



On the Romanian Biographical Novel: Fictional Representation of Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu

Andrei TERIAN

Universitatea „Lucian Blaga” din Sibiu, Centrul de Cercetări Filologice și Interculturale
“Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu, Center for Philological and Intercultural Research

B-dul Victoriei 5-7, 550024, Sibiu

e-mail: cchi@ulbsibiu.ro, web: <http://grants.ulbsibiu.ro/wsa>

Personal e-mail: andrei.terian@ulbsibiu.ro

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By choosing as starting point the biographical novels dedicated to Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu, this study examines the reluctance shown to this narrative form by contemporary Romanian literature and it also explores some of the structural features of the biographical novel as genre. Thus, despite the obvious reconnection of Romanian literature to the world literary space over the last decades, the suspicion of this cultural system towards fictional processing of biographical data is explained by the post-communist condition of Romanian literature, namely by its imperative to rediscover the historical truths that have been obscured by the communist ideology. Regarding the genre conventions of the biographical novel, this study emphasizes, in contrast to much of contemporary research of this form, its predominantly literary nature, manifested by its polemic placement against modernist aesthetics, by its propensity for certain narrative motives and scenarios, and by the configuration of various specific intertextual webs.

Keywords: world literary space, (semi)peripheral literatures, Romanian fiction, biographical novel, modernism, Mircea Eliade, Ioan Petru Culianu



The present study tries to provide an indirect answer to the question whether there is any affinity between the resurrection of the biographical novel in the last decades and literary modernism¹. The indirect nature of my answer relates precisely to the fact that I am going to explore a lesser-known literary space where the phenomenon of the recent expansion of the biographical novel is *not* confirmed. I am talking about Romanian literature; here, the focus will mainly (but not exclusively) be on the fictional representations of the modernist novelist Mircea Eliade and of his main disciple, Ioan Petru Culianu. Nevertheless, I will take this detour hoping that it could help me clarify three issues. First, how can we explain that, despite their coexistence in a globalizing cultural space, there are such radical differences between the development of

the biographical novel in American and Romanian literature? Next, why does the biographical novel of the last decade have a specific fondness for the exploration of the modernist authors' lives? Last but not least, I will analyze whether the investigation of the previous aspects can help us construe if not a rule, at least a structural conditioning of the biographical novel as specific genre.

Before I attempt to tackle these issues, I believe several basic pieces of information on the evolution of the biographical novel in Romanian literature may be useful. In the modern approach of the term, this narrative form appeared in Romania, as well as in the West, in the inter-war era; its sources are continental rather than Anglo-American. More precisely, the Romanian novelists' models at that time were authors such as André Maurois or Stefan Zweig, instead of Irving

Stone or Robert Graves. Thus, from this point of view, two cycles published in the mid-1930s are particularly significant; they join various episodes in the life of the Romanian “national poet” Mihai Eminescu. In the novels *Mite* (1934) and *Bălăuca* [*Blondie*] (1935), Eugen Lovinescu explored the two defining erotic relationships in Eminescu’s life (with Mite Kremnitz and Veronica Micle), while in *Romanul lui Eminescu* [*Eminescu’s Novel*] (3 vol., 1935-1937), Cezar Petrescu analyzed the poet’s youth (mainly the period of his studies in Vienna and Berlin) and the last years of his life which coincide with the onset of his madness.

Despite the popularity of the genre in Romania, the biographical novel, similar to what happened in the Anglo-American or in other continental literatures, encountered steady resistance both from the critics and professional writers. Truth be told, at that time the Romanian intellectual elite did not know the objections raised by some authors such as György Lukács and Virginia Woolf (more frequently invoked now in the American academia); instead, they followed Albert Thibaudet’s and Benedetto Croce’s suggestions. But even this way their arguments often met those of the British and American writers. For example, in a series of reviews to the said novels, George Călinescu, perhaps the most influential Romanian literary critic of the era, rejected the literary genre of “fictionalized life” by linking Thibaudet’s thesis according to which a genius cannot become character in a novel (because, to truly “understand” his character, the author of the novel himself should be a genius, which scarcely ever happens) and Benedetto Croce’s modernist thesis that “fictionalized life” creates a gross confusion between the writers’ “creative” and “empirical” self. Thus, Călinescu unknowingly meets Virginia Woolf’s ideas in *The Art of Biography* (1942). In their opinion, it is precisely the aspect that conditions the existence of the biographical novel (namely the fusion of biography and fiction, its “hybridity”) which cancels its validity.

Fueled by Călinescu’s authority, this modernist-born dogma continued in Romania even during communism (1948-1989), when biographical novels were not too successful here, even if the new totalitarian regime encouraged the translation of a number of Soviet “fictionalized lives”, such as those signed by Anatoly Vinogradov (*Three Colors of Time* and *Condemnation of Paganini*), in which they saw the expression of a manner to educate the public and, at the same time, to circulate more efficiently their own propagandistic ideas. Nevertheless, in the Romanian writers’ novels of the communist era, the only cases where historical characters appear with their names in fictional works are those where the authors self-consciously try to rehabilitate some political personalities of the pre-communist period.

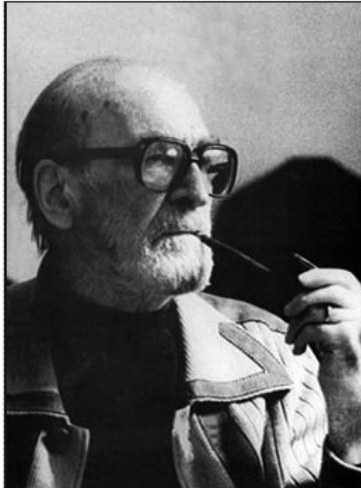
But the odd detail here is the resistance encountered

by the biographical novel in Romanian even after the fall of communism. Thus, although the 1990s marked, as often seen, an unrivaled development of this form in literatures written in English and beyond them, a similar evolution did not occur in Romania, where the biographical novels published in the last 25 years can be counted on one hand. This is even more surprising when we consider that we can no longer invoke here the traditional provincialism of the Romanian culture. This literature was extremely open, in the 1930s, to the impact of the first wave of the biographical novel; therefore, there were expectations that it should also be after 1989, as a result of its accelerated (re)accessing of the globalization process. Perhaps the nature of the explanation for this reluctance is different and it relates mainly to the post-communist condition of Romanian literature. A number of theorists and analysts of the biographical novel, from David Lodge to Michael Lackey, explained the recent canonization of this form in the West through the increasing suspicion seen in the second half of the 20th century toward the strong distinction between fact and fiction. It’s not that the dimming of this distinction was not known in Romanian culture, but its assumption was slowed down here by the imperative need to retrieve the historical truth. Since communist ideology was in itself a nasty blend of “fact” and “fiction”, Romanian literature of the last quarter of century focused mainly on the retrieval of *facts*, especially those that had been distorted by propaganda. This is why, although post-communist Romanian literature saw a real inflation of biographical genres (diaries, memoirs, biographies, autobiographies, conversation volumes etc.), it has always been suspicious of and, thus, avoided systematically the biographical novel.

There is, however, a significant exception in this landscape: the personality of Mircea Eliade who, in the last two decades, has been the object of several factual and/or fictional works, written both by Romanian and foreign authors. An explanation at hand of this privileged condition could be the popularity known by the author. Born in Romania, where he stood in the 1930s as leader of the “new generation” of intellectuals, after World War II, Eliade immigrated in the West, where he had a prestigious academic career as historian of religions, first in France, then in the US, where he taught for nearly three decades this field of study at the University of Chicago, as Sewell Avery Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Religions. Although his methodology is now strongly debated, many voices in this field claim that in the 1970s and 1980s Eliade was perhaps the most influential historian of religions worldwide. Nonetheless, Eliade’s renown is not necessarily an argument to justify the relatively large number of novels that, directly or indirectly, concern his life. While, on the one hand, many biographical novels also acquainted us with the introduction of rather marginal personalities,



there are, on the other hand, numerous Romanian born writers whose renown is comparable to Eliade's and who have not become, until now, characters of biographical novels.



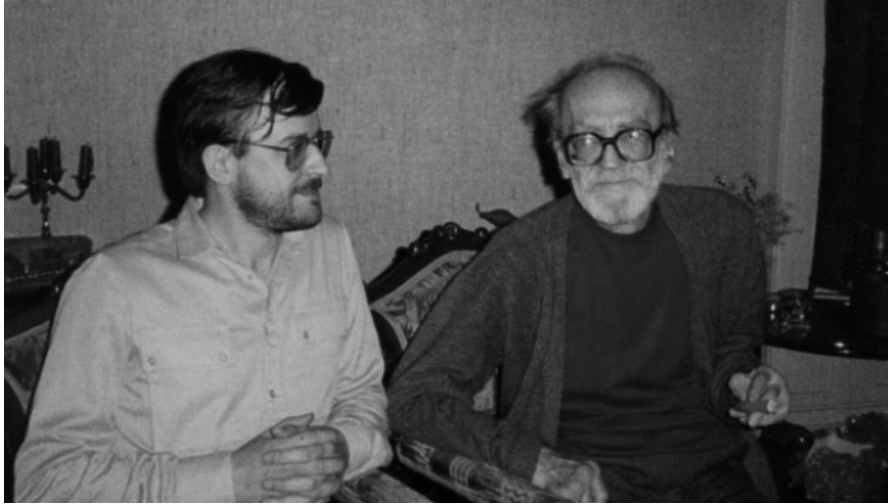
Mircea Eliade

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/ro/c/c3/Mircea_eliade.jpg

This aspect could be clarified by a brief exploration of Eliade's biography and work. To this end, I think at least three elements are conclusive: first of all, the author's fiction writing. Between 1927 and 1930, Eliade published in Romania 13 modernist novels and novellas, influenced by Papini, Gide and Joyce, with a more or less (auto)biographical note. From these, the most important one was *Maitreyi* [*Bengal Nights*] (1933); a result of his stay in India several years before, the novel tells the love story between British engineer Allan and Maitreyi, his host's 16 year-old daughter; the story begins with pure feelings, it is furthered by sexual relationships and ends because of cultural differences. The novel was received extremely positively in Romania, being considered the first "exotic" Romanian novel, as well as, given the protagonist's name and ethnicity, a work of pure fiction. Nevertheless, its (auto)biographical nature was revealed to the main female character herself, Maitreyi Devi; not only was she a real person, but also a writer, daughter of Indian philosopher Surendranath Dasgupta and protégée of poet Rabindranath Tagore. In 1969, when Romanian Orientalist Sergiu-Al. George made a trip to India, Devi was horrified to find out about the contents of Eliade's novel; several years later, she replied with her own (auto)biographical novel, *Na Hanyate* [*It Does Not Die*] (1976), in which, although she acknowledges the spiritual connection between Mircea and Amrita (the female protagonist's name in the novel), she firmly denies the existence of any sexual contact.

Another defining element of Eliade's biography is his adherence, in the 1930s, to the Iron Guard, a Romanian far-right movement that promoted racism and anti-Semitism. Although Eliade did not take direct part in the group's violent actions, he supported in a series of articles published in the Romanian far-right press the group's mystic and chauvinistic ideology. Furthermore, after his relocation in the West, Eliade never admitted and confessed this shameful episode of his biography, although it did gradually catch the attention of the Israeli and American academic environments, starting from the 1970s. Perhaps Eliade's later attempts of hiding his past rather than the past itself determined Saul Bellow to depict him sarcastically in his last novel (*Ravelstein*, 2000), in which a historian of religions at the University of Chicago and a close friend of the narrator is described, under the name Radu Griesescu, as a *parvenu* who tries to conceal his guilty past by surrounding himself with Jewish friends. Admittedly, *Ravelstein* is not altogether a biographical novel, but a *roman à clef*; however, Bellow's work also includes several real characters that help identify Eliade with Griesescu (for example, the Chicago professor is described as a disciple of Nae Ionescu, mentor of the Romanian "new generation" in the 1930s).

Last but not least, a significant part in Eliade's literary posterity plays the relationship with his main disciple and potential successor, Ioan Petru Culianu. After he left communist Romania at the beginning of the 1970s and finally relocated in the US, Culianu felt strong intellectual admiration toward Eliade; in fact, he was also the author of the first monograph dedicated to his mentor, but he began to slowly distance from him as he discovered his far-right past. On the other hand, Culianu's academic career ended violently on May 21, 1991, when the young scholar was assassinated in unknown conditions in a restroom at the University of Chicago. Culianu's murderer remains unknown and his death inspired a series of novels. Thus, in 1996, Italian journalist Claudio Gatti published the biographical novel *Il Presagio* (*The Omen*); although here Culianu's murderer is suggested to be an agent of the former Romanian secret police (Securitate), some characters do not exclude the hypothesis that the moral author of the murder could be Eliade himself, either because his disciple had disclosed part of his fascist past or because Eliade introduced him to the dangerous secrets of occultism. Similar hypotheses were also spread by a Romanian author, Cezar Pricop, in the biographical novel *Patria de carton* [*Cardboard Homeland*] (2005), which followed Gatti and the path of the sensationalist thriller. From a literary point of view, two other novels published in Romania are more substantial, because they manage to exceed the sphere of popular fiction through parabolic reflection or metafictional projection. Thus, in Norman Manea's *Viziuna* [*The Lair*] (2009), the relationship between Eliade and Culianu is described by



Ioan Petru Culianu și Mircea Eliade

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the duo Cosmin Dima – Mihnea Palade, while in Caius Dobrescu's *Minoic* [*Minoan*] (2011) the characters are called Tidid Diomed Caraiani and Constantin Dima. Nevertheless, none of these is a proper biographical novel; they are rather *romans à clef* that further the tradition started by Saul Bellow.

At the end of this perhaps too detailed digression, I believe we can try to find some answers relating to the novelists' interest in Eliade, and these could help us grasp a series of characteristics of the biographical novel in general. But I would note first that a large number of researchers who studied this hybrid form (Ina Schabert, John F. Keener, Vanessa Guignery) focused on the correct delimitation of the "biographical" from the fictional, while they often forget that the biographical novel is first and foremost *a novel*, which means a narrative form guided by specific structures and conventions. This is why, in what follows I will approach particularly the *literary* (not necessarily fictional) nature of the biographical novel; this, I think, can provide some explanations for a series of otherwise opaque phenomena.

Thus, I find the biographical novelists' increased interest in the modernist authors involves an obvious polemic stake. We can see that the modernist authors preferred by recent biographical novels are those who have problematized tenaciously the relationship between life and writing, either by negating any such connection or by attempting the accreditation of an idiosyncratic interpretation of this relationship. To this end, perhaps the extreme cases are Wittgenstein and Freud, two key names of modernism who marked decisively the conceptualization of this association: the former invented a discipline (analytic philosophy) that rejected any connection between mind and empirical objects; the latter founded a field of practices (psychoanalysis) for which all of our gestures – cultural

creations included – are governed by the obscure forces of the psyche. Undoubtedly, in this equation, Eliade attaches to the latter category and even promotes it in the most literal manner possible. Because, as we could see, precisely the debatable allegations in *Bengal Nights* triggered the writing of the reply-novel by Maitreyi Devi.

Beyond this aspect, there is another cause that explains Eliade's popularity as novelistic character. To this end, I would like to remind one of Irving Stone's suggestions: "Not every life will fit into the form of the biographical novel. There are specific dramatic elements that must be present, recurrent themes of conflict and accomplishment woven through its entirety, an overall, perceivable pattern into which the parts can be fitted to make an organic whole." (*The Biographical Novel*, 1957) Indeed, as a literary form, the biographical novel tends to use the same stock of schemes and structures we also see in the "purely" fictional novel. For example, we can clearly observe that both *Bengal Nights*, and *It Does Not Die* merge the well-known cultural motif of the "exotic" Other with the theme of impossible love approached in the Romeo and Juliet manner; we can also see that, in all the novels published after Eliade's death, his fascist past embraces the pattern of a hubris particularized as the "skeleton in the closet"; and that the sophisticated relationship between Culianu and Eliade packs a vast range of literary scenarios and motifs, from the teacher-disciple relationship to a narrative thriller core and even to various versions of the conspiracy theory. All these examples show that in a biographical novel and in the related genres, the characters' selection relies constantly on novelistic conventions too.

Finally, there is the intertextuality of the biographical novels, which relates frequently to other biographical novels or to purely fictional works. This is proved very plainly in Eliade's case. For example, the Romanian



literary criticism showed that, despite the Indian setting, *Bengal Nights* is nothing else than a modern remake of Søren Kierkegaard's *Diary of a Seducer*. As expected, *It Does Not Die* also evokes and comments on many episodes of *Bengal Nights*. Grielescu, the name assigned by Bellow to Eliade's mask in *Ravelstein*, is a hint to Gavrilesco, the protagonist of one of the best known novels of the Romanian writer. Constantin Dima (Culianu's alter-ego in Caius Dobrescu's *Minoan*) is obviously an offshoot of Cosmin Dima (Eliade's alter-ego in Norman Manea's *The Lair*). This fabric of intertextual links seems to connect the novels on Eliade in the form of a microsystem, if not even a subgenre that has already created its own conventions and which helps us explain one of the key-problems of the biographical novel: why do some authors write biographical novels as such, while others choose to dissimulate the real references of their works in the form of masks, in *romans à clef*? Unmistakably, a writer's primary option can be determined only by circumstantial causes. But when a real person becomes a character in a series of novels, the work that opens the series tends to change its own structural features in conventions of the said subgenre. This is how we can explain, for Eliade, why Cezar Pricop, in his popular fiction, borrowed the model of this predecessor, Claudio Gatti, and used the characters' real names, while Norman Manea and Caius Dobrescu, Romanian mainstream writers, related to the illustrious precedent set by Saul Bellow and opted for the *roman à clef* formula. We can only wait to see whether future novels that will include Eliade as character confirm or try to overturn this convention that seems to postulate a specific homology between a character's identity and a specific type of discourse. One thing is certain, though: like Freud or Henry James, Eliade and Culianu have become in the last two decades more than extremely controversial cultural personalities; they have evolved into real literary *topoi*.

Notes:

1. This study expands and elaborates a paper that was presented in the panel "Modernists and Modernism in the Biographical Novel" at the 16th Annual Conference of the Modernist Studies Association (MSA 16), Pittsburgh, November 6-9, 2014.

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