

Strangers in the city. Some psycho-social and ontological aspects of representing the otherness in literature

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In different cultures, traditional representations of the *stranger* (who could particularly be an "alien", "outsider", "outlander" or "new comer") often highlight the difference, if not threat, and could induce a cautious reserve, even enmity among the people who are in such a situation. This is revealed by the vocabulary of certain Indo-European languages – with their specific expressions of negative alterity¹ – and also, by a rich enough literature focusing on the various aspects of the otherness. In a way, a very ancient predisposition to xenophobic symptoms – which are etiologically based upon primary perceptions and tendencies, such as territorial instincts and those of preserving access to different kind of resources – advances the respective modern *isms*, ideologically codified. Perhaps as ancient as this basic xenophobia, some hospitality practices, spread all over the world, have their origins in some symbolical strategies meant to diminish the potentially dangerous effect of the presence of the Other, and thus, to a better health of the intercultural relationship. Inviting someone – the Other – to his/ her own dinner is a very important and universal act of ancient hospitality, which is based on an identity principle: "we are what we eat", and eating together the same food we'll necessarily become similar; thus, finally we'll be good friends, not enemies (Mesnil 1997: 203-204). This is why, in Eastern Europe, particularly in Romania, the strangers are traditionally welcomed giving them bread and salt. As a proof, the Russian verb *hlebosolit* – composed from *hleb*, "bread", and *sol*, "salt" – is a reminiscence of this East-European greeting ceremony of "bread and salt" (Mesnil 1997: 204). Similarly, the Latin *companio* refers to the sharing of the same bread (Latin *panis*), which is the purest form of companionship (Mesnil 1997: 204), and from this Latin etymology, derived some lexical families in Romance languages.

However, in the collective imaginary, the *stranger* is more than an accumulation of ethnic characteristics. This is what also concerns us further, as well as the recurrence – not without explanation – of a gnostic scenario in some modern representations of history and of individual or collective exile experience. The corpus we chose² is not exhaustive, but only (and possibly) illustrative, so that it may seize, from different angles, the figure of the Other: Euripides's *Medea* and *The Bacchae*, *The Hours* by Michael

¹ Lat. *hostis*, *-is*, "enemy, foe", but also "stranger"; Fr. *étrange*, "strange, odd", Fr. *étranger*, "stranger"; Engl. *strange* and *stranger*, Engl. *alien*, "stranger", "different from", "hostile". The examples could continue.

² The works respond to each other intertextually – in a wide sense, à la Riffaterre, or even in the more rigorous acceptance of Genette. Their approach is located at the interference of literary comparativism and mythology, the anthropology of the imaginary and the history of ideas.

Cunningham, *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann, *The Knight of Resignation* by Vintilă Horia, Mircea Eliade's "fantastic" prose, Emil Cioran's *The Evil Demiurge*.

The evil stranger in the city. From Medea to Laura Brown

In Euripides's play, Medea is a barbarian witch, the evil stranger from Colchis. With her elemental intensity, she baffles the city's ambition of orderliness. Her image is shaped by negative attributes: she defies the traditions of the polis and, through the art of magic, she evades the justice of the place. The "stranger" is no less dangerous at her native place, in Colchis. There as well, she has a terrifying appetite for the memorable and crude act that anticipates a looming Lady Macbeth, however without the latter's conscience crisis. Medea's conflict with her foster cities is that from Euripides's *The Bacchae*: the "foreign god", Dionysus, the lord of enthusiasm and madness, clashes with the king of Thebes, Pentheus, thoughtlessly confident in the power of reason. It is a recurrent conflict at the ancient Greeks. And the symptom of a culture of balance, that feels, nevertheless, that its foundation of rationality is threatened by the abysmal smouldering of the psychic. Dionysus refutes the rationalist vanity that demands order and structure, of everlasting humanism.

In *The Hours*³ by Michael Cunningham – a novel made of the stories of three women, among whom Virginia Woolf –, Laura Brown has something of a (post)modern Medea. The alterity – a penalized *difference* – is marked through physiognomy, behaviour (phobic reactions, the "strange" passion of reading that enables her to evade daily anxiety and chores, even her name (Zielski)). A "foreign" figure, a queer nature, she does not kill her children (although she is tempted to commit suicide during pregnancy), but abandons them. Richard, who has inherited her talent, literary passion and morbid sensitivity will bear this trauma throughout all his life. The proof, the monstrous image of the mother in his novels. Richard's suicide, sick with AIDS, on the very day that he would have been awarded a notable literary prize, is somehow Laura's murder. She saves herself; she resists neurosis, depression, schizoid impulses. However, the due date comes with the gradual disappearance of the family, which she has left for a librarian's life without obligations, in Canada. The runaway "stranger" is found again at the end of the novel: old and lonely, guilty and yet innocent. Lost in Manhattan, a victim – like of a destiny – of her fragility and selfishness, at the same time. The immanent fatality from the modern tragedy (that of O'Neill, for example) manifests here without great gestures or tirades.

³ The title coincides with the initial title of Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway*.
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The anger of Clarissa (alias “Mrs Dalloway”) when faced with the irreparable, under the preventing mask of a woman of the world, becomes an empathetic acceptance of the “stranger”. The octogenarian – blasphemed and adored – eventually brings the spectre of a life led with effort and regret, as if long time ago and to her disadvantage, she had made a deal with death:

“(…) herself, Laura Brown, is the ghost and goddess in a small body of private myths made public (…). She knows she has been worshipped and despised; she knows she has obsessed a man who might, conceivably, prove to be a significant artist. (...) She says calmly, of her son, that he was a wonderful writer”⁴.

“Laura Brown, the lost mother, the martyr and fiend. (...) Here she is then; the woman of wrath and sorrow, of pathos, of dazzling charm; the woman in love with death; the victim and torturer who haunted Richard’s work. Here is an old woman, a retired librarian from Toronto, wearing old woman’s shoes”⁵.

Camus’s “stranger”, the Gnostics and the Kierkegaard's “knight of resignation”

Saint Augustin and the apologist of the *Stranger* meet – despite the fifteen centuries between them – under the sky of Algeria. The former, a bishop in Hippo Numidia, tempted in his youth by the Gnostic heresy of the Manichees. The latter, an apostate existentialist, for whom living and philosophising makes sense only by assuming (not necessarily “understanding” by logical mellowing or sublimation in theosophy) death and the absurd. There are, in Albert Camus’s work, several “Gnostic”, iconic images. It is nevertheless inevitable the question of whether they carry the meaning circulated by the Gnostics, over several centuries. They made use of several elements taken, to a good measure, from an older tradition: religious, literary, philosophical. (The Gnostic motif of the celestial repatriation of the soul is anticipated – as of the ancient Egypt, the era of the slough that led to the *Debate between a Man and his Soul* – by the motif of returning *home*; a return made possible by death, after *slavery* on earth⁶.)

What connection could there be between two systems of thought – Gnosticism and Existentialism – occurring nearly two millennia apart? Moreover, the former is an exaltation of transcendence, whereas the other is – as Sartre says – a “humanism”, (only) to the extent in which it denies the existence of divinity⁷. In the latter half of the 20th century, Hans Jonas has brought the two doctrines together. He noted the fact that they resemble in how they render the human condition – the condition of man fatally “*cast into*

⁴ Cunningham 1998: 221.

⁵ Cunningham 1998: 225-226.

⁶ See *Debate between a Man and his Soul (Dialogul unui deznădăjduit cu sufletul său)*, apud (Davy 1999: 41- 42).

⁷ In other words, existentialism is one of the “most typical forms of modern nihilism”, whereas Gnosticism remains the “champion of transcendence” in the Western history of ideas (Culianu 2000: 327). Hans Jonas focuses on the similarities between the two trends; Ioan Petru Culianu, on the gap between them: one is – as Culianu argues – the “reverse” of the other.

the world": "abandonment, forgetfulness, inauthenticity" (Culianu 2000: 327). Hence, the image of the *stranger*, symptomatic for the Gnostic (self)representation. What creates the "positive force of anguish and the energy" required by *salvation*. (A possible answer to the human precariousness, the gnosis⁸ is like knowledge that saves). For the existentialist, the condition of alienation intermingles with "mundanity" and "obscures the meaning of the being as a *being-for-death*" (Culianu 2000: 327).

Hans Jonas, Henri-Charles Puech, Ioan Petru Culianu are only some of the authors asserting the relative unity and continuity of the gnosis as an intellectual and existential paradigm, although the forms it has taken, from Antiquity to (post) modernity are diverse. Culianu (2006: 157–159) finds Gnostic influences at Goethe, Byron, Lamartine, Victor Hugo, Leopardi, Bulgakov etc. The exegesis has affiliated to Gnosticism authors with whom it shares only an inventory of motifs/ images, some of these desemantized in relation to an authentic gnostic context. It is the case of Albert Camus, who recovers old gnostic symbols, modifying their meaning through recontextualization. His intellectual biography confirms these preoccupations; he obtains his Diploma of Higher Studies (1936) with a work on the *Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme* (2006: 157–159). Camus manages a paradoxical synthesis between the gnostic "language" and the "nihilistic" message of (post)modernity. In fact, Ioan Petru Culianu would rather speak of Camus's gnostic *imaginary* than of his gnostic *view* (Culianu 2000: 327-328); just like for Harold Bloom, Borges is, "from an imaginative perspective, a gnostic, although a sceptic humanist intellectually and morally speaking" (Bloom 2007: 466). But is Camus really a "nihilist"? "Freedom to nothingness" (Landgrebe 1974), nihilism places itself in the empty space left by the "death" of God and subsequently by the loss of the belief in reason, as a sufficient guarantee for truth. The belief in reason is

"(...) but a *substitute (Ersatz)* of the lost religion (...). The moment this shadow of an original belief disappears, there is nothing in the world that may replace it. (...) man is actually faced with nothingness" (Landgrebe 1974).

Or, Camus's "philosophy" of the absurd is (only) an attempt to "define a behaviour": that – as Camus argues – of the "man who believes *neither in God, nor in reason*". Hence, the

⁸ "Absolute knowledge, perfect, plenary, supreme science, able to redeem through itself the one who acquires and owns it" (Puech 2007: 7). What the old Christian heresiologists called *alleged gnosis* or *gnosis with a fake name*, and for modern commentators, Gnosticism represents an intellectual, religious, existential phenomenon, articulated into some thought systems that grew in parallel or in symbiosis with Christianity, in the 1st-5th centuries, in the West, the Near and Middle East, as well as in Egypt (Puech 2007: 8).

absurd and exultancy, the vital paroxysm as a reaction to nothingness. From “continuity into despair, there may occur joy” (Camus 2006: 1000). “The Shadow of Dionysus” – as Michel Maffesoli argues (2003) – comprises the megalopolis: the taste of celebration, *fiesta*, exaltation, hedonism. For the “stranger” Meursault and his mother, the approaching death sparks vitalist effusion: her late engagement and the crowd electrified by hatred, which he, as a gladiator facing his final fight, wants to have as a witness to his execution. An elemental energy, the pathos – love and hatred – occur, here, as the only certainty. God and the “other” life are related to the unverifiable nature of belief. Camus’s titles evoke the favourite themes of Gnostics: *The Stranger*, *The Fall*, *Exile and the Kingdom*, *Nuptials*. In the Gnostic condition, Hans Jonas sees a “double alienation”: from the world and from transcendence; for both of these, man is a *stranger*. Hence, the feeling of *exile*, that finds its end only by redeeming the *kingdom* – an ideal country, lost at one moment after the *fall*. One fragment from *The Myth of Sisyphus* is an agglomeration of recontextualized Gnostic images and symbols:

“A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a *stranger*. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a *lost home* or the hope of a *promised land*. This *divorce* between man and this life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of *absurdity*” (Camus 1955: 6)⁹.

The compass of Gnostics always indicates an *acosmic* homeland. The world is “evil”, imperfect, because its Demiurge is “evil”. Kafka’s *The Castle* or the instance that leads the trial of Joseph K. illustrates quite well – although transposed in another context – its signification. For Camus, Kafka’s melancholy is the same as that of Proust or Plotin; it is the “nostalgia of lost paradises” (Camus 2006: 224). Meursault accompanies the Gnostics only for part of the journey. However, like them and the Existentialists, he remains the “stranger” until the end (*l’être étranger*). He is “divorcing” the world and unforgivingly strange (*étrange*); he ignores usages and conventions. Accused by his own lawyer, he is sentenced to death. His elimination is almost an atavistic reflex: “stranger”, therefore dangerous. With his disillusioned naturalness, verging on cynicism, he is an exception. And therefore undesirable. He is – as Llosa observes – the “one who must die” (Llosa 2005). Nothing connects him to the absurdity of the world, its sophisticated and opaque system, like that in Kafka’s *The Process* or *The Castle*¹⁰. The night before the execution – “fraught with *stars* and *signs*” – brings solitary salvation to the “stranger”. Entered into another dimension, he awakens “with the stars on his face”. Cross with the lower practices, Meursault

⁹ This “*divorce*” between the self and the world – between the I and the Self – between the need of man to understand the world’s refusal to be understood – is opposed, in metaphorical language, by the *wedding*: a “mystical marriage”, the “meeting of the Spiritual and its double”, of the soul (a degraded, embodied form of the pure Spirit) and its *alter ego* from the “native”, astral realm (Puech 2007: 25.).

¹⁰ Together with Dostoievski, Kafka is one of Camus’s benchmarks; hence, the essays that Camus dedicated to the two precursors.

becomes the citizen of a utopic homeland. The message of *light* has reached him. Camus is not a mystic, but borrows some images from such a symbolism. He is somehow, like Cioran, a religious being, but “without God”, a “denied mystic”. Just like Kafka “repudiates every idea of God, no matter how far and hidden in the primordial abyss. What Kafka asserts is a human, primary, divine but lay attribute, knowledge where indestructibility is known”; it is gnosis, without being Gnosticism (Bloom 2007: 460). “Man cannot live without the permanent belief in something indestructible existing in itself, although both this belief, as well as the indestructible element may remain constantly hidden from him” (Kafka, *apud* Bloom 2007: 455). The idea of the *indestructible* corresponds to – is the symptom of – a need for “spiritual authority” that Kafka experiences, a man for whom “theophany does not exist” and who pretends to belong to a “spirituality independent from any belief or ideology” (Bloom 2007: 459 - 460). “If neither immortality nor blessing participate to that something that is indestructible then, for all that, what does participate to it? (...) the indestructible lies within us as a hope or a quest, but Kafka’s most sombre paradox is that the manifestations of these quests are destructive and, particularly, self-destructive” (Bloom 2007: 460 – 462).

Like Sisyphus – as seen by Camus – Meursault discovers, before his end, that he is happy: death may untie the Gordian knot of the absurd. There is nothing “beyond” – Camus assures us; this life is “the only one that was given to us”. (For Gnostics, death is a “return” to the state before the “casting” into existence. For “nihilists” and the “revolted” Camus, it is “a liberation into nothing”¹¹.) But Meursault makes a late discovery, that strips death of its sombre aura; it is not death that is tenebrous, but – hence the absurd – the meaningless world: “without a master”, as Camus writes in one of his essays. Like for the Gnostics, God is a complete “stranger” to the world whom – a regrettable accident produced in the Eon’s perfect laboratory – he ignores. Their God – the “Good” one, who is not the one in the *Old Testament* – is forever the *Stranger*, irreducible to the aporias of intelligence. The Gnostic man is himself a “stranger”, expiating meaninglessly the fault of Genesis. Which evokes a cosmological equation that the Gnostics inherit from Orphism, *cosmos-skotos*¹². The responsibility for evil does not belong to the strange Father (acosmic and so “good”), but to the Creator: “Second Demiurge” – “blind”, cruel, “jealous”, angry, ignorant, weak¹³. For the Gnostics, life *here* is but “captivity, burial or *blindness*” (Puech 2007:17). All in all, an error. It is an absurd “blindness” (the darkening of both

¹¹ See *supra*.

¹² Cosmos-shadows.

¹³ (Puech 2007: 23). Above the ignorant – “evil” – Demiurge, there is the “unknown God”, the “Father”: “absolutely transcendental”, with no connections to the world or time, inaccessible to ordinary knowledge and manifesting only through “inner revelation”. He is absolute Good; his function is neither to create nor to judge, but to *redeem* the creature from its filthy condition. In this “unknown God” of light, the gnostic finds the guarantee of a redemption which he seeks outside the world” (*Ibid.*).

sight and mind) that Meursault blames for his crime. In the language of Gnostic metaphors, *this* world is sleep, lethargy, drunkenness, unconsciousness, forgetfulness (Puech 2007:17). Until the accident, Meursault lives vegetatively, somnolently, at the pace of biological or social routine. The accident is a moment of inner rupture; it is similar to what the revelation of the *gnosis* (of the saving knowledge on the origin of evil) causes to a gnostic: through “initiation”, he “awakens” to himself¹⁴. On different paths, the paradigmatic gnostic and the (quasi)existentialist Meursault reveals his fundamental “estrangement”: one, through revelation; the other one, through unmediated experience.

If the novel is read from the gnostic perspective – which is possible, but not compulsory –, there is performed, in front of the crowd, more than the mere drama of an individual: it is a parable of the *Being*¹⁵. Its meaning may be obscure, dissimulated on purpose. Just like in Mircea Eliade’s prose, epiphanic signs are revealed only to the mystagogue, the one who already “knows”. At the end of Meursault’s story, the stars take the world/ the man/ the *stranger* to their own trust. At Eliade, in *Incognito at Buchenwald*, “the same light” envelops all things, “no matter how ugly these may be”. A light – of “stars and signs” – which Meursault discovers by himself, without the possibility of somebody else revealing it to him; in any case, not the priest called to hear his last confession. Meursault is named – a reminiscence from Nietzsche – the “Antichrist”: he brings a shocking change in how things are viewed; he places himself outside the *Establishment*.

Camus approaches a thinker that the existentialists regarded as a precursor, the Danish Søren Kierkegaard. Camus’s “happy Sisyphus” and Meursault at peace with himself before the execution are of Kierkegaard’s stock of “the knight of resignation”. The latter, an “*estranged* individual, the *stranger* by excellence”; “happy in the virtue of the absurd” and beyond all faith: “(...) not to find peace in the suffering of resignation, but the *joy in the virtue of the absurd* – is a real miracle. The one who does this is great, the only great one” (Kierkegaard 2005: 104-105) 16. This is how Meursault finally reveals himself. He finds his fundamental *estrangement* from the world and from transcendence. (His experience reminds somehow of the uncertain, ambiguous atheism of Ivan Karamazov; Ivan admits the idea of God as a spiritual principle, a God of meaning, whatever we may call him – “if it didn’t exist, we would have to invent him” –, but he can accept neither the world He created nor the Christian mystification meant to justify it. In the mind of the most revolted of the Karamazovs, there cannot fit, at the same time, the crookedness of

¹⁴ He passes from “death” to another type of life (*anastasis*, “resurrection”, *ananeosis*, “renewal”) (Puech 2007:17).

¹⁵ The novel may also be interpreted from a perspective convergent to the gnostic one: Heidegger’s view upon the Being. Mircea Arman provides us with an argument: “what we should understand by death is not equivalent to the finiteness of the biologic, to the state of suppression but, like at Heidegger or Blaga, to the state of inertness, the perfect state given by the rounding up of the cycle of Life and the Being’s entry into the perspective of the eternal (s.n.)”. Anyway, the «case» Camus is neither singular nor random. We may speak of reverberations from Heidegger’s views at René Char, B. Fondane, J. Derrida, G. Braque and others. The hermeneutics of the «Being» has grown into an era in the European culture” (Mircea Arman, “Prolegomenă”, in Martin Heidegger, *Ființă și timp*, translated from German (Eng. *Being and Time*) by Dorin Tilinca, Notes by Dorin Tilinca and Mircea Arman, Scientific reviewer: Mircea Arman, Foreword by Octavian Vuia, Editura “Jurnalul literar”, 1994, p. 13)

¹⁶ An image – also Kierkegaardian – of the “knight of resignation” is the “knight of belief”. He is happy: “the only happy individual”, rewarded with the delights and “inheritance” of the finite. But, “in the infinite resignation, there is only “peace and quiet”; nothing else, nor now nor never. Nothing else, expect a consoling promise: *anyone* “can discipline himself in performing this movement that, through suffering, reconciles him with existence” (Kierkegaard 2005: 99).

the world – the absurd suffering of children, which no need for redemption can justify – and the existence of God. However, there fits something that reminds of the Kafkian *indestructible*. Meursault leaves the world with the exaltation of a winner who has extorted a secret from life. It is – despite Camus’s departure from Existentialism – “the great secret of gods”, called out by Sartre’s Orestes: “men are free”, although they “don’t know it”. Free and delivered to the existentialist “nothingness” – to the world without any God, like Sartre’s hero. Or free and delivered to an irreducible mystery of “stars and signs”, like Camus’s *stranger*¹⁷. Both Meursault and Camus’s Sisyphus may be identified in one of the lines from Sartre: *Mon acte, c’est ma liberté*; no less, the act to assume the absurd. (And also/ or the Kafkian indestructible?)

The “strange” god in Venice: Pentheus the Theban and Thomas Mann’s Aschenbach

In *Death in Venice*, the meaning of the “stranger” is contaminated by that of Dionysus, a “foreign god” and yet so familiar to Greeks, before Christianity. Aschenbach, the hero of the short story, relates to certain (mythological and psychoanalytical) archetypes¹⁸. Apparently, the multiple identity of Aschenbach – in the short story, explicitly or only allusively akin to Socrates, Appolo, Dionysus, Jesus – shatters his coherence. In fact, these associations are already established by the exegesis. Schelling, for example, compares Socrates to Dionysus, “the young god thanks to whom Uranus’s desolate sky will be filled with songs and frenzy” (Jankélévitch 1994: 10)¹⁹. The polyphonic inferiority of Aschenbach, where Socrates and Dionysus meet, reflects the portrait that Nietzsche (a declared model of Thomas Mann) outlines for Socrates. Nietzsche sees in the Socratic

¹⁷ The evolution of Camus’s thinking, as revealed in his prose and essays, confirms a statement of Mircea Arman: “(...) a writer like Camus should not be inscribed in the so-called circle of *existentialism*, whose relevance does not go beyond the quotidian (...), but rather among those who, following the path of the Being, have struggled to essentially utter the truth and its foundation” (Mircea Arman, *op. cit.*, p. 13). Camus is closer to Heidegger – whose approach “starts from the Being to man and back to Being” – than to Sartre’s existentialism, “from Man to Being and back to man (Noica), an approach related more to the «human social» and its external implications (maladjustment, hostility, anxiety in front of nothingness) than to the meeting between the human and what is essentially essential to it: Being (Heidegger)” (*Ibidem*).

¹⁸ This interpretation relies on Thomas Mann’s vigorous advocacy – as shown by his correspondence – of the marriage between mythology and psychology, an alliance that displays not just a possibility, but an imperative of the epoch. Here is how the novel writer salutes, in a letter to the scholar Károly Kerényi, born in Timișoara, the occurrence of one of his works, *The Divine Child*: “The fact that you have united your forces – on the scientific realm – with Jung, mythology and psychology therefore, represents a very strange event, gratifying and very characteristic of today’s spiritual moment. The book *The Divine Child* has reached me in time. It is an extremely interesting book. (...) I have long been a follower of this combination: mythology and psychology. Bringing these two together seems to represent the world of the future, a type of humanity, blessed by the spirit and the lower depth. Sincerely yours, Thomas Mann” (Letter dated February 18th 1941, addressed to Károly Kerényi).

¹⁹ If Parmenides is, “in his turn, a Cronos of philosophy, who devours, as of their very occurrence, the concrete particularities, plurality, mobility and transformation, Socrates, a “Dionysian nature, mocks this greedy unity, this Chronian principle, where the diversity and variety of things suffocates” (Jankélévitch 1994: 10 -11).

attitude an exemplary synthesis of a way of thinking – sabotaging, with lucidity and irony, the traditional rigours of the polis – and a jocular-Dionysian way of being²⁰. Two effects of Socratic irony – remarked by Vladimir Jankélévitch – enable a rapprochement between Dionysus *lysios* (the “Liberator”) and the master of maieutics: “Socrates represents the conscience of Athenians, the good as well as the evil one”. He “liberates” his fellow countrymen from convictions that had turned into automatisms. At the same time, he stirs them: he takes away the comfort of their old beliefs (Jankélévitch 1994: 10). Socrates and the “stranger” Dionysus – an imported god, a “late comer” from the East – “threatens an entire life style and a whole universe of values” (Eliade 2000: 227) on which the old city was built. Aschenbach remains, for a long time, the prisoner of his own work, his social image and all sorts of stereotypes. He is “freed”, upon approaching end, by the Dionysian revelation of Life – intense, voracious, in fatal sisterhood with Death.

Thomas Mann projects, in Aschenbach, the duality of the German spirit and of himself. The short story – published in 1912 – was interpreted as a parable of the crisis experienced, at that time, by the German society and culture: divided between Goethe and Nietzsche, between the (neo)classical esteem for reason and the apology of irrationalism and anarchic vitalism. (This is related to a certain *Zeitgeist*, whose apologist in our country was Nae Ionescu.) Dionysus’s victory meant, however, the surrender of Germany. With a feeling of guilt, Thomas Mann sees its cause. And when history repeats itself, in the fifth decade, he opposes – which brings about his exile – the *Führer* and the hysteria that drags Germany into its defeat. *Doctor Faustus* (1943-1947) is an answer to *Death in Venice*. The end of Leverkühn – an excruciating agony, without the beatific aura of the mystic death of Aschenbach – allegorically transposes the trauma of collective history into an individual destiny. *Doctor Faustus* is – as the author said about his famous conference *Germany and the Germans* (1945) – “a German self-critique”. And a long-term warning for fellow countrymen: Dionysus will either lose or lose them.

Death in Venice remains yet an encomium of the unconscious that defeats, in a sort of “Twilight of the gods”, the dialectic spirit and Socratic wisdom. (The short story could have a motto from Schönberg: “art belongs to the unconscious”.) The real appears to Aschenbach in a transfigured manner. A mythical geography replaces the real one: the Ancient Greece of the Bacchae, Orpheus and Dionysus overlaps, in imagination, the Venice of the *belle époque*. Remembering and assuming prestigious cultural masks (Aschenbach as Socrates, Tadzio as Phaëdrus or epiphany of Hermes and Dionysus) lead to the character’s split image. His confused intimacy is the stage of a psychodrama with mythical actors. The action moves from the exterior (München, the Adriatic coast, Venice) to the hero’s intimacy – desiring “something completely *foreign*, something without any

²⁰ “(...) there will come a time when, in order to progress along the path of moral and reason, we would consult, instead of the *Bible*, the ‘Memorable words of Socrates’, and Montaigne and Horace would be regarded as initiators and guides in the intelligence of this mediator wise man, the simplest and most alive of us all, Socrates. He gathers the paths of the different philosophical rules that are, in fact, rules for different personalities (...) fixed by reason and habit, all culminating in the joy of living and the joy felt in front of one’s self; (...) Socrates is superior to the founder of Christianity through his joyful seriousness and that *cheerful wisdom* (s. a.) that is the most beautiful state of the human soul. Moreover, his thinking was also superior” (Nietzsche 1996: 59).

connection to his ordinary life”, the “incomparable, the extraordinary from stories” (Mann 1991: 21-22). The southern holiday becomes an escape into interiority, the (re)cognition of the “stranger”, of the “enemy” that is implacable on the inside. Defeated by the “flattering and ambiguous” Venice, Aschenbach discovers, with fear and voluptuousness, a completely new face. In a foreign place, surrounded by the city’s sick beauty, Aschenbach abandons himself, like Euripide’s Pentheus, to the “stranger” within. Mythical symbols translate the metamorphosis²¹, the anarchic defy of the reasonable.

In Euripide’s *The Bacchae*, Dionysus is a “foreign”, “new” god, who takes revenge on those who ignore him. From the very beginning, his power is acknowledged by the old wise men of Thebes – Cadmus and Tiresias –, but contested by the young king Pentheus, too confident in the power of reason. Disguised as Dionysus, Pentheus gradually identifies with the “foreign” god that he had once blasphemed. The humility is not enough; Pentheus²² falls killed by his own mother, the Bacchant Agave. The portrait of the Polish teenager from *Death in Venice* reminds of classical representations of Dionysus: blond, effeminate, smooth-faced²³. Tadzio, as Aschenbach remarks, is the “tool of a mocking god”: eventually, Dionysus punishes the vanity of Pentheus, or Eros, or Hermes, psychopomp and protector of travellers. In Venice, Aschenbach dedicates himself to a sort of cult of the “divine child”²⁴; like Pentheus, he pays for this experience of (self)knowledge. An epiphanic presence, Tadzio is an ambiguous messenger of the ideal and death. The last “work” of Aschenbach is a mystic(mythic)-aesthetic projection of his own death; like at Mallarmé, Nothingness intermingles with the Absolute.

By means of a dream of Aschenbach, Thomas Mann evokes the celebration rites of Dionysus: *oribasia and pannihia, (dia)sparagmos, ômophagya, enthousiasmos, mania*²⁵. With what consequences at the level of the narrative’s meanings? “Vital paroxysm” leads, thanks to the alchemy of the rite, to the “supernatural and incorruptible” (Vertemont 2000: 119)²⁶. It is Aschenbach’s journey marked – in an attempt of objectification through mythical projection – by the initiation imaginary: the experience of the self as alterity, (re)cognition of the “stranger inside”. The reversal of the polarity Apollonian/

²¹ Dionysus was not just a divinity of wine and vegetation – with cyclic succession of deaths and rebirths – but, on the contrary, the god of metamorphoses and theatrical illusion. Aschenbach’s transformation – external (cosmetic) and internal – has something excessive, like of the baroque drama (where the obsession with fragility, the inconsistency of life is compensated by the spectacular agglomeration of stage effects) or rather, of psycho-drama.

²² Like the ritual victim, who, in the Dionysian cult, is an epiphany of the god.

²³ See. Mann 1993: 36. In archaic iconography, Dionysus is full-bodied, dark-haired and bearded. In the classical period, his features soften.

²⁴ Among the “divine children” of Greek mythology – the persecuted who turn the odds in their favour – there are Zeus and his son, Dionysus.

²⁵ We find, in the dream sequence, the moments of those mysteries that consist of the participation of the Bacchae to the “total epiphany” (Eliade 2000: 230) of Dionysus.

²⁶ “(...) similar frenzies reveal a communion with the vital and cosmic forces and they could be interpreted only as divine possession.” (Eliade 2000: 231).

Dionysian has the Nietzschean meaning of “plenitude”: “a Yes without hesitation, said to suffering itself, to guilt itself, said to everything that is doubtful and *foreign* in the very existence”, “a last (...) overwhelmingly enthusiastic Yes said to life” (Nietzsche 1994a: 64). The Olympian Aschenbach achieves the stigmata of humanity: humility and suffering. Nietzsche speaks of a “psychology of tragedy. Aschenbach’s metamorphosis illustrates it: “(...) to be myself, beyond fear and pity, the eternal joy of becoming – that joy that also encloses the voluptuousness of destruction...” (Nietzsche 1994b: 65).

Venice is for Nietzsche, too, a favourite place, in the immediate and symbolic geography. Although the figure of the *stranger* – frequent in Thomas Mann’s prose – is familiar to Nietzsche, the modern Thomas Mann accuses symptoms of postmodernism: “everything has been said”, there cannot be writing but rewriting; (almost) everything is “intertext” and “palimpsest” à la Genette.

A Wallachian “knight of resignation” in Venice. Søren Kierkegaard and Vintilă Horia

In Kierkegaard’s terms, with some gnostic allusions, *The Knight of Resignation* – Vintilă Horia’s novel – reveals a Romanian feeling of history. Venice – mixed in the most troubled diplomatic ballet of the Gate with the West – is the host of a wanderer without illusions: a “foreigner” in the vernacular sense, a “stranger” in a gnostic way and “resigned” in Kierkegaard’s manner. (Dante, lining up with such heresy as can be found in *Fedeli d’Amore* and René Guénon are, together with Giovanni Papini, fundamental readings for Vintilă Horia.) The Romanian history – measured with the metronome of invasions and withdrawals “into the woods”, from the great migrations to the post-war resistance in the mountains – is reduced to its essence. Radu-Negru is an archetypal character. Just like Ahasverus is the effigy of another collective destiny. Radu-Negru’s “resignation” is primarily a denial of heroic illusion; it is an abnegation of exemplary history, “where great wars have forged great hearts”. His nation “boycotts” history but cannot decide its path²⁷. (“Why were we born? Why were we born *here*?” – Maria-Doamna bursts.) The “major” civilization of the West ignores this lost – “resigned” – people on the edge of the empire; one that systematically practices “withdrawal into history”. Radu-Negru, the Danubian messenger, seeks in vain, in the chancelleries of the West, loyal support for the Eastern Danube bastion. Like at Kierkegaard, his “resignation” is sceptical distancing from God; like the allies, Heaven has forgotten about him and his people. The Wallachian “knight” is burdened with a curse that – hardened by God’s dumbness – his Old Man casts upon Heaven, before death. Like Meursault, the Old Man closes his eyes cross with history and an “evil” God, who makes it incomprehensible. The wrath of the Old Man echoes in Cioran’s diatribes. Those from *The Evil Demiurge* or *Mon pays*:

²⁷ “Maybe there’s Vienna burning, (...), and we are rotting in this valley, stalking a thousand poor Turks, whom we shall crush under the rocks”; “in this small valley, (...) the gestures of people, even in victory, became useless”; bravery “without any pride and consequences” (Horia 1991: 155- 168).

“(My country – n.n.) I wanted it strong, without measure, crazy, like an evil force, a fatality that would have made the world tremble, but it was small, modest, lacking the attributes of a destiny. When I would lean over its past, I would discover only servitude, *resignation* and humility, and upon returning to the present, I would be welcomed by the same flaws” (Cioran 1996).

Radu-Negru believes that the world is “badly constructed (...). Heaven and hell were but original symbols, with no possible solution, as long as men would be men” (Horia 1991: 157). This “mistake” is rather a gnostic “antecedent negligence” – a divine error – than the guilt of Adam from the *Scriptures*²⁸. Also of gnostic or orphic inspiration are certain allusions to the *cosmos-skotos* (world-shadows) and a certain way of “liberation” connected to the “unknown God” of light – who, for the Gnostics, is that of the soul and Pleroma:

“To put yourself to the trouble of such a life, to what good? To grope, like horses, at every step you take, surrounded by shadows that never end” (Horia 1991: 66).

“Something at the bottom of the soul or somebody, perhaps that image of God that we carry inside us without being aware of it, signalled my approaching release...” (Horia 1991: 63)

The same starry sky²⁹ overarches the Venetian exile of Radu-Negru and Meursault’s expectation, awaiting his death, (en)lightened by “stars” and “signs”. *The Knight of Resignation* evokes – not only by its title – themes characteristic of Kierkegaard. The omnipotence of nothingness spreads anxiety and revolt on the faces painted by Aloisio Loredano. The fear of the Venetians, under the guise of frail sociability, is *Angst* from the work of the Danish writer:

“There was, in Aloisio Loredano’s portraits, an entire eulogy of rebellion” (Horia 1991: 77).

“These people (the Venetians, n.n.), whose ancestors had fought on all seas, were afraid, without knowing it, of an approaching death, but that was not threatening them directly, the death of their city perhaps, or of another reality which Radu-Negru failed to comprehend” (Horia 1991: 84).

²⁸ The idea that Emil Cioran also resumes in *The Evil Demiurge*: “Creation (...) is all in all a *sin* (s.a. - E.C.), the famous crime committed by man thus appearing like a minor version of a much more serious crime. What is our fault if not that of having followed, more or less servilely, the Creator’s example? His fatality – we recognise it too well in ourselves” (Cioran 2003: 9).

²⁹ Horia 1991: 60.

At the end of *The Iliad*, there stand together – above all dispute, equally vulnerable in front of destiny and death – Priam and Achilles. Vintilă Horia's hero reveals the same helplessness in front of the absurd and the threat of nothingness. It reconciles – on a level of values, not necessarily of action – Radu-Negru with his conjuncture adversaries:

“... the same *fear* also haunted him (Radu-Negru, n.n.), always. He looked like a character born out of Aloisio Loredano's brush. It was not the Turks that terrified him. He was even disgusted that he had to fight them, while another danger was threatening the people, even the Turks” (Horia 1991: 77).

From Kierkegaard's “infinite” resignation there may rise, paradoxically, faith³⁰. A great belief, itself absurd – as long as nothing justifies it – may convert the absurd into meaning; like that of Abraham, on the point of blindly sacrificing Isaac – as God had asked him to, without explanation³¹. Camus explicitly refuses this divinization of the irrational, which we find at Kierkegaard, Jaspers or Shestov; his “absurd” man revolts, like Vintilă Horia's “resigned men”. Returned to his country, Radu-Negru finds out that the Danube principedom forces, arms in hand, the will of a God hard to limber and a humiliating destiny that places him in the shadow of history. The end of the novel outlines an ethics of action. It embodies it, like an archetype of the national being, the voivode from Radu-Negru's prophetic dream; on it “depends everything that is yet human in man”³². The novel of the Wallachian knight accounts for this conversion: from “resignation” as understood by Kierkegaard, to action. Like Kierkegaard, Vintilă Horia captures a “paradoxical becoming”³³: that of a people long undecided between “retiring” from and returning to history. The return of the Voivode – of the archetypal one, in dreams, who transmits his power to the historical one, returned from exile – reminds the latter of a duty. There is, in Vintilă Horia's novel, a throb of dignity of the national being. The feeling of the absurd no longer brings the consoling belief, à la Kierkegaard, but revolt and action, like at Camus³⁴.

“He was sure that these lives, now beginning, promised something unheard of (...), that today's unfortunate people were carrying, on their bare and feeble shoulders, the cross of an illusion that tilted towards the future. Among them, there already grew the will of the one who will not resign, for whom war, deceit and stupidity will be unworthy, obsolete weapons...” (Horia 1991: 157).

“A voivode appeared in his dream. He was dressed like a peasant, with a cap of lamb's skin on his head, his long hair falling on his shoulders, his green, shiny

³⁰ Kierkegaard 2005: 100.

³¹ Kierkegaard 2005: 70 – 75.

³² “Notă finală”, in (Horia 1991: 171).

³³ Stan 2005: 10.

³⁴ That somehow contradicts a statement from the *Dicționarul general al literaturii române*: “(...) the novels from the exile trilogy do not accept the sometimes tempting comparison with the existentialist doctrine” (*Dicționarul general al literaturii române*, p. 523). In fact, any meeting of Vintilă Horia with existentialism may find a source in Kierkegaard's very work: a precursor of existentialists and reference author for the writer of *The Knight of Resignation*.

cheek like that of a poisoned man. He knew that this voivode had died long time ago, centuries ago, and that he had ruled this country that was now his. His name was unknown, but he knew that the power and his own crown came from this Lord who had protected his country against other invaders, at the beginning of history. The voivode was advancing slowly and, holding a bloody sword, was signalling the army that was following him from behind” (Horia 1991: 156).

Despite a vague medieval situatedness, the “knight of resignation” remains caught in a mythical indeterminacy. His story and that of the Danube principedom – negotiated/ betrayed/ forgotten by the great empires – is added to the other novels of the exile: *God Was Born in Exile (Dieu est né en exil)*, *Persecute Boethius! (Persécutez Boèce!)*, *The Seventh Letter (La septième lettre)*, *A Tomb in Heaven (Un sepulcro en el cielo)*. With each character – Ovid, El Greco, Radu-Negru – Vintilă Horia rediscovers his biography. One of a stranger all through the end. A sort of local Ovid, exiled to the other end of Europe: Spain, not the Pontus Euxinus.

A gnostic mythology of Romanian exile

Renouncing Indian studies, Ioan Petru Culianu admits to be “attracted to Gnosticism in a way that Hans Jonas (...) would have called «with existential roots»” (Culianu 2005: 16). His exile is, as he confesses, an escape from a Romanian history dominated – at the moment of leaving, in the eighth century – by the “Archons of evil”, as he himself designates the presidential pair.

“(...) for my personal interest in Gnosticism, I remain with a bitter duty to those Archons of the evil that have cast me into exile until I could find a welcoming country” (Culianu 2005: 17).

Or, Gnosticism – as Hans Jonas observed – brings a certain view upon man: the “stranger” by excellence, destined to a historical or ontological “exile”. The eponymous character from *Ultima apariție a Alicei H. (The Last Appearance of Alice H.)* is a sort of gnostic Sophia: coming as a saviour, from the acosmic dimension of the Pleroma – from the “coloured valley” of the uncreated –, to the help of mortals; the prisoner of a condition that only the mistake of transcendence has rendered possible, humankind – with its history heading nobody knows where – has left the rails of Meaning like “a tired wagon without any rails” (Culianu 1996: 90 - 91):

“(...) she was trying to explain to me why she was there by means of some *accident*. Strangers in the City by Nicoleta Popa Blanariu

(...) I did not know, in fact, what she wanted to say or where she had come from. But that place of *nowhere* was bathed in *soft light*. (...) She was doing what she was doing (and yet, what was she doing?) out of pure *freedom*. (...) she could withdraw to the depths from where she had come any moment” (Culianu 1996: 90 – 91).

“ « You should never offer roses », she said. « They are the secret of the body: bodies fade like roses. *Planets are clothed in roses*. (s.a. - I.P.C.) Sensuality and ephemeral, this is what they symbolize. »” (Culianu 1996: 92).

“She didn’t like roses, she was a *stranger*. (...) She saw order and beauty where I could hear the scratch of all the hinges of that *primordial wagon*. (...) She was nothing more than a gentle fire in a coloured valley. She was scared to be *there* and terrified by the wagon. She could hardly wait to return to that valley” (Culianu 1996: 96 – 97).

The imaginary of the Romanian diaspora is, to a certain extent, gnostic. (An explanation – not necessarily the only one – approaches the one mentioned above, belonging to Ioan Petru Culianu.) History follows – as Mircea Eliade explicitly says in *Nineteen Roses* – an anti-Hegelian, gnostic scenario: the Spirit does not march majestically through history, but is its prisoner. The world is created and ruled by an “evil” Demiurge. Whom Emil Cioran denounces – and ambiguously praises – with the same, never changing, almost mannerist grief³⁵. (Cioran’s motif of the *fall into time* is also of gnostic inspiration). Elements of the gnostic imaginary also occur at Eliade, in *Ivan, Incognito at Buchenwald*, *In Dionysus’s Court*, *Two Generals’ Uniforms*, *In the Shadow of a Lily*. Sometimes, the gnostic myth is associated with the Orphic one; the purpose of art would be – as Mircea Eliade reiterates in several short stories – soteriological and no less political. Banished by Plato, the Poet is recalled by Mircea Eliade in the ideal city. In its Orphic hypostasis, he may be – as we may find in the short story *In Dionysus’s Court* – an efficient political actor: by taming *zoon politikon*, he transforms the crowd into polis and humanity. *In Dionysus’s Court* is an Orphic rewriting of the gnostic myth of Sophia and the “rescued Saviour”; also, a variation on the theme of the Orphic Poet, assimilated with the gnostic “stranger”. Valentin, the character from *In the Shadow of a Lily* – whose name reminds of the founder of the Valentinian gnosis – summarizes allusively the gnostic myth: “the entire world lives in exile, but this is known only by few”. In *Ivan*, there occur explicit motifs, such as *agnostos theos*, the soul captive into matter (which is related to the gnostic and Orphic imaginary), the “Strange” God (a “camouflaged”/ “unrecognizable” Spirit). The latter – as we are warned – is neither “Paul’s God” nor that of “the Greeks”.

“(...) you were about to explain to us the meaning you give to the expression *agnostos theos*. You were looking, like at an inner screen, at the image of Ivan, somehow buried in his own body. And you were about to say that this is how God sometimes looks like, the Supreme Spirit, captured, imprisoned by Matter, blind, alienated, ignoring his own identity. But what God was that? In any case, neither Paul’s God,

³⁵ See *supra*.

nor that of the Greeks. You were thinking about the gnostic myths, the Indian ideas about Spirit and Matter. (...) Spirit is *always* camouflaged by Matter (...): how am I to recognize the Spirit if it is camouflaged, that is, essentially, if it is *unrecognizable* (s.a. - M.E.)? And then we are also, all of us, (...) not just indestructible, (...), but also unrecognizable..." (Eliade 1994a: 251 – 252).

The message of such a "Stranger"-Saviour seems to be awaited by Beckett's (anti)heroes or by K. from Kafka's *The Castle*.

Instead of conclusions

The deviant affect and ethnic difference likens Medea to Laura Brown, instances of the evil *stranger*. Albert Camus's Meursault suffers from a schizoid personality sublimated through ethical and ontological exploitation. Firstly, it allows the association of Camus's *stranger* with an iconic figure of the gnosis: the *estranged* who accuses – with a diagnosis à la Ugo Bianchi – a "double alienation": from the world and from transcendence. Secondly, it is possible to associate the Camusian hero with a Kierkegaardian figure, "the knight of resignation". The Danish thinker – a declared model for Camus – sees in him the "estranged par excellence". Pentheus the Theban and Thomas Mann's Aschenbach share the same experience: the revelation of *inner alterity* – censored and eventually devastating dimension of personality. This second, anarchic self carries – at Euripides, in *The Bacchae* and no less at Thomas Mann, in *Death at Venice* – a mythological mask and a psycho-analytical meaning: the "strange god", *Dionysus lysios*, the "Liberator".

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