyses, even though the said analyses were applied on the capitalist society, and not on the communist one, inside which Ivănescu was active – and seemingly captive. His poetry clearly shows that the poet was actually free, writing his poetry as if he was a co-citizen of the *Homo consumericus* and not of the *Homo sovieticus*. Mircea Ivănescu told me a few years before his death that his main hope was that his poetry would not bear any mark of the evil times during which it was written; I understood that this was his method of putting the historical evil between brackets. It was his way out of the evil historical labyrinth; and it worked. The mythoid eventually eliminated the historical myth.

### Note:

1. For a somewhat ampler discussion of the relation between Tocqueville's „prophecy” and American poetry, see J.D. McClatchy's considerations in his preface of *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, edited and with an introduction by J.D. McClatchy, Vintage Books (division of Random House), New York, 1990, pp. xxii-xxiii.
2. V. *Poezie americană modernă și contemporană*, anthology and translation by Mircea Ivănescu, Cluj, Dacia, 1986.
3. *despre moarte ca revedere*, 2, in Mircea Ivănescu, *versuri poeme poezii altele aceleași vechi nouă*, anthology and preface by Matei Călinescu, Polirom, Iași, 2003, p. 70.
4. *Ibidem*, p. 61.
5. *despre învățarea uitării*, in Mircea Ivănescu, *Poeme alese. 1966-1989*, [anthology by Alexandru Mușina,] Aula, Brașov, 2003, p. 176.
6. Radu Vancu, *Mircea Ivănescu. Poezia discreției absolute*, Vinea, București, 2007, pp. 88-92.

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