

**THE IRRESISTIBLE TEMPTATION: A BRIEF PERSPECTIVE ON THE
COMPLEX NATURE OF ISLANDS AS DEPICTED IN A. E. BACONSKY AND
MIRCEA ELIADE'S PROSE (*BISERICA NEAGRĂ*, *ȘARPELE*)**

**Antonela Laura CORNEA, PhD Candidate, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca –
Northern Baia-Mare University Centre**

Abstract: Beyond the geographical definition of the island, that of a land surrounded by water, of a smaller size than the continents, in literature, the term encompasses a series of symbols and meanings, as the island is often considered to be a contradictory space, situated somewhere in between two worlds, in between reality and fantasy, a place that embodies a society's dreams, aspirations or, on the contrary, its worst fears. Islands are, therefore, miniature worlds, separated from the main not only by water, but also by the unwritten rules that govern them, worlds that can illustrate anything from the utmost sacrality to the various forms of promiscuity. Perceived by the individual from a double perspective, depending on one's location, islands are usually viewed by outsiders as miraculous places, idyllic retreats, while those exiled or forced by circumstances to live on an island, experience feelings of alienation and isolation. Nevertheless, the specificities of islands as briefly mentioned above, can be encountered not only in the perimeter of the island in the common meaning of the word, but are transferred as well to a series of places that are transformed in island-like or insular spaces. The present paper focuses therefore on the dual nature of the island, using as support A. E. Baconsky's "Biserica neagră" ("The Black Church") and Mircea Eliade's novel "Șarpele" ("The Snake").

Keywords: island, insularity, boundries, refuge, identity.

Commonly defined as a land entirely surrounded by water, of a smaller size than the continents, and often associated with the idea of separation and/or unknown, the island is a highly exploited cultural image, as the entire range of meanings and symbols connected to it have transformed a simple word designating a concrete object into a more abstract concept. This entire process of evolution suffered by the noun in question, can be explained when taking into consideration humankind's fascination with islands. Due mostly to the fact that *the verification of a map was, until very recently, in the absence of images from space, the verification of geography with a „fiction“* (Pinet, Kindle locations: 2966-2967), islands became the ideal alternative to everyday reality, as the mystery and the uncertainty of their existence allowed the human imagination to build replicas of the present. According to Margaret Cohen, *from a landbased perspective, the island appears a prime “empty” space of orientalist discourse, a fresh, untouched realm that can be shaped as it serves the metropolis: to offer a utopian counterpart to its injustices and problems, and/or to be conquered and cultivated to further its aims.* (Cohen: 656) In consequence, this *geography with a fiction* embodies a society's dreams, aspirations or, on the contrary, its worst fears, because its rather ambiguous and undetermined status offers the individual an opportunity to create different versions of reality, often in an attempt to either offer a concrete expression to phobias and obsessions or to compensate for something that is longed for, by creating an imaginary refuge that suddenly becomes more appealing as it is allegedly real. This is why the representations

of islands are extremely variable - the conglomeration of fantastic and real elements that shape the image of the island is what makes them to be perceived as contradictory spaces, situated somewhere in between two worlds, in between reality and fantasy, miniature worlds, separated from the main not only by water, but also by the unwritten rules that govern them, worlds that can illustrate anything from the utmost sacrality to the various forms of promiscuity. In his article *Desfrâu și sfințenie. Doi poli ai imaginarului insular*, Lucian Boia discusses, as well, the dual nature of the island, stating that although there can be identified islands that serve as a model of virtue and christian morality, their number is surpassed by those that present themselves as a space of materialized temptations and lack the rigid censorship imposed by civilization, as these offer a sense of complete freedom and open a way of expression for the well-hidden, repressed desires that are unspeakable of, unless attributed to someone else, in this case to exotic people inhabiting even more exotic islands.

Due to the great variety of the insular representations and to their versatile character, classifying islands is a challenging task. Nevertheless, Gilles Deleuze distinguishes between oceanic and continental islands, where the first ones are considered to be the original, essential islands, while the second category consists of accidental or derived islands: *Continental islands serve as a reminder that the sea is on top of the earth, taking advantage of the slightest sagging in the highest structures; oceanic islands, that the earth is still there, under the sea, gathering its strength to punch through to the surface.* (Deleuze: 8) Peter Sloterdijk goes even further, as his theory also deals with the formation of islands, and he discriminates between three types of islands: the absolute islands (space stations), the atmospheric islands, and the anthropogenic islands (human life generating). When discussing the absolute islands, the author gives as examples the submarines and the space stations, stating that the islands of the terrestrial globe are not absolute islands, as they do not move and are restricted to a bi-dimensional surface. The second type of islands, the atmospheric ones, are those that control the environment indoors, such as the central warming systems and air conditioning as some of the simplest, as well as greenhouses, shopping centers or ships. The third type of islands described, the anthropogenic ones, has as attributes the power of self-generating and developing life, especially human life, in specially prepared contexts, and Sloterdijk divides this third type of islands into nine sub-categories: Chirotop (the performance of the human hand, the human action), Phonotop (the vocal sound, the communication between members of a community), Uterotop (a conquered space that aims to expand the area of maternal protection and care), Thermotop (the heat as a matrix for the state of well-being), Erotop, Ergotop (an authority able to generate cooperation in order to improve the life style of a community, through the division of labor or by fighting for the same goal), Alethotop (deals with preserving traditions by establishing a group of people able to learn as guardians), Thanatotop (a place of revelation connected with the ancestors, the dead or the gods of a community), and Nomotop (human cooperation, mutual expectations and the division of labor that lead to a social architecture and a political constitution).

Philippe Walter proposes a different classification of islands, less complex, but more literature-centered, as he differentiates between three types of islands in his article *Les îles mythiques de l'autre monde dans „La navigation de la barque de Maelduin“, texte irlandais du XIIe siècle*. The first category of islands that the author presents is that of *l'île fortunée* (the

blessed island), a space where nature caters to every need of the individuals, who do not have to work in order to survive: *C'est toujours un lieu qui ignore les contraintes du travail agricole. Il s'agit d'un lieu où les fruits poussent d'eux-même, sans aucune intervention humaine, et ils où se régénèrent aussitôt qu'ils ont été cueillis.* (Walter: 44) The next type of islands is *l'île, royaume des ogres* (the ogres' kingdom) and this is a space populated with grotesque creatures with either peaceful or aggressive intentions, a space in which everything tends to be upside down as images appear to be deformed and often difficult to recognise. *L'île magique* or the magical island is the last type of islands discussed by Walter: *Cet anti-monde libéré des contraintes du travail et de la nature représente l'utopie à l'état pur. Même si l'évocation de cet eldorado, pays où coule le lait et le miel, épouse à merveille les habitudes de l'Eglise, elle garde les traits de l'antique paradis païen où des charmes magiques semblent agir en permanence.* (Walter: 52) The magical island is equivalent to a place that lacks any form of restrictions, a spiritualized place where miraculous transformations are possible. In spite of the obvious differences, what all these places have in common is their enclosed and self-sufficient character, as well as the massive impact they have on the lives of those who willingly or by chance inhabit them. There is an undeniable connection between the individual and the space one inhabits, and according to Bachelard, the individual that inhabits a place, also modifies its limits and its reality through one's specific perceptions, thoughts, and memories to the point where the individual and the inhabited place can hardly be dissociated, as they define each other. Sloterdijk highlights the same idea when addressing Heidegger the question: *When you say Dasein is thrown into the world, where is it thrown?*, so the being is not simply thrown into the world, but into a place that presents itself as a field of endless possibilities. That is why islands are perceived by the individual from a double perspective, depending on one's location, the outsiders dream of islands envisioning miraculous places and idyllic retreats, while those exiled or forced by circumstances to live on an island, experience feelings of alienation and isolation. Nevertheless, the specificities of the islands as briefly mentioned above, can be encountered not only in the perimeter of the island in the common meaning of the word, but are transferred as well to a series of places that are transformed in island-like or insular spaces.

The two novels discussed here, A. E. Baconsky's *Biserica neagră* (*The Black Church*) and Mircea Eliade's novel *Șarpele* (*The Snake*) are centered around the image of the island materialized into a life-shifting experience, and its functions do not resume to simply delimitating a space where events happen, as this specific environment shapes characters and decisions. Even more, as liminal places, argues John R. Gillis, islands are appropriate sites for *rites of passage* stories. *We do not just think with islands, notes Gillis, we use them as thresholds to other worlds and new lives.* (Gillies: 75) The islands from the two novels come with different characteristics and functions in the development of the events, but are both surrounded by mystery and uncertainties, as the characters go through a rite of passage. Also, traveling toward an island is usually the equivalent of getting in touch with one's inner self, as this is not just a horizontal movement from one place to another, because it implies a change in one's status and perceptions, as well. Eliade's characters are part of a universe where miraculous transformations are possible, while Baconsky's *The Black Church* depicts a dark and absurd space, so the two novels shape the opposite faces of the same image.

At a first glance, *The Snake* follows a family's attempt of finding a suitable partner for their daughter, Dorina, a young cultivated woman. Nothing seems out of the ordinary as the family organizes a party and invites two not-so-spectacular men as possible matches, in the hope that Dorina might accept one of them. In order to create more opportunities for the young to socialize and get to know each other, the group decides to visit the nearby monastery, and this is when things take an unexpected turn. On their way to the monastery, the group encounters a tall, dark stranger, supposedly left behind by his friends. Sergiu Andronic, a soon-to-be aviator, as he introduces himself, is a charming and confident person, with the appearance of a sportsman. He easily attaches himself to the group as everyone is fascinated by his presence, especially Dorina and Liza, the last one married but longing for a change. The events that follow are rather ambiguous, as the characters themselves seem to be confused and there is a certain lack of coherence in their memories as they become unable to place events in a chronological order. Andronic initiates a game in the wood, a game that no one really understands, but that has everyone running in the dark, as ancestral fears and primal desires are unleashed. Nevertheless, the culminating point of the meeting is represented by the bizarre ritual Andronic performs at midnight, firstly warning everyone that a snake is about to visit them, and then asking all to stand still, close to the wall. In a very tense atmosphere, with those present being either scared or bravely displaying skepticism, the snake does show up and the mysterious man turns into a snake whisperer, while everyone else appears to be hypnotized, unable to move or think clearly. Once this is over and the snake is chased back to the island in the middle of the lake, the shock is so great that Andronic cannot cheer them up, and they all decide to call it a night. Still, something has changed and Dorina seems to be the one who is the most affected of them all. The dreams she experiences take her to a different dimension of the reality and have her realizing that Andronic is the one, and that the only place they can be together is the island. From this point on, Dorina struggles to confront her fears, but she is unable to complete her initiation in her first attempt. Still, she does not give up, but perseveres and, using a boat, she heads toward the island, and in the same time Andronic swims in the same direction, probably unaware of each other. Their experience is completed once they both arrive on the island, and the morning finds them both in each other's arms, with the rest of the group staring at them in distress.

Nevertheless, the text abounds in clues that suggest a different key of interpretation - the novel itself starts under the pressure of time, the family is afraid that Dorina is running out of time and should get married before it is too late, then the game takes place against the clock, although they all end up losing perception of time. Andronic's presence and his attitude also add to the fantastic side of the novel: he is even subtly warning the others: *Să nu vă speriați când vă voi prezenta prietenii mei, continuă tânărul. Sunt înfiorători. Nici nu vă pot spune cu ce au să semene când îi vom întâlni*¹. (Eliade, *Șarpele*: 22) Everything he does has a hidden meaning, and it looks as if he is trying to convince the others to accept the existence of the unknown, of the things that cannot be explained, and Dorina is the most willing to embrace what she cannot understand, she is the one open to experience the unseen side of the reality she lives in. She has a vision of her Andronic together and she starts thinking of the

¹ [Do not be afraid when I shall introduce you to my friends, the young man continued. They are bizarre. I cannot even tell you what they are going to look like when we'll meet them.]

island or, according to Deleuze, *Dreaming of islands—whether with joy or in fear, it doesn't matter—is dreaming of pulling away, of being already separate, far from any continent, of being lost and alone—or it is dreaming of starting from scratch, recreating, beginning anew.* (Deleuze: 9) Dorina is actually looking toward a change of her own status, she is looking for a way out of the restrictions and limitations that define her everyday existence, and the island here is an alternative to the opaque and dull reality. In Mircea Eliade's novel, the representation of the island is one closer to Mihai Eminescu's romantic perspective, reminding of the paradisiac island of Euthanasius present in Eminescu's short story *Cezara*. Of course, in order to be able to access what lies beyond, both Dorina and Cezara must pass through a rite of passage. While Cezara has to swim in order to reach the island, this symbolizing, in fact, a form of purification, Dorina has to face an entire underwater universe, and this can only happen in her dreams, as her dreams are not limited by the common knowledge of what is and what is not possible. Challenging her own destiny, Dorina is looking for a fresh start and, in the same time, she is also looking for a way of defeating time, one of the obsessive themes of the novel, as time is associated with passage, weakness and, eventually, death. Therefore, the island is the perfect refuge, the out of time place that offers Dorina and Andronic the possibility of returning to the origins: *The deserted island is the origin, but a second origin. From it everything begins anew. The island is the necessary minimum for this re-beginning, the material that survives the first origin, the radiating seed or egg that must be sufficient to re-produce everything.* (Deleuze: 12) In *The Snake*, the island becomes a representation of the lost paradise, a natural garden that, according to Rossario Assunto, symbolizes the absolute reconciliation between man and nature. The luxuriant vegetation, the golden birds, and the simple, untouched aspect of the island remind as well of the various representation of the Paradise such as Nirvana, Svetadvipa or the Celtic afterworld: *It is the most delightful land of all that are under the sun; the trees are stooping down with fruit and leaves and with blossom. Honey and wine are plentiful there: no waisting will come upon you with the waisting away of time; you will never see death or lessening.* (Scott, ed.: 260) Therefore, islands are in this context a threshold to another worlds, and although some might appear as deserted they never are, and those who inhabit them can only be exceptional figures: *To that question so dear to the old explorers—"which creatures live on deserted islands?"—one could only answer: human beings live there already, but uncommon humans, they are absolutely separate, absolute creators, in short, an Idea of humanity, a prototype, a man who would almost be a god, a woman who would be a goddess, a great Amnesiac, a pure Artist, a consciousness of Earth and Ocean, an enormous hurricane, a beautiful witch, a statue from the Easter Islands.* (Deleuze: 11) Also, the water that surrounds the islands has more than a purifying function, because water is also a symbol of oblivion, facilitating the materialization of a new beginning, as it helps the characters put their past behind them. The image of the couple Andronic and Dorina on the island, the same island where the snake has been sent, is a reminder of the original couple, Adam and Eve, before falling into temptation.

While *The Snake* is an expression of the human being longing for the lost Paradise, trying to recover his privileged position and to re-establish a harmonious relation with the universe, Baconsky's novel depicts the hallucinating experience of the character who returns to his native city and has to face a series of grotesque events that transform his home city in a place of terror. Set in a nameless city, surrounded by water, the plot follows a character's

struggle to understand the absurd involution of the place he lives in. The character who is also the narrator of the story, witnesses how the poor and the homeless take control of the city, imposing new rules and new principles, while trying to brainwash everyone else. In the very beginning, their actions are rather subtle, and their goal cannot be easily understood. The narrator simply notices at first how the number of beggars has increased and is intrigued when he receives several invitations to a secret society; still, his intuition warns him of the yet not so obvious danger of all these actions, so he decides to leave and never return. He clandestinely boards a ship, but while waiting for it to depart, he has a strong urge of abandoning the ship and returning home, so just as the ship is about to set sail, he reveals himself, has an altercation with a crew member, and then jumps into the sea. He uses his last strength to swim back to shore, and makes his way to the lighthouse, where a group of strange persons seem to work, almost ignoring his presence and simply showing him a bed to rest. In a poor state of health, the narrator is committed into a hospital, and is surprised to see how the sick lay on the floor, while the dead rest in beds. During his illness, the city undergoes even more changes, changes that the narrator can only take note of, as there is nothing he can do, not even when it comes to his own well-being. For example, he just discovers that his domicile has been changed, although he did not intend to change it, and no one asked for his opinion, and on top of everything, the narrator finds out that he cannot even lock his door. The character is caught in a place surrounded by water, and the movements of the sea accentuate the turmoil and the struggle the character experiences while trying to understand the absurd turn of events. Those who are not members of the horrid group now in control of the city have their own identities threatened. Even more, it appears that everyone has to play a role to the point where it is practically impossible to know one's real identity. The narrator becomes part of the system, part of the mechanism that has to act according to the orders received, and there is simply no way out. Decisions are made and applied by the group in charge, and although this is a clear depiction of a totalitarian regime, the focus here is on the space itself, on the relation between the space and those who inhabit it. In *The Black Church*, the city as an insular space is a hallucinating place, where one has to fight for survival and for one's sanity, as his identity and status are constantly threatened. This island is one that resembles more to a nightmare landscape, the air is heavy, instead of golden birds there are crows, and the reality is one forced upon the inhabitants.

The island from Baconsky's novel appears to be similar to what Philippe Walter calls *l'île, royaume des ogres*, a place populated by monsters, in human form in this case, whose intentions are far from being peaceful. Truth and reality are blurred, and barely no distinctions can be made between the way things are and the way they appear to be. Here, everything seems to be upside down, and the characters experience acute feelings of isolation and separation, they cannot control what is happening around them and they cannot control what is happening to them. On the other side, the island from *The Snake*, would be an example of magical island, a highly spiritualized place where miraculous transformations are possible, and characters perform a *regressus ad originem*, establishing a deeper connection with their inner-selves, as well as with the universe.

In both novels, what is real and what is imaginary can hardly be dissociated, because one's perception on the space one inhabits is influenced by personal feelings, memories or desires. As Edward Soja states, mental and physical space cannot be understood

independently, the space has to be understood as both real and imaginary at the same time. In conclusion, islands belong to a fictionalized geography difficult to map as it is constantly changing in the same rhythm as the human imagination. Nevertheless, the islands remain enclosed, self-sufficient spaces, often defined by contradictions, but insularity can be experienced through a series of oppositions, as these oppositions confirm the heterogeneity of the island.

Bibliography

- Assunto, Rosario. *Scrieri despre artă. Filosofia grădinii și filosofia în grădină*-vol. 1. București: Meridiane, 1988.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *Poetica spațiului*. Pitești: Paralela 45, 2005.
- Baconsky, A. E.. *Biserica neagră, Scrieri II. Proze*, București: Cartea Românească, 1990.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Desert Islands and Other Texts. 1953-1974*. LA: Semiotext(e), 2004.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Insula lui Euthanasius*. București: Humanitas, 2008.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Șarpele*. Cluj-Napoca: V-V Press, 1991.
- Glodeanu, Gheorghe. *Coordonate ale imaginarului în opera lui Mircea Eliade*, Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 2006.
- Littleton, C. Scott (General Editor). *Mythology. The Illustrated Anthology of World Myth & Story Telling*. San Diego, California: Thunder Bay Press, 2002.
- Lucian Boia, Anca Oroveanu, (coord.). *Insula. Despre izolare și limite în spațiul imaginar. "Les îles mythiques de l'autre monde dans La navigation de la barque de Maelduin texte irlandais du XIIIe siècle"*. Walter, Philippe. *Centrul de istorie a imaginarului și Colegiul Noua Europă*, 1999.
- Moretti, Franco (ed.). *The Novel. Volume 1: History, Geography and Culture*. "The Chronotopes of the Sea". Cohen, Margaret. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Pinet, Simone. *Archipelagoes: Insular Fictions from Chivalric Romance to the Novel*, (Kindle Locations 2966-2967). Kindle Edition.
- Sloterdijk, Peter, *Sphères I, Bulles*, Paris: Pauvert, 2002.
- Sloterdijk, Peter, *Sphères III, Ecumes*, Maren: Sell Editeurs, 2005.