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Diary Pages in *The Forbidden Forest*. Mircea Eliade's Detention in Miercurea Ciuc

Abstract: The novel The Forbidden Forest comprises the main themes in Mircea Eliade's literature, but at the same time it may be considered an attempt of re-writing the author's past. The exiled Mircea Eliade, haunted by the shadows of his former political beliefs, wants to renounce his old identity and to build up a new existence outside Romania. He lends his main character, his alter ego Ștefan Viziru, the key moments of his biography; one of the most significant episodes concerning the concealment of his political convictions is represented by the incarceration in the legionary camp in Miercurea Ciuc. If in Memoirs Mircea Eliade does not insist on this fragment of his past, he chooses to reveal the ordeal he went through by means of this work of fiction, thus trying to emphasize the main character's and implicitly his own apolitical attitude. Ştefan Viziru eludes any political involvement and is unfairly condemned, exactly as Mircea Eliade used to claim. If the character may even be considered a victim of history, Mircea Eliade's interest in the Legionary Movement cannot be completely overlooked. Even if we disapprove of the articles written in favor or the Iron Guard, in interpreting them we must take into consideration the fact that Mircea Eliade was drawn to the mysticism of this Movement, whose leader advocated the spiritual revolution which can be accomplished only by the new man, about whom Mircea Eliade had written on countless occasions.

Key words: terror of history, literary transfiguration, legionary camp.

### Introduction

The Forbidden Forest is a key novel, a literary transfiguration of Eliade's vision on History and a reinvention of its author's past. On the ambition of writing "the great novel", Eliade will engraft the attempt of transposing into literature the image of a human drama lived as "terror of history" (Ţurcanu 518).

The main character, Ştefan Viziru, relives the key moments of the author's biography. The novel presents at the same time an ample chronicle of the Romanian society in an epoch of great convulsions. "The fresco Mircea Eliade wanted to write has substance and he who wants to get an idea about the Romanian society in an apocalyptic epoch (1936-1948) finds convincing facts in *The Forbidden Forest*" (Simion 241-242). The accuracy of presenting historical events as well as the main character's initiatory quest engross the

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reader's attention who will certainly attribute to the author the hero's political convictions. Ştefan Viziru eludes any political involvement and is unfairly condemned, exactly as Mircea Eliade used to claim. The character is the advocate of democracy, is purified of any political belief and, even more, he is a victim of history. Mircea Eliade tactfully succeeds in hiding his Romanian past under the remarkable mask of the quest for the sacred in the profane. Mircea Eliade wants to build up a new existence outside Romania. Through the novel *The Forbidden Forest*, Mircea Eliade renounces his old identity, his political past.

## Mircea Eliade/Ştefan Viziru incarcerated in the legionary camp

Stefan Viziru has the phobia of History, he is terrified by events, he tries to hide himself from the course of history in a secret room, but he is brought to reality by the revenge of history. The arrest is perceived by the character as if it had occurred in a parallel world. The intrusion of the police is brutal:

He saw himself surrounded by unknown people. Some had revolvers. He didn't even have the time to understand what was going on. He only heard, the first guy, yelling: Prefecture Police. He was now between two armed agents. A third man searched his pockets. Others threw away the chairs and the bed, and started searching in the wardrobe (Eliade 1: 176).

The character's disarming honesty is not convincing; he is called at the Prefecture for a declaration:

Where is Teodorescu? asked, taking a step forward into his direction, someone who stood the whole time near the door. I don't know. I haven't seen him since he left. He thanked me for the accommodation and left. I don't know where. The boss looked at him, smiling, with distrust. Were you friends? He asked again. Friends in the true sense, no. I met him in Germany, a year ago...Come to the Prefecture Hall, the chief said. You have to give a statement (Eliade 1: 176-177).

Ştefan was taken to the headquarters of the Prefecture, where he remained in arrest, just like Mircea Eliade. The writer spent here 17 days, forced to sleep on the floor and blinded by the light of a strong bulb which he didn't have permission to switch off. During the arrest, both Mircea Eliade and Ştefan Viziru sharply denied any involvement in politics. We find the same ideas in the novel:

I'm not a legionary, Ştefan answered calmly. Yeah, we're perfectly aware of this, they all say that, said the Inspector bored.[...] I can't sign this, said Ştefan firmly. It's a declaration which dissociates me from the legionary movement. I can't dissociate from it since I've never been a legionary. It's a simple formality, said the Inspector bored. It's more than that. Why should I lie, saying that I'm something that I have never been? Someone I couldn't have been, due to my fundamental conceptions, in regards to both ethical and political ideas (Eliade 1: 182-183).

It's hard to imagine that this type of conversation took place between Mircea Eliade and his investigators. But, as well as Ştefan Viziriu, Mircea Eliade was interrogated two times, declaring every time that he wasn't involved in politics and that he had never considered politics a suitable path for his generation to take. His refusal to sign the declaration which dissociates him from the legion, led to his incarceration in the concentration camp in Miercurea Ciuc.

Ştefan was transferred during the night, without being told where:

A duty agent announced him to gather his things, because they're going to leave at midnight. Where? Ştefan asked, caught by surprise. You'll see for yourself [...] the hallways were strongly lightened. In the backyard of the Prefecture, a locked truck was lightened by 2 headlights. He noticed the Inspector talking to one of the drivers. For one second he thought he should have approached him and protest. Still everything seemed useless to him. His eyes hurt because of the headlight but, yet, he kept on thinking with great delight at the darkness inside the truck. For 20 days he didn't feel the shivers released by the dark (Eliade 1: 192).

Then, when he hears whispers in the truck "Long live the Legion, Long Live the Captain!" (Eliade 1: 192), Ştefan doesn't try to declare solidarity with his grief partners, responding politely and laconically.

The camp is accurately described:

It was an imposing building, an old agriculture school, built at the bases of a hill, with its back to the forest. In front of the school lay a plain; faraway, in the streak of light the Odorheiu Mountains were shaped. The space left free for the delinquents to walk by was quite narrow. Ten meters away from the school walls, high wire barriers were lifted. Ştefan counted slowly, with no curiosity, the gendarmes armed with machine guns, looking at him, as if they didn't see him, from behind the wires; there were six gendarmes and one sergeant (Eliade 1: 200).

There were three hundred iron-guardists kept imprisoned in the camp; most of them intellectuals. After a few months of incarceration, their clothes were frayed and, because of the long beards, it was difficult to make a difference among them.

In the first discussion in the camp, Ştefan Viziru confesses to an acquaintance of Ioachim Teodorescu:

I'm not a legionary, rushed Ştefan into informing him correctly, but yet with coldness in his words. It's a mistake. I was brought here by mistake. Politically, I even oppose your ideas [...] I obviously, regret that you're here, among the wires, continued embarrassed Ştefan. Obviously, at a human level, I sympathize with you... But I wouldn't want any ambiguity to be spread. I have no sympathy for your political ideas or methods. I am exactly your opposite... Obviously, he rushed into adding, regarding your battle with the police, I'm neutral. I have the same aversion towards the police as I have for fascism... (Eliade 1: 200-201).

Describing the character as the enemy of the Iron Guard, Mircea Eliade attempts once more to be exonerated; but, at the same time, he outright condemns dictatorship, political crime.

Even in the camp the legionaries carry on some of the practices within the Movement, such as the collective prayers, followed by discussions concerning different topics: "at nights, after the prayers, in some bedrooms there were gatherings" (Eliade 1: 212). After one of these gatherings, Ștefan briefly exposes his ideas about History and Time; life loses its importance because of time reference and because of the history that people create. Everything that's good in a person tries to fight against time; feelings, living states are timeless, they don't take into consideration time. Regarding politics, the only viable approach is the one that takes into consideration a particular moment, the one that remains true regardless of historical circumstances. Ștefan Viziru is in favor of democracy "because it's also anti-historical, meaning that it sets an abstract ideal, which is against the historical moment" (Eliade 1: 214).

The character will become dilemmatic when he realizes that the ones who consider themselves the democracy defenders are the ones who arrested and locked them up in the legionary camp:

They believe in something, and for that reason they were locked up between the wires. I believe in democracy, but I don't do politics, so I'm not taking part in the conflict; the democracy defenders are the ones who arrested them and brought them here. I am a spectator concerning this battle. I have no right in interfering in their problems; I am neutral... (Eliade 1: 213-214).

Mircea Eliade brilliantly depicts the prisoners' reaction after the hideous assassination of the thirteen legionary men and their Captain in the night of St. Andrew, which is identified in the traditional belief as the night when the phantoms come out of the cemeteries, sneaking in people's houses and eating their hearts. The moment when the prisoners are told about the tragedy impresses through the legionaries' admirable solidarity:

He saw how, across the wires, one of the gendarmes set his shotgun in target position. He discovered that, by the entire length of the wires, the number of sentinels increased: there were about 15. (...) The sergeant wrapped the journal, squeezed it as much as he could and threw it far away up the wires. The other one bent over to pick it up and went towards the center of the yard unwrapping it. He stopped in his way, opened the newspaper, and started to stagger. Everyone ran to him. Then Ştefan heard a thick, wild scream of a beast in pain: They shot the Captain! Then he didn't hear anything, no breath in the whole yard. That stoned silence seemed more horrifying than any other scream. The next moment, he saw all of them falling on their knees, bursting into tears, groaning. Some of them banged their heads to the ground. Others screamed like beaten dogs. With the guns in their hands, the gendarmes watched them (Eliade 1: 215).

Mircea Eliade keeps Ştefan away from this tragedy. He "crossed himself and he lowered his forehead, with no thoughts in his mind" (Eliade 1: 215).

At the time when Corneliu Zelea Codreanu was killed, Mircea Eliade had been released from the camp. The scene of the tragic news of the Captain's death is purely fictitious; still it describes the legionary men's solidarity, their commitment to Corneliu Zelea Codreanu.

Held in the camp, Ștefan Viziru continues to refuse to sign the statement according to which he is dissociated with the legion. If in the beginning he is convinced that there will be a release order on his name, later he gets used to being in detention, because the incarceration offers him the possibility to hide his love for Ileana to Ioana. He gets to the point when he really enjoys the fact that Ioana was forbidden to visit him:

Often, with the doctor beside him, he remembers Ioana. He no longer asked himself, as in the beginning, if she'll succeed in coming to see him. He was, now, more content that things turned up as they did. It would have been awful to be welcomed by her, in the major's office, that place where visits were held, and she would have guessed from the first look that he loves Ileana more than her (Eliade 1: 211).

He doesn't seem to care about freedom, and the news about his discharge didn't affect him:

And all of the sudden he knew that all these were just pretexts, which come and go so fast through his mind so that he didn't remember that terrible thing: even though he found out he was going to be made redundant, and that Ioana wasn't going to cash his paycheck from the Ministry, he still loves Ileana (Eliade 1: 205).

Unfairly arrested, \$\text{Stefan lives} in the incarceration as if in a trance; almost unaware of what he is experiencing, he lives driven by the love revelation for Ileana. If Viziru doesn't want freedom because this will mean that he'd have to reveal his growing love for Ileana, Mircea Eliade refuses to sign that declaration as long as the generation is persecuted and the legionaries followed and hunted without having any apparent blame.

### Has Mircea Eliade succeeded in exonerating himself?

Besides the fact that Mircea Eliade tries to prove his alter-ego's lack of involvement in politics, the writer also subtly underlines the negative side of the characters that join the Legionary Movement. Bursuc, who will be later a representative of the new power, is now an appreciated member of the Iron Guard. "Aren't you friend with Bursuc?" (Eliade 1: 202) asked doctor Stănescu, another prisoner. "Admirable boy [...] And damn smart too!..." (Eliade 1: 202). The character's political malleability emphasizes his demonism. Thus, Bursuc is an informer by profession, and Bibicescu signs up in the Iron Guard in order to be named theatre manager. Neither of the novel characters is a truly convincing defender of this organization. We don't find anywhere in the novel, a discussion or a monologue in which the Iron Guard is described in a positive light. Mircea Eliade is a versatile legionary; he doesn't want to compromise himself, not even by introducing into the text of some comments in favor of the legion, for which eventually he could be reproached because of his former sympathy for this movement.

#### Petre Biriş blames the legionaries too:

If I am mad with legionary men, said Biriş, I am also mad because they are the reason why our civil rights are being restricted. While fighting against them, the government is forced to apply fascist methods and so not only the legionaries suffer, but also, we do. Anyone can arrest you, only because there is a possibility that you could be a legionary man and until they find out that you're not, you are fired from your job or sent to the legionary camp. That's what, probably, happened with poor Viziru (Eliade 1: 207).

Biriş, a witness to these events, testifies here for the innocence of his friend, unfairly accused and locked up.

Mircea Eliade tries to purify Nina's political past, herself a former legionary woman. In the novel there isn't any reference to Ioana's political opinions; she has put aside everything that has to do with political involvement, and when \$\forall \text{tefan}\$ is imprisoned, she begs him to sign the declaration so he can return home. Mircea Eliade underlines the absurdity of Ioana's political involvement through a conversation she had with her father:

I told you to give him an ultimatum! What, has he gone insane? Does he want to compromise all of us? Wire him!... No telegrams are being received. I wrote him only by post, more than thirty letters. I wrote him others through the gendarmerie... Send them to him with the help of the Prefecture Police, because they arrested him. If you telegraph him, compelling him to sign the declaration, they would hand him over the telegram. I can't compel him, Ioana said hopeless. I asked him, I begged him, but I can't compel him... Then you are both sympathizers, old Bologa exclaimed with smolder despair in his voice. You are both Iron Guard sympathizers!... (Eliade 1: 217).

When he arrived home, Ştefan, surprisingly and astonishingly, found out that his friend, Biriş had envied him for his experience:

I've envied you the whole time you've been imprisoned, Biriş said to him. What a lucky guy you are! What an once in a lifetime opportunity!... To suffer for a cause which wasn't even yours, he continued anxiously. To assume a sin you didn't do and to ransom this sin through your own innocence... I would give anything to have had your experience; to pay for a crime I didn't commit, but which was also horrifying to me. I would have grieved joyfully beside them, just because dictatorship, political murder was and is hideous for me, too. Above all, when I found out that you refused to sign that statement, at the Prefecture, I almost got jealous of your luck...(Eliade 1: 225-226).

Of course, Mircea Eliade could have described \$tefan's incarceration as a spiritual and noble act of masked revolt against any type of political crime. The author's intention wasn't to transform his hero into a martyr, but to clear his past of stains. His simultaneous love for Ioana and Ileana makes \$tefan more human, more credible than a possible sacrifice for a cause in which he has never believed.

As soon as he was released from the camp, Mircea Eliade tries to dissimulate in what concerns his legionary past:

Eliade, being in the pulmonary disease sanatorium in Moroieni, writes to professor Radulescu-Motru, with the same indignant tone, of innocent victim: "Strange! I wonder when I have ever been involved in politics..." (Letter from 10 nov. 1938, Moroieni, to Rădulescu-Motru, in Eliade, *Europe, Asia, America...: Correspondence*, III, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 2004, p. 15). Eliade seemed to have completely forgotten about his political articles, published since the autumn of 1935 until the beginning of the year 1938. "I can't remember writing a single page of doctrine or legionary propaganda" (Letter from Paris, 3 July, 1972, to Gershom Scholem, in Eliade, *Europe, Asia, America: Correspondence*, III, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 2004, p.129), Eliade answers to Gershom Scholem in 1972. And, in one way - very ambiguous - Eliade, the author of so many amnesic characters, really "had forgotten"... (Petreu 18).

But, both his articles from the '30s, and his *Portuguese Journal*, say something different. The Revolution, in which Mircea Eliade believed, was a spiritual one, starting from an inner transformation, which could have been brought at the surface only by the new man. In an article in 1934, Mircea Eliade describes this in the following way:

I am one of the few people who believe in a permanent revolution, in an infinite purifying set of values and a more fierce control of the laic dogmas. (...) The Revolution, about which we hear all the time, does it have anything revolutionary in it? (...) I wish I'd see with my own eyes what the changes would be in regards to Romanian ground, due to what the great revolution sets to do. (...) The true Revolution starts from a soul supply, from a biological and sacred fury against lie, injustice, hypocrisy, from a pagan thirst for a new life, for a new man, for a new world. (...) A new man? But, for God's sake, this new man is our very own existential sense. But he doesn't have to repeat the darkness, stimulations, mythologies and cruelties of what old men used to do, those old men whose presence smells like a dead body. The new man is being made; he is not being waited for. First of all, the new man means a complete break from hypocrisy and society's lack of courage. A young man with no bonding, fearless and pure, with his eyes straightened to the future not to past practices. (...) One who doesn't have any ambitions, values, who will give up comfort, mythology of the street, ignorance and ancestors' sins. Show me that man. A soul ready to be improved, with no strategy and no political opinions, no money and no ambitions. A new man means a man who feels, who thinks, who does everything without thinking of himself. In order to end up being an instrument of the love above him. He shouldn't want any reward or success, he shouldn't look for stimulations and he shouldn't stimulate. And most of all, he should give up his individual limits, in order to overcome his poor boundaries of flesh (Eliade 3).

A lot of the Legion ideals were identical with what M. Eliade had wanted for a long time. For example, the next fragment from C. Z. Codreanu's *Cărticica șefului de cuib*, is almost a summary of this article wrote by Eliade:

What a legionary believes:

Point 67. That the state based on the old ideology of the French revolution is ruining. In the world the matter is a new state. It can be very good or very bad. What will it be like? It will be like we'll make it.

Point 68. New State, but it can't be based only on theoretical conceptions of the constitutional law. On the first hand a new state needs, as well as any *indispensable* thing, a new type of man (...)

Point 69. *The new man*, or the renewed nation, requires a great *soul* development, a great soul revolution of the entire people, meaning *a fight against the spiritual direction from today*, and a defined offensive against this direction.

Point 70. In this new man, *all human soul virtues have to be resurrected*. All our race qualities. In this man, the purpose is to eliminate all his flaws and all his plies for evil. In this type oh *hero*, hero in the sense of a warrior, because through fight he can impose his opinion, *hero in a social sense*: incapable after victory to exploit other one's work; *work hero*, the huge creator of his country *through work*, he has to gather everything that's been good for thousands of years in the Romanian people.

This is the man we're waiting for, this hero, this great man. The state will count on him; tomorrow's Romania is in his hands. The Legionary Movement, before being a political, theoretical, financial, economical movement, is also a *spiritual school*, which, *if a man gets in*, at the very end he has to come out as *a hero* (Codreanu 78-79).

The resemblances between these two texts are astonishing, so the Legionary Movement becomes a group to which Mircea Eliade must have felt related. The true spiritual revolution can be made only by the new man who seems to coincide with the Captain. In some articles, Mircea Eliade speaks of a political leader able to trigger a spiritual movement which could transform Romania. Although he doesn't give away his name, it's obvious that he speaks about Corneliu Zelea Codreanu.

In the testament article from Buna Vestire (in which Corneliu Zelea Codreanu is mentioned as the leader of a movement that would bring the spiritual, mystical revolution), Mircea Eliade considers the Legion as being the only way which would bring not only the restoration of our Romanian virtues, but that new man, fit to an European lifestyle. This new man, who Mircea Eliade talked about for several times, cannot be born as a result of a political revolution, but a spiritual one, which he could be set only by the Legionary Movement. The Legion's purpose is to create a man who is not afraid of death and who is strongly tight to religion. This movement was born in order to change the Romanian soul and to create a new man who can overcome the instincts of individual conservation and who can subordinate himself to the supreme value, the spirit. This new man - Mircea Eliade writes in another article - "replaces the old <<political life>> by <<civil life>>, meaning that he restores humanness and Christianity relationships within the same blood community" (Eliade Textele "legionare" 51). The new Christian revolution cannot be compared to "any of the revolutions which have been done or are on the verge of being done" (ibidem) because neither one "has ever attempted such a complete <<re-update>> of Eastern Christianity" (ibidem). That's why "if it succeeds - if it comprises the whole Romanian community – it will be the greatest revolution of the century" (ibidem).

Mircea Eliade also emphasizes the differences among the revolutions made in the name of class fight (communism) or the state and race (fascism), and the one that the legion could start, born under the sign of Archangel Michael, which will triumph through divine gift. Mircea Eliade himself noticed in 1937 the orthodox specificity of the Legionary Movement

as opposed to German Nazism and Italian fascism: "If, as it is said, Nazism is based on People and fascism is based on State, then, the Legionary Movement has the right to proclaim itself as the only religious mystic able to lead human settlements" (Eliade *Textele "legionare*" 46).

By this Mircea Eliade refers explicitly to the political method of the Legionary Movement, which - although it is based on Christian mystic - would be "able to lead human settlements" (ibidem). It's about "a religious revolution - Eliade continues - a spiritual revolution, an ascetic and manly one, which European history has never met" (ibidem)

In the articles in favor of the Iron Guard, Mircea Eliade insists on the mystic features of the movement, putting aside its political side. If we look from this perspective, Mircea Eliade is entitled, but only partially, to say that he was not involved in politics.

And yet, Mircea Eliade is the one who confesses: "Corneliu Codreanu turned me into a Romanian fanatic" (Eliade *Jurnal portughez* 1: 156).

Back in Romania in July 1942, Mircea Eliade meets his "legionary friends" to discuss "what happened, and why it happened, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January?" (idem 1:132) Mircea Eliade doesn't give out names, but:

It's probably about different persons than his "Criterion" friends, who appear, exactly under this indicative, half a page later. [...] It's possible that Mircea Eliade's "legionary friends" belonged, just like Pălăghiță, [...] to the "anti-Sima" legionaries, who stood faithful to (the memory of) Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. (Alexandrescu 154,156)

We can talk about two categories of legionaries: the ones faithful to Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and the ones from Horia Sima's group; and concerning Mircea Eliade's interpretation regarding the events which took place on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January, the latter category is the one to blame, the former being the ones who: "were framed, and they fell blindly" (Eliade *Jurnal portughez* 1: 132).

In Bucharest, M. Eliade meets his friends from "Criterion", Constantin Noica, Mircea Vulcănescu, Paul Sterian. In a discussion about the Legion, Noica " is accusing them of making a comfortable place to sleep in, in the shelter of the formula "we are pleased as being technicians and serving the state, no matter what form it takes" (idem, 1: 133). The reproach coming from the fact that they made a pact with Ion Antonescu's Regime, is based on the Legion members having been hunted after the Rebellion. Mircea Eliade – hinted at these accusations because of his function of cultural adviser at Lisbon and thus representing Antonescu's regime - tries to clear his legionary status in the given context: "I rarely interfere in the discussion, confessing that, though a legionary man, I have suspended any judgment in what concerns the internal political ideas as long as the war with Russia takes place" (ibidem).

If in his circle of friends Mircea Eliade is willing to defend his legionary man honor, what will make him deny his loyalty to this movement? Marta Petreu considers that Mircea Eliade "knew that, if he explicitly denies his legionary past, the legionary men have their own revenge (the same way when they had their revenge, in 1973, on Cioran); and he also knew that, if he accepted public praises for being a legionary, he creates another scandal" (Petreu 18).

#### **Conclusions**

Haunted by the shadows of his political past, the exiled M. Eliade attempts to build up a new image, cleansed of his previous political convictions. We believe that an important stake in getting less attention on his relationship with the Legionary Movement is found in his scientific work; Mircea Eliade doesn't want to be thought that his sympathy towards this Movement had any impact on his way of thinking or on his writings. That's the reason why he doesn't waste any opportunity to exonerate himself; he uses even this novel by means of his alter ego in order to purify his political past. The episode of the incarceration in the legionary camp is certainly edificatory in this respect. But if Ştefan Viziru may even be considered a victim of history, Mircea Eliade's interest in the Legionary Movement cannot be completely overlooked. Even if we disapprove of the articles written in favor of the Iron Guard, in interpreting them we must take into consideration the fact that Mircea Eliade was drawn to the mysticism of this Movement, whose leader advocated the spiritual revolution which can be accomplished only by the new man, about whom Mircea Eliade had written on countless occasions.

On the other hand, Mircea Eliade was in a world which refracted the problems regarding "the other Europe", a world which refused to completely understand what had happened in the thirties in Romania with a generation whose ideals were vanished by the tools of an unprecedented and powerful dictatorship. Nevertheless, the great savant's youth mistakes could never damage the incontestable value of his works.

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