

**"OVIDIUS" UNIVERSITY OF CONSTANTA**  
**DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES**  
**FIELD OF STUDY: PHILOLOGY**

**DOCTORAL THESIS**

**ABSTRACT**

*The Circularity of Mythical and Symbolic Images in  
Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu's Works:  
An Interdisciplinary and Comparative Approach*

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**CONSTANTA**

**2018**

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## SUMMARY

**Keywords:** myth; symbolism; archetype; imagination; fantastic aesthetic category; multiplicity; anthropology; ontology; soteriology; medicine; magic; interdisciplinarity; gnosis; dualism; cognitivism; science-fiction; postmodernism; master; disciple.

The aim of this Ph.D. thesis is to reveal new perspectives upon ontological condition, by appealing to the realms of **active imagination**. The comparative analysis of Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu's systems of thought helps us identifying the repetitive and mythical, ultimate Truth, which is the quintessence of all diachronic cultures. On one hand, Mircea Eliade illustrates 'the general history of religions' (being a 'general historian of religions', as Culianu named him), if we take into account the major pieces of work entitled *The History of Religious Ideas* and *The Treatise of Religious History*, and on the other hand, Ioan Petru Culianu, his disciple, emphasizes an analytical approach to the cultural ages he considers to be representative in developing human perception upon the world, such as: gnosticism, dualist religions and mythologies, liberation and the ascent of the soul, the magic and Renaissance philosophy. As a result, the Ph.D. thesis revolves around two fundamental axes, showing the ontological unitary visions belonging to both historians of religions: Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu, in a manner which is quite similar to the ancient model established between Socrates, the master and Plato, his disciple.

My option to analyse the circularity of Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu's mythical and symbolic images illustrates the aim to explore the realm bridging the gap between **science** and **literature**, which at present is not wholly investigated, if we consider the actual research phase in the field. Whereas current articles and studies concerning the encyclopaedic personality of Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu, his disciple, focus on the 'background history' or the biography of these writers and 'historians of religions', this Ph.D. thesis focuses more on textualist interpretation and less on historical contextualization, a method which, as I see it, has been overused by literary exegesis, but which has not been definitely ignored in the current Ph.D. thesis. This Ph.D. thesis makes use of many scientific and literary methods of research, such as: the **structuralist** perspective, starting with the basic aspects of a written discourse, which are the words being organised in a diagram of notional and functional predicates and features, so as to identify the central message, **symbolic** reading, in the sense of

Gaston Bachelard's poetics, the **archetypal** approach, making reference to Carl Gustav Jung's collective unconscious, and **philosophical** reading as well, by appealing not only to Plato and Aristotle's ancient philosophical ideas, but also to modern philosophy representatives, such as: Immanuel Kant, Edmund Husserl and other philosophers who want to reveal the existential mystery, just as Mircea Eliade does.

Another argument for the present study is the aim to show the validity and relevance of **comparative interdisciplinary approach** in identifying original perspectives, which also marks new directions of research. The comparative interdisciplinary approach between Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu's systems of thought, which represents the main aim and the title of the current Ph.D. thesis, proves its validity, because the works they collaborated for, such as: *Dictionary of Religions: Eliade – Culianu, Foreword for a Phenomenology of the Sacred* and the volume of *Correspondence* between the master and his disciple - that was published later - show a "circularity of both writers' ideas". Moreover, another argument for the appropriacy of the Ph.D. thesis title in the field is the fact that, just as there is a **circularity** or repeatability of real events, by means of the archetypes deeply integrated in the collective unconscious, so it happens in the present Ph.D. thesis: It can be found a circularity, a return, a continuation of Ioan Petru Culianu and Mircea Eliade's ideas everywhere in their works, and in this sense, one can identify the postmodernist dialogic principle. In other words, Eliade, the master and Culianu, his disciple applied the archetypal pattern when they wrote their scientific and especially, literary works, by means of the circular, repetitive perspectives upon life. I believe that such real-life repeatability of events has its correspondent at the ideative level, by means of both writers' circularity of ideas.

Furthermore, due to the empathic close reading of both scientific and literary material, I have noticed the expectations and future cultural projects designed by both writers and I have tried to bring them to life in an initial version. The continuation of Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu's projects is illustrated on one hand by the scientific approach of the current Ph.D. thesis, that is interdisciplinarity, on which both writers agree and on the other hand, by the description of possible fictional scenarios to continue the incomplete *Tozgrec* novel by Ioan Petru Culianu, by means of Eliadian intertextuality.

A further important aim of current research is to reestablish the inexhaustible value of both scientific and literary works belonging to Ioan Petru Culianu, thanks to the ideative circularity between the disciple and Mircea Eliade, his master.

The present Ph.D. thesis comprises **two main distinct parts** that focus on the essentializing of a complex scientific corpus. Firstly, one can identify *The Theoretical Approach to Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu's Systems of Thought*, which in its turn comprises five chapters and secondly, one can notice *The Literary Analysis: The Comparative Approach to Fiction Writing Belonging to Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu, His Disciple*, a substantial part of the Ph.D. thesis which also comprises five chapters. Gradually explaining the structure of the current Ph.D. thesis, we have to mention that each chapter in its turn includes some subchapters that show – either comparatively, in case there are common aspects in both writers' works, or as in a symphonic counterpoint, if there are differences between the writers' perspectives – mythical and symbolic images from the literary works and similitudes and differences of both writers' scientific systems. In addition, the reader can notice the use of number ten as a form of the Ph.D. thesis' discursive organisation, whose symbolic and magic function can be found in both writers' works and it illustrates a constant preoccupation for the architectonic construction of narrative discourse, shared by both Romanian writers.

At the level of **the Ph.D. thesis theoretical considerations**, one can identify the analytical process of classifying ontological perspectives and cultural diachrony from a comparative point of view. The approach starts from the assumption that one should not ignore the scientific grounds of both writers' systems of thought, because the theoretical perspectives can be found in the fictional writings and they add multiple original interpretations. Another example would be the interpretation of Camil Petrescu's literary work by making connections with the scientific system he established in *The Doctrine of Substance*, implying that the substantialist research method brings to the surface various hypostases of authenticity, from the bottom structure of the text.

The **1<sup>st</sup> chapter** of the theoretical part aims to identify the similarities and differences between both writers' systems of thought. The friendship between the master and his disciple becomes obvious by Ioan Petru Culianu's working on the project of writing a brief *Dictionary of Religions*, as an attempt to make his master's wish come true. However, this piece of writing is in a striking contrast with the following Eliadian scientific writings: *The History of Religious Ideas* and *The Treatise of Religious History*, which are full of numerous edificatory examples that aim to illustrate the infinite interpretation of a symbol, functioning as the substantial form of absolute reality.

The main difference between Eliadian thought and Ioan Petru Culianu's spiritual system resides in the method which is being used to show the diachrony of religious ideas. On one

hand, Mircea Eliade starts from the assumption of a mythical, primordial, unique reality of *illo tempore* which is continuously perpetuated nowadays, through myths and archetypal patterns, whereas Ioan Petru Culianu negates this starting point of religious history, assuming that it is not really important to know the origin of an event, but to acknowledge it as it is. From my point of view, Ioan Petru Culianu expresses Camil Petrescu's substantialist theory of the real world's "gradable certitude". On the other hand, Mircea Eliade deals with a lot of specialized concepts in the reality of human spirit, such as: Gaston Bachelard's active imagination, Carl Gustav Jung's collective unconscious, the main opposition between the sacred and the profane, contrasting with Ioan Petru Culianu's spiritual system, that focuses on 'the dualist gnoses', which show the writer's fascination with cultural dualism, seen as the explanatory essence of all situations and things, an edificatory example being the binary mechanism of generating '**The Tree of Gnosis**'.

**Dualism** can be frequently found in Ioan Petru Culianu's theoretical system, in order to show the validity of the dualist theory applied in the scientific world and at the level of human consciousness. "The frightening doctrine of double truth" illustrates dualism or binary system, theorized by both Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu. On one hand, from Mircea Eliade's point of view, oppositions occur between fundamental existential principles, such as: Good-Bad, Masculine-Feminine, Right-Left (just as Roger Sperry, for instance, demonstrated the dual consciousness of the human brain), etc. and give birth to multiple interpretations, that are different from one culture to another, but they still have some common features. On the other hand, in Ioan Petru Culianu's system of thought, each term of an initial opposition generates a new opposition and as a result, we will have an infinite chain of dichotomies, in the *p-form* number (*p-adic*) and in the end, completely opposed interpretations or 'the double truth' form whose parts co-occur, in the same way that Mircea Eliade does with the "coincidence of contraries" principle.

If Mircea Eliade elaborates an encyclopaedic history of religious ideas, his disciple illustrates only a feature of mythical thought identified by his master, that is **the infinite interpretation of a symbol**, by means of concepts like: variants, dualism, 'tolerance spectrum', trying to introduce a mathematical logic in the complex field of interpretation.

Eliadian perspective on the omnipresence of the sacred hidden in the profane world is rendered by Ioan Petru Culianu, his disciple through the specialized concepts that can be briefly expressed by means of natural elements' interconnection principle, which involves: 'vital

pneumatic force', individual pneuma, cosmic pneuma, ecosystemic intelligence and anthropic principle.

Contrasting both writers' theoretical approaches to cultural and religious diversity, we can notice that Mircea Eliade's encyclopaedic approach is in a striking opposition with Ioan Petru Culianu's concise presentation. Moreover, Mircea Eliade's symbolic thought contrasts with Ioan Petru Culianu's dualist system of thought. However, both writers' perspectives are complementary, due to the occurrence of Eliadian mythical images and symbols in his disciple's writings. In other words, Ioan Petru Culianu's "Interpretations' Game" continues the Eliadian perspective upon the infinite symbolic interpretation.

The **2<sup>nd</sup> chapter** shows both writers' ideative convergence concerning the importance they give to *yoga* techniques in the process of reconnecting the human being with nature. *Yoga* becomes the way by means of which inner harmony and positive peaceful energies are established. Such balanced lifestyle is a preliminary condition in the discovery of divine attributes and the world creation model which, as a myth, is included in the rational counterpart of human soul. In contrast with his master, Ioan Petru Culianu emphasizes the moral aspect attached to *yoga* techniques, which is taken from the Stoics. In this sense, the Romanian writer uses Epictetus' virtues theory, according to which a human's positive energy is spread by his/her moral life, by the act of living in accordance with essential moral values, like: altruism, forgiveness, justice, truth, temperance. Among the transcendental journeys, Ioan Petru Culianu focuses on **shamanism**, definitely ignores his master's work on the topic, coming up with new perspectives, while trying to surpass his master, a fact which proves again the relevance of the present Ph.D. thesis.

The **3<sup>rd</sup> chapter** illustrates both writers' arguments for the fantastic aesthetic category and active imagination. At the level of the harmony between spirit, soul and body, typical of human being's inner reality, Ioan Petru Culianu notices the necessity of a beneficial, stimulating energy called '**vital pneumatic force**' that circulates through human body's arteries or 'Spirit', which has the power to keep soul and body working. As a result, the writer distinguishes subjective reality from the objective one, irrationality from rationality, foregrounding fantastic representations. Ioan Petru Culianu's theory of '**fantastic pneuma**' continues Eliadian perspective upon **active imagination**, that deals with images and symbols. However, an important difference between both writers' perspectives is implied at the level of the place where the human fantastic reality is located. If Ioan Petru Culianu emphasizes inner, subjective experience in fantastic thinking, adapting Aristotle's assumption of human heart as central

fantastic reality, Mircea Eliade creates the 'transconsciousness' or the irreplaceable Spirit (*puruṣa*), illustrated in his works about *Yoga*, as the centre of all collective and individual symbolic representations. Extrapolation at a cosmic level of 'the fantastic pneuma' model, by means of **pneumatic and intersubjective magic** is analysed, using the approach of the ideative circularity between the master and his disciple, in Eliadian *The Graceful Three* short story and 'demon-magic', typical of gnosticism, is explored in Eliade's novel entitled *Isabel and the Demon's Waters*.

The **4<sup>th</sup> chapter** shows an important difference between both writers' perspectives. If for Ioan Petru Culianu, the basic human mind's scheme is **cognitivism**, for Mircea Eliade, the mythical **archetypes** are the human mind's scheme. It can be established a correspondence between Eliadian perspective on myth, by stating it as a reductible, simplified way of explaining the world's essence and Ioan Petru Culianu's cognitive perspective upon cultural diachrony, coming up with cognitivism, by means of simple rules that help generating every cultural system's quintessence, thus functioning as a solution to essentialize universal complexity.

**The last chapter of the theoretical part** shows that the volume of *The Interrupted Dialogues between Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu* is an important book in the sense that its analysis certifies the circularity of both writers' ontological and literary perspectives, by means of the complementary relationship established between the master and the disciple and Indian existential optimism Mircea Eliade suggested to Ioan Petru Culianu in his letters, in order to bring up his disciple's intrinsic motivation to build a vast knowledge of the world, that is absolutely necessary to a historian of religions. Apart from the analysis of their scientific and literary works, the focus on their epistolary dialogues helps us identifying common beliefs and illustrates the process of writing books and articles by means of exchanging new and interesting ideas between the master Mircea Eliade and the disciple Ioan Petru Culianu. However, the master – disciple epistolary dialogue becomes an example that writers can follow whenever they want to realize monographs about postmodernist writers. This chapter includes two main parts. On one hand, there is the part concerning the analysis of the letters Mircea Eliade addressed to his disciple, the most relevant aspect being Mircea Eliade's methodical optimism conveyed to his disciple by means of their correspondence, and on the other hand, there is another part regarding the analysis of the epistolary texts Ioan Petru Culianu addressed to his master and at this level, what is very important is Ioan Petru Culianu's follow of the initiation labyrinthic path shaped by his master.

At the level of **the Ph.D. thesis literary analysis**, one can notice the exploration - by means of the techniques that are typical of different reading types, such as: **mitocritical, hermeneutical, generative-transformational, pragmasemantic, symbolic and intertextual reading** – of the way in which theoretical perspectives and cultural interpretations of myths and symbols are integrated in the fascinating 'painting' of fiction writing.

In the **1<sup>st</sup> chapter** of literary analysis part, the multiplicity of human personality in both writers' literary universe is gradually illustrated by means of duality between personal construct and expected personality, in case of Mavrodin-Hasnas and Ileana-Lena characters from *Wedding in the Sky*, triple personality of Stefan Viziru-Ciru Partenie-Spiridon Vadastra characters of *The Night at Sanziene* novel, the infinite hypostases of Tozgrec mysterious protagonist, who gives the title of the novel and who can be anything at the level of interpretation, as in the 'logic' of the absurd, functioning not only as the Earth's god, but also as a science-fiction supernatural entity who wants to annihilate this world so that a new one would emerge. The expression of ontological mystery can be found at the level of nocturnal, labyrinthic and oneiric symbolism, and as a result, by means of counterpoint technique, Eliadian short stories, such as: *Nights at Serampore*, *Miss Christinne*, *The Snake*, *The Ditches* and Ioan Petru Culianu's *Tozgrec* novel are analysed. Moreover, I consider that Ioan Petru Culianu succeeds, by using the techniques of unfinished novel and multiple versions – as illustrated by the four versions of the novel - to foreground and draw postmodernist writers' interest upon 'the novels which are being written', just as a similar situation can be identified with inter-war novels of Marcel Proust's 'The New Structure', in contrast with objective realism. Furthermore, one of the major original aims that the current Ph.D. thesis assumes is to create, in accordance with the active imagination's principles, presented by both writers, narrative scenarios that could continue the versions of *Tozgrec* novel, so as they become autonomous writings or novels that reveal the unique reality shaped by Ioan Petru Culianu, that is the occult reality, which reminds us of his scientific system's quintessence, reduced to the magic perspective on things, narratively called '*Tozgrec*'.

The **2<sup>nd</sup> chapter** reveals both writers' interdisciplinary preoccupations. In this sense, they combine literary study with journeys in the fields of medicine and magic, keen on the limits of fictional realm, through the endlessness resulted from Indian techniques of concentration and connection to nature, illustrated in the Eliadian short story of *Youth Without Youth*, and the integration of this absolute state in a tridimensional universe, '*Hesperus*', by his disciple, memory loss, perceived as the paradoxical cause of chaotic autoregeneration in

cancer's case, in Eliadian *The Graceful Three* short story, the characters' oddness, as a symbol of transcendence, in Eliadian stories entitled *A Big Man*, *The Bridge*, *Captain's Daughter* and Ioan Petru Culianu's *The Emerald Game* novel, and also the minimalization of magic power by means of underground machinations in the Eliadian story of *A fourteen-year ago picture...* .

The **3<sup>rd</sup> chapter** emphasizes the fact that a common aspect of both writers' literary works is desciphering the mystery through inquiries' analysis. As a result, the scenario of revealing how 'secret societies' that focus on annihilation of Florence cultural unity, in *The Emerald Game* novel, or the use of oneiric screening technique to manipulate people, in *Tozgrec* novel, is quite similar to the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* prototype which is revealed to the Eliadian characters of *On Mantuleasa Street* short story. Eliade's novel entitled *The Return from Heaven* overturns human logic of the ideal Appolonian in contrast with the ill-fated Dionysian principles, showing multiple disadvantages of the Eros category.

In the **4<sup>th</sup> chapter**, it is shown the fact that on one hand, Mircea Eliade uses the multiple worlds' theory in the limits of the same universe in the real world, by coming up with ways to escape from the real world, whereas his disciple analyses not only this world's multiple realities, rendered as secret societies that determine the fate of this universe, but also interplanetary realities that merge and influence each other, at the level of *Hesperus* science-fiction scenario. In this sense, Mircea Eliade claims as a foreword to his disciple's novel that exploration of Culianu's literary universe by means of spiritual intertextuality is a relevant research line. In addition, Mircea Eliade's honest confession in which he is discontent with Christianity not finding religious grounds to modern technology, makes us thinking that the tridimensional world's creation by Ioan Petru Culianu is one first step in making Eliade's wish come true. As a conclusion to the tridimensional world's scenario, Culianu archetypally introduces the 'hesperian' being's nostalgia after the ephemeral human condition, who needs to perceive illusion as 'The Art of Transformation' and dreaming as a revelation of 'Efortless Freedom'. From our perspective, the new aspect that Ioan Petru Culianu introduces in his novel is the "hesperian" being's nostalgia after the ephemeral human condition. However, one can notice here the mythical desire of returning to the origins, to the essence. If the hyperboreans' project belonging to the human beings includes the creation of a new world, called *Hesperus*, that "will not interfere with suffering, wish and death", a fact which illustrates the ephemeral human being's inner need to exceed his/her limited condition, by means of the immortality aim, mentioned in the end of the novel. However, the perspective is changing, because, unsurprisingly, in spite of getting immortality, seen as the source of happiness, the individual

becomes nostalgic and would like to return to his/her ephemeral condition. Finally, the creation of an alternative universe, called *Hesperus*, having new and perfect temporal, spatial and ontological dimensions, from the perspective of profane human beings who are not capable to perceive the energies of eternal nature, is useful because the drawbacks of this ideal and boring universe, due to its lack of evolution, remind the human being of the original ontological vitality.

**In the last chapter of literary analysis**, Mircea Eliade transposes the original version of Ovid's Orpheus myth in his story entitled *In Dionis's Yard*, in an inverted manner. Leana is the character that leads Adrian on his path of final human liberation, through death, by uttering the interdiction not to look back, which is applied to both protagonists and whole humanity, due to the fact that the assumption turns into a metaphorical message that hides the soteriological, positive function of forgetfulness, which counts as a process by means of which, the human being, as the time passes by, can cure past suffering and limited ontological condition. At the level of the disciple's literary creation, the Orphic magic and the masculine counterpart of Ovid's 'Hesperia', *Hesperus*, that gives the title of Ioan Petru Culianu's novel, illustrate the failure of the Utopian ideal of endless physical life, immortality being achieved only at a spiritual level.

As a result of the analytical study of both writers' scientific and literary works, the present Ph.D. thesis illustrates numerous original symbols and mythical images, whose interpretations identified due to Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu's ideative circularity have not been classified so far.

From my point of view, reading scientific and literary works belonging to Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu is an obligatory charge to notice the multiple aspects of life and to discover the inner ontological resources, because their works are a lesson to see that the human being should not give up surpassing his/her limited condition and explaining the mysteries of the world. In order to achieve these aims, the individual should make use of the **active symbolic imagination**, because it offers him/her the chance to exceed his/her condition, by means of integrating in the interior time dimension and opportunity to make symbolic connections between natural elements and divine revelations, flashbacks, anticipatory projections in time, possible scenarios and so on. In addition, the theoretical and fictional universe created as the result of both Romanian writers' collaboration, is a fascinating realm open to exploration, because the reader can shape his/her new life perspective, due to the **didactic function** of their works, apart from the revelation of ontological mystery, by means of cultural diachronic

presentation so as to choose your own existential beliefs and by means of the fact that ultimately both writers' scientific and literary works show the human being multiple ways '*to be*' in the world, the reducible equation of both writers' creations including two fundamental essentialized verbs: '*to be*' (<Latin *sum, esse*) and '*to know*' (<Latin *sciō, scīre*) and the ultimate message which is being conveyed is to exist in the real world, to enter eternal world through the process of perceiving mythical and symbolic values of significant sacred objects and to be knowledgeable of multiple cultural perspectives through the acceptance of 'the Other'.

Last but not least, the research in this article is useful nowadays, because both cultural personalities: Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu, his disciple combine scientific, mathematical research, which can be found in their theoretical works, with the fantastic aesthetic category of their literary writings. This mixture is doubled by intertextuality, due to the fact that Mircea Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu's perspectives are always redefining, by means of a constant dialogue between them, which is extremely actual and typical of postmodernism and postmodernity.

In conclusion, taking all these aspects into account, we can say that both writers' theoretical and literary perspectives are complementary, having faith that Ioan Petru Culianu, the disciple could have equalized his master if his tragic ending had not occurred so early.

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