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Scarlat. Iasi: Editura Lumen, 2011**

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Abstract

Cristina Scarlat, the author of this book (Mircea Eliade, Hermeneutica spectacolului, II) is an instructor and post-graduate scholar in the Doctoral School of Philological Studies, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Iași, currently preparing a thesis on the transposition of Eliade’s works into different literary and artistic forms. In 2008 she published her first book on this subject, Mircea Eliade. Hermeneutica spectacolului, I, Convorbiri (Iași, Editura Timpul), which consisted mainly of interviews she had taken (orally or through correspondence) with persons who had known Eliade or had written about him. The volume under review here is the sequel to that book.

Keywords:

Cristina Scarlat, Mircea Eliade, Mircea Eliade: Hermeneutica spectacolului

II

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She was writing and publishing articles on her dominant interest as early as 1996, but our correspondence did not begin until 2002. Since then I have followed her progress as she has carved out for herself a unique niche in Eliade studies: what might be termed “Eliade performed.” Thus, she has sought out and catalogued scores of his plays, novels, and novellas that have been staged, filmed, turned into opera, movies, and presented on television, etc. She has also listed talks, interviews, etc. *about* Eliade given on radio or TV, at convocations or exhibitions, and more. The great majority of these events took place in Romania, but she has collected many notable happenings from other countries too. Truly, Cristina Scarlat has earned the name of world expert in her field.

The small book being reviewed here resembles in part the previous one with the same title, but includes a more varied content. After a brief foreword, the author sets forth a theoretical “preamble,” describing her project in semiotic terms. For the reader who, like myself, finds this technical language foreign, the first three pages may be hard to understand. But after many rereadings, I believe I have grasped the gist of it... Taken as a whole, Eliade’s writings constitute, in Scarlat’s terms, a “complex semiotic universe.” A particular text, such as the novel *Domnișoara Christina*, that has given rise to variant forms (cinematic, theatrical, musical, plastic, etc. – each of which is an *autonomous semiotic system*) – becomes, for her, a *radial semiotic construct*. The original text, plus all the forms it has generated, constitute a *unitary semiotic family*. The author is interested in the *transpositions* of Eliade’s texts into other artistic languages, each of which she considers makes a contribution to Eliade’s

work as a whole. Beyond all the variants (transpositions), she believes the central point of meaning of the text persists and unifies them.

This first chapter examines, in turn, Eliade's four completed plays and the one left unfinished, listing the dates and places of their performances, up to 2011.² Likewise, she catalogues the projected but unwritten plays, and the largest category: the productions of stage plays, musical performances and recordings, motion pictures, various radio and television programs, etc. – thus bringing up to date the list published in the first volume, which ended in 2007.

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The second part of the book consists of interviews, which made up the main part of *Hermeneutica spectacolului, I*. Three of these are with Italians, one with a Mexican, and two with Romanians. One of the most interesting is the first, with Marcello De Martino, who teaches Italian at his country's Consulate in Lausanne. Professor Scarlat questioned him about his recent book, *Mircea Eliade the Esoteric. I.P.Culiannu and the "Unspoken."* Despite his profession as a language teacher, De Martino stated that he has always been interested in religion, and especially the esoteric, such as the works of Guénon and Evola. But his connection with Eliade came through Georges Dumézil, whom he greatly admires. He considers the Iron Guard a movement with powerful mystico-religious characteristics, to which Eliade was attracted by Codreanu's "charisma." He has read extensively in Eliade's journalistic writings and fiction, and believes he has discovered the man's secret ("esoteric") side. *Ifigenia*, thus, was a Legionary play, and he has found what he believes is a quote from Evola in *Lumina ce se stinge*. De Martino did not care for *Noaptea de Sânziene*, but he believes that Eliade displayed his view of the theater fully in *Nineteen Roses*. He agrees with the author that reading can become a ritual, perhaps more powerful than performance. "Through reading certain texts, man can discover the sacred and can return to a primitive state of humanity, what I call the 'ecstatic-energetic mythopoetic.'" Furthermore, he adds, "[Visual] art draws out the divine." When asked what role Eliade's work plays in his own life, his answer was "minimal." He does not intend to write anything more about him, but he

² This is, in fact, an up-dated and expanded version of a shorter list found in the first volume.

would like to ask him if he really believed in what he said – and didn't say – in certain novellas.

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Cristina Scarlat devotes considerable attention in this book to an experimental version of *Coloana nesfârșită* (The Endless Column), in the Italian language, recently created and now being performed in Italy. The translation was made by a Romanian-born scholar, Horia Corneliu Cicortaș, while his wife, Letteria Giuffrè Pagano, an Italian dramatist, drastically revised the text and directed its performance. Cicortaș, having lived for about a decade in Italia, was able to translate the play easily into good Italian. His wife, with a degree from the Academy of Belle Arts in Florence and an evident gift for the dramatic arts, arranged and directed the performance. Scarlat presents here her interviews taken with Cicortaș (2010) and Pagano (2011); then, in the last section of the book, she adds her own commentary on the play.

Cicortaș' dates his interest in Eliade's literature to his high-school years (1984-1988), that is, still in the Communist era. Having written his doctoral thesis on Eliade in India, he lives now in Italy. He says that he finds a great deal of interest among the population for Eliade's literary works, although many of them remain untranslated, including his plays. He sees this play, *La colonna infinita*, as a beginning toward making his dramas known to Italians.

Letteria Giuffrè Pagano, under Scarlat's skilful questioning, proved quite fluent in expressing her theoretical views on the theater in general and the play *Coloana* in particular. Her innovations consist of reducing Eliade's three-act play to seven short scenes, selecting and rejecting certain passages of the original text, and eliminating all the actors to one man, Tazio Torrini, who portrays several different characters in the course of the performance. To supplement the actor's words, the director introduces lights, sounds, musical themes, projections of pictures on a screen, draperies of Indian cloth, etc. The central theme of the drama, Pagano believes, is the creative man's sterility in the face of nothingness, or death. In "concentrating" the play, she says, she sought to understand the *something* that is hidden beneath or possibly beyond the text itself. She imagined Eliade having amused himself "stratifying" different elements, hiding some and bringing others

to light. By her not revealing everything to all the spectators, she believes she has remained true to Eliade's intention.

The interlocutor inquires concerning the director's collaboration with the actor, Tazio Torrini. Pagano states she is enthusiastic about working with him. She gave him some guidelines at first, then encouraged him to make his own contributions. He studied the biography of Brâncuși and learned about his artistic works. The director states she worked directly with him in constructing the Brâncuși character. But in some scenes, Eliade's text appears. Eliade called the column the main character of his play; Pagano has taken this into account. The column is present in every scene, emitting sounds. The public, she affirms, has understood and much appreciated the play in Italy. Still, she has no plans to transform any other of Eliade's plays for performance. She confesses that she doesn't understand why Eliade wrote drama when his other literary forms were more successful.

Cristina Scarlat, in her essay on the play in its "Cicortaș-Pagano variant," states that someone acquainted with Eliade's text but not with experimental theater will be greatly surprised at its new form. She evidently has seen it performed at least once, and is thus able to describe it more clearly than when she interviewed the translator and director. She focuses at first on the actor and his "pseudo-monologue" in which selected passages from the text are brought together with "semiotic systems that blend coherently and harmonically: the grammar of gesticulation, sounds, images, colors, elements of décor which combine in a subtle and convincing dialogue." The actor re-defines on-stage the meaning of actor, she says, becoming a veritable shaman; the intermediary between the gods and men. The experimental theater affords the actor a great degree of freedom in "soldering" two autonomous semiotic forms: the text and his performance of it. Scarlat is struck by Torrini's "ardor" in playing his role(s), especially that of Brâncuși. His gestures, vocal inflections, improvisations (at points), changes of costumes (together with the scenery) she finds completely convincing. Moreover, the actor exhibits his understanding of Eliade's own ideas of the "morphology of Spectacle as a ritualistic act". Turning again the Column, which is the centerpiece of every scene, it is, of course, an axis mundi, a way to heaven, whose ascent is difficult. Or in Cristina Scarlat's, words, "It is the symbol of the human condition."

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Another man who has translated *Coloana nesfârșită* into a foreign language is José Antonio Hernández García of Mexico City. Having learned Romanian in order to read Eliade, he has become one of the leading Eliade specialists in Latin America. He readily declares that Eliade is one of the most important thinkers of the century, classing him with Carl Jung and Ernst Jünger as men who have transcended materialistic and positivistic views of the world. Like Cicortaș, he became interested in Eliade in high school, through *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, recommended to him by a certain teacher. He translated the play because his counterpart in Spain, Joaquín Garrigós, had already translated most of the fiction and autobiographical works. He chose *Coloana* because he believed it to be Eliade's best play. In his translating, he has found Eliade's writings of uneven linguistic quality, something he attributes to his long absence from the homeland.

When Garrigós visited him not long ago, Hernández introduced him to a large number of scholars who are interested in Eliade. In response to Scarlet's questions, she discovered the Mexican in agreement with her ideas about the theater and with Eliade's theories on Spectacle. For example, they agree that any dramatic performance can be therapeutic, and that sporting events and rock concerts can play the same role as sacred rituals for secular man. It is hard, he says, to transform a novel or novella into a film. In his opinion, Coppola used too many visual elements and lost the meaning of the story. He considers Barbăneagra's film (*Eliade and the Rediscovery of the Sacred*) to be excellent. Personally, Hernández finds in all of Eliade's books a way of viewing the world. If he could ask him something, he would ask Eliade about his relationship with Corneliu Codreanu. He believes a drama could be made of the latter's tragic story. Meanwhile, he plans to translate all his plays and stage them, or better, transform them into radio programs.

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Cristina Scarlet obtained an interview with the director of a highly unusual performance of the novella, *Domnișoara Christina*, that took place at Iași in 1999 at the underground theater, Casa Pogor. Its singularity consisted in the fact that the text was reduced to Chapters

XIV and XV of Eliade's text,³ and the cast was condensed to a single actress who portrayed Christina, the *strigoi*. Scarlat interviewed the director, Mrs. Dumitriana Condurache, in 2011.

In the late 1990s) she was working in the field of drama, and was searching frantically for sources that would stimulate her imagination. She found in Eliade what she was seeking: for example, in "Uniforme de general." She chose *Christina* to develop into a play because she didn't want to do something conventional; she saw in it possibilities for working with it creatively. Professor Scarlat compares her work to that of the Italian, Letteria Pagano, who "simplified" an Eliade text. Condurache protests that her play was not a *simplification*, but a *selection*. She had several reasons for using just one actress. And she does not like to hear her play called a "one-woman show." But like Pagano's spectacle, the single person stage embodied the several feminine personages in the narrative. The chapters chosen constitute the "moments of maximum intensity." In reply to her interrogator, the director explains why she used the underground theater for her production. It seems it was possible to create some "weird effects" involving a mirror in which an "apparition" in an old-fashioned dress would be seen. No electric lights were used. Mrs. Condurache has no plans to stage another Eliade text as such, since for her an author's text would only serve as an inspiration for a spectacle.

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Cristina Scarlat recounted in her previous volume a conversation with the literary critic Cornel Ungureanu, reproduced from a periodical of 1996. It was taken at a time when Eliade's relationship with the Legion was a lively, controversial topic. The names of Nae Ionescu, Cioran, Sebastian, Norman Manea, Dubuisson, and even Adriana Berger crop up repeatedly. Ungureanu, who had recently written a series of articles on "Eliade's Detractors," was sure that the "repercussions" of all the current agitation would be positive. In his view then, Eliade was the most important Romanian in exile whose work had been the "reconstructing of Utopia," writing about the nostalgia for origins, for Paradise, and for his native land.

³ Eliade's novella has 19 chapters in all.

The interview in volume II is dated May, 2011, 15 years after the first. This conversation is focused on a book Ungureanu had recently published, *Șantier 2. Un itinerar în căutarea lui Mircea Eliade* (București: Cartea Românească, 2010). The first *Șantier*, subtitled “An indirect novel,”⁴ was actually a book taken directly from the journal *Eliade* kept in India. Ungureanu says that he only desires that his *Șantier* be “of a piece” (*solidar*) with *Eliade*’s volume. “Not a study, not an exegesis.” With respect to other books that are being published that approach *Eliade* differently, he is quite pleased. He considers the bibliographical works of Mircea Handoca definitive, but regrets that the edition of *Eliade* was interrupted after only two volumes.

The conversation seems to ramble, touching on things unrelated to Ungureanu’s book or *Eliade*. Returning to *Șantier 2*, Dr. Scarlat quotes the author from somewhere in the volume: “Why do I entitle the book *Șantier*? [...] It is only a matter of a book that would evoke an intellectual experience. I want to tell how an author from Romania, born in 1943, tries to discover a writer, an *oeuvre*, a coming to being in the world of the writing.” Then she asks: “What would be its correct position, after all the ‘explanations’[...] that have been given about the (historic) ‘personage’ Mircea Eliade, of the Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine and Daniel Dubuisson type?” Ungureanu replies that he can’t answer that until he has published the second volume of his work, *The Secret History of Romanian Literature*, which he promises will contain chapters on Nae, *Eliade*, Cioran, Noica before 1948. Later chapters will draw on the Securitate files.

Near the end of the interview, Professor Scarlatt asks about Francis Ford Coppola’s movie based on “Youth without Youth.” Ungureanu expresses great admiration for the American director but he declares that neither the American definition of film nor the American culture of today can meet *Eliade* with understanding, even through Coppola.

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Grațîela Benga, scientific researcher at the Institute of Socio-Human Research in Timișoara, constitutes a distinct figure among those Dr. Scarlat interviewed: she avows that she does not consider herself an “Eliadist.” Despite the fact that she published two volumes about *Eliade*

⁴ From the French *chantier*, usually translated “work in progress.”

in 2005 and 2006 respectively which were well-received, she has published nothing about him since. Even though she spent years studying him, she does not consider herself a specialist. The two books she published were too hastily done, she avows. Her enthusiasm for Eliade began in the last class of high school, 1989, with her reading of the few volumes available. After the revolution she avidly devoured anything and everything formerly forbidden – especially Eliade’s works. The degrees she earned thereafter, including her doctorate, were all based on serious Eliadean themes, and she brought out her books soon after graduation. Her enthusiasm then corresponded to the mood of the public at the time, but she has observed that interest in the man has cooled somewhat in recent years, perhaps because of “satiation.” Also, certain biographical details concerning his politics have injured his reputation. Everything in Eliade’s life is overshadowed by a single political error, she asserts.

And yet, she regrets the curtailing of the projected “Eliade Edition” begun by the Minerva Press, and edited by Mihai Dascal and Mircea Handoca. She knows that two volumes prepared for publication were lost. Dr. Benga has a special interest in the post-war publicists of Eliade, to which little attention has been paid, including his collaboration on the journal *Antaios* (Stuttgart, 1959-1971). Continuing with her remarks on his writings in exile, she states that “For Eliade, the problem of the Center and the margins, the nostalgia for the lost Center, but also the myth of the labyrinth receive an authentic substance only in exile. [...] Prefigured in the works of youth, these obsessive aspects are articulated only later [...], occasioned by the fall into History.” Despite her initial denials, Dr. Benga’s responses prove her to be both knowledgeable and insightful about the master who was her youthful passion.

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The last three items in the book are commentaries by the author rather than interviews. The first is about a musical production entitled “An Out-of-the Ordinary *Ordeal by Labyrinth*,” composed by the Italian Aldo Brizzi and recorded in Italy. The title of the composition seems to be taken Eliade’s *Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet*, which were published in 1978 under the title *Épreuve du labyrinthe*. Prof. Scarlat admits that there is no proof of this, but the similarity seems to be more than

coincidental. As for the symbolism, a labyrinth can constitute either one of two things: (1) a series of ordeals,” through which one must pass in order to reach a center, or (2) a process of discoveries and changes. How, Professor Scarlet asks, can these be represented musically? Through a combination of the spectator with time (tempo) and space (acoustical), she suggests. In this opera, a viola solo can be heard above the sounds of Afro-Brazilian jazz rhythms. The author compares the “wild” rhythms to wandering through an African jungle (a labyrinth), and the themes played on drawing-room instruments to the “civilized” world into which the wanderer emerges.

Closely related to this essay is the next one about *Axis Mundi*, an album of “ethno-jazz,” brought out in 1999 by the Romanian Harry Tavitian and his group, “The Orient Express.” Ethno-jazz (post-modern music) is defined as a form of “survival of folklore in the urban milieu.” Yet the six pieces on the album are not traditional folksongs, but new creations, based on trans-national Balkan styles and themes. Three of the six are dedicated to Mircea Eliade, from whom Tavitain has taken many of his ideas. For instance, he considers the axis mundi to be the tree of life. The individual pieces take folksongs as their starting point, but they are a mixture of all sorts of traditional and modern elements. However, Scarlet emphasizes, there is no similarity between the work of Tavitian and Aldo Brizzi

The movie of Francis Ford Coppola, *Youth without Youth*, is the subject of the last critical essay in Professor Scarlet’s book. A great deal of effort (and money) was expended on this film to make it authentic, with much of it having been filmed in Romania using local actors. Like Dr. Scarlet, I had great hopes for this “big screen spectacle.” I have long believed that the literary works of Eliade would find widespread acceptance as entertainment if they could be made into movies or television programs. The opportunity to prove my thesis came when the great film director became interested in the work of Eliade through an old friend, Professor Wendy Doniger of the University of Chicago. She gave him a book containing several stories by Eliade that I had translated. He liked “Youth without Youth,” and began making preparations to film it in 2005. It had its debut in Rome in November 2007.

This was the first time an English-language spectacle had been attempted. When a preview was permitted, an American critic wrote a favorable review of it in the *New York Times*, but the movie was not shown in the United States until several months later. It had enjoyed a short but generally successful tour of Europe, yet it was shown in very few American cities. In a brief time, it was withdrawn from circulation, as though the director had decided it was a failure.

Professor Scarlat, writing after having seen it, praised it for being more faithful to Eliade's text than other attempts at "performing Eliade." But she admits that "it is not an easy film. It is not a film just to be *seen*, but especially to *be re-seen*." It is unlikely that Americans who were privileged to see it once, returned to their theaters to view the film a second time.

In my opinion, it was a mistake to include the prolonged nude scene, which was sure to bring the movie an "R" (restricted) rating. Not that under-age young people would have understood Eliade's narrative anyway, but for me it distracted from the subtle message of the literary work, turning it into a voyeuristic semi-pornographic show. Perhaps the movie was doomed to failure from the start, as far as the general public was concerned. The American movie-goer simply is not sufficiently "educated" to appreciate this sort of cinematic literature. Fortunately, it is available in DVD and Blue Ray formats from Amazon...

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Cristina Scarlat has given us another excellent book of interviews and critical essays. No other Eliade scholar is doing what she is doing. We hope to see her work crowned with a doctoral degree in the near future.