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### **History and Destiny: Faces of Memory and Oblivion**

#### *1. The Paradox of Recollection.*

The French ethnographer Marc Augé<sup>1</sup> amply elaborated on the double edge of all our memories, which he presented either as the two faces of a coin or as screens that reveal and hide at the same time. When examined from this all encompassing perspective our century appears to have given rise to a contradictory mixture of memory and oblivion. A rich European scholarly tradition evolved around the so-called “*short 20th century*”<sup>2</sup> emphasizes clearly the mixed nature of our relation to memory.<sup>3</sup>

One of the main outcomes of the utterly traumatizing events that occurred between the First World War and the fall of communism in Eastern Europe was an overwhelming tendency to *camouflage* certain memories, in order to erase particular segments of the historical timeline. Such a deliberate treatment of memory did not just involve the suppression of certain recollections but also their replacement with a (re) interpretation of the past, from the point of view of the present. This type of “second degree memories” finished by overwhelming primary memories and shaping them according to various contextual purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Augé, *Les formes de l'oubli* (Paris: Payot, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Eric Hobsbawn, *The Age of Extremes. The Short 20th Century.1914-1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> According to St. Augustine “we cannot look for something we have lost unless we remember it at least in part.” *Confessions*, X, quoted in Katharine Hodgkin, S. Radstone, eds. *Contested Pasts. The Politics of Memory* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 239.

Writing down someone's memories (in all its possible aspects, from the direct testimony of diaries, to well orchestrated memoirs or written confessions and to totally or partially fictionalized accounts) currently adds to this sophisticated process, extending the battlefield where memory and oblivion, history and story, history and individual destiny, suppression and celebration of the past confront each other. On such occasions particular attention should be devoted to the ambivalent interplay between memory, on the one hand, and "tactical" oblivion, on the other. This genuine game of recollection turns out to be highly intertextual, due to the fact that the subject of the writing moves constantly between texts and discourses, creating multiple layers of representations.

At close scrutiny this appears to be a "representation of representations", in which any step refers to or mirrors another, either as "memory of memory" or as "forgetting of forgetting". Subsequently, in this chain of discursive representations, the process of remembering/forgetting involves a deeply self-reflective dimension. This fact was revealed as early as St. Augustine's *Confessions*<sup>4</sup> and it could be identified as the self-reflective paradox of recollection. My paper intends to illustrate its different aspects, focusing on the various written representations stimulated by the process of remembering /forgetting of a major traumatic event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the Second World War.

The chronologically successive and generically diverse writings (several diaries, an autobiography, memoirs, oral confessions and a novel) published in different languages by Mircea Eliade, an outstanding world scientist and Romanian-born European writer, illustrate the significant intertwining of memory and forgetting stimulated by his particular experiences of The Second World War, outside Romania.

I will insist on the discursive construction of an individual destiny as a reaction to the enormous and traumatizing pressure of the war and on the relationship between history and memory based on the tensions between story/history. Last but not least, I will focus on the essential part played by the production of successive texts, each perpetrating the memory of their predecessors, in a, theoretically, endless chain of self-mirroring writing.

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<sup>4</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, X, 13,14,16, quoted in Katharine Hodgkin, S. Radstone, eds. *Contested Pasts. The Politics of Memory* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 239.

## 2. *Destiny, Memory and Oblivion*

What someone's memory retains as being worth remembering depends on an underground tension between macro and micro-history. This key relationship usually triggers off an extensive processing of raw historic events in order to craft *a meaningful Self*. Eliade's testimonial texts embody the two faces of *autobiographical memory*, usually defined by sociologists (especially by Durkheim's followers) as recollection of the events that we have personally experienced in the past.<sup>5</sup>

Significant parts of Eliade's remembrance revolve around the Second World War, experienced by him as a Romanian diplomat in Europe. In 1940, during the bombing of London, he was eyewitness to apocalyptic events and afterwards, in 1941, he headed for Portugal, as a cultural attaché until the end of the war. During his Portuguese sojourn, his wife died in Lisbon and his native land, Romania, was taken over by Soviet Russia. This segment of time is recalled in the second volume, *Les moissons du solstice: (The Harvest Time of Summer Solstice)*, of the *Memoirs* that he began to publish in Paris in the mid-sixties.<sup>6</sup>

In his *Memoirs*, Eliade's account of the wartime spent in Lisbon insists significantly on his relentless effort to produce a document titled *The Portuguese Diary* (soon to be published in Bucharest for the first time). The narrative discourse of the *Diary* preserves a strong link to the daily life of the average contemporary individual under similar catastrophic circumstances. In the *Memoirs* the account has been carefully screened in order to fit into the horizon of the modern Portuguese culture, evaluated retrospectively by Eliade whilst in Paris. However, as a revealing litmus paper for his destiny, "During the four years of war in Portugal", the author maintains "I have kept quite an elaborate diary, especially between 1942 and 1945. If this text is ever published the reader will find in it precious information concerning a crucial segment of history. I didn't even try to rewrite it, selecting only the

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<sup>5</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, Edited, translated and with an Introduction by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Memoires II, (1937-1960) Les moissons du solstice* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

events that, evaluated in the long run, seem to have announced important turning points in my destiny and in my understanding of history.”<sup>7</sup>

Theorists currently insist to distinguish between *two regimes of memory*: one is active and focuses on actions and habits. The other is mostly contemplative and involves a certain degree of disinterest in every day life and has developed the capacity to descend into the past and to resurrect it in the imagination. A comparative reading of Eliade’s two testimonial documents, the diary and the later memoirs, shows that the author is constantly screening his previous testimonial pages. He selects carefully only the events that in retrospect may foster a significant frame where the destiny of the displaced writer is the *Figure in the Carpet*. The landmarks of this framing horizon are the Latin culture and civilization of Portugal. That is why during the war Eliade wrote a study entitled *Os Romanos, Latinos do Oriente* published in Lisbon in 1943.

On the one hand, Eliade’s diary displays an active and pragmatic recollection, focused on habits and action, bearing the marks of conjuncture and closer to its dynamics. On the other hand, the later *Memoirs*’ highly contemplative, hermeneutic and imaginative nature grew mainly out of the distance between memory and the historical events. In the *Memoirs* certain fragments of the diary were transcribed word for word, others were only mentioned and otherwise deliberately ignored, and a few others were reviewed, shortened and commented upon or recounted in an entirely different manner. Maurice Halbwachs has compared this kind of testimonial bricolage to “those stones one finds fitted in certain Roman houses, which have been used as materials in very ancient buildings and that still show the effaced vestiges of old time.”<sup>8</sup>

In order to grasp the main significance of this reshaping operation as it applies to the past we need to keep in mind that even at the moment of re-reading his *Portuguese Diary* the author’s imagination remained under the influence of his present time. In this distanced and contemplative regime,

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<sup>7</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Memorii. Recoltele Solstitiului*, vol. 2 (Bucuresti: Humanitas, 1991), p. 62 (my translation).

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, edited, translated and with an Introduction by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 51.

illustrated by Eliade's *Memoirs*, the past is a projection shaped mainly by the concerns of the present. It maintains at least a partial continuity with the past as well as a reading of the past in terms of the present.

Eliade's post war experience as a displaced Romanian intellectual in Paris forced him not just to reproduce in thought previous events of his life in Lisbon but also to touch them up, to shorten them or to add to them in order to give them a significance that initially they did not seem to possess. Consequently, his *second-degree* memories preserve certain traces of this type of strategic oblivion, or, in other words, a genuine "memory of oblivion" closely intertwined with the "memory of memory".

### 3. *Memory, Story and History*

In our attempts to think through and conceptualize the relationship between memory and history, we need to be aware that recollection is a process of representation. Out of the devastating collision with history, different sensibilities eventually patch up different imaginative forms of memory. This is also the case with Eliade. Between 1942 and 1944 in Lisbon he had started writing a novel with the very significant title *The Apocalypse*, a project that failed, most probably due to the close proximity with the historical events.

However, after the war, Eliade published in Paris the novel *Noaptea de Sinziene* (later translated into French as *La Forêt Interdite*)<sup>9</sup> that combines parts of his previous recollections with purely imaginary memories about this historical catastrophe. More precisely, the previous testimonial documents (diary and memoirs) were reshaped and melted into a novel, a fictional work based on the manifold game memory / history / story.

His novel *The Forbidden Forest* is what we may call a post-memorial story. In Paris, Eliade picked up the London and the Portuguese themes from his autobiographical memories and mixed them into an unexpected Romanian theme. The author had minimum experience of the war in his homeland, provided by a seven-day trip to Bucharest and the stories of his colleagues at

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<sup>9</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Noaptea de Sinziene* (Bucuresti: Minerva, 1991) (translated into English as *The Forbidden Forest*).

the Romanian embassy, commuting between Bucharest and Lisbon. The outcome of this discursive mixture is the destiny of a fictional character, named Stephan Viziru. Following the traumatic experiences of the author, this alter ego character is successively a diplomat in London and in Lisbon. He also happens to be an officer on the Russian front, to lose his wife in the bombing of Bucharest and to witness the Soviet take over of Romania, before he seeks political asylum in Paris, like Eliade himself.

Under such tragic circumstances, Eliade's fictitious character tries very hard to escape into a mythical, purely imaginative time, which will allow him to recover an essential and significant past and to defy the cruel real time. The novel illuminates a deep dimension shared by all Eliade's memorial writings: a defensive hostility towards what he calls the *Terror of History* and a steady confidence in strategic amnesia. One of Eliade's characters, witnessing the Soviet take over of his country, underlines the virtues of selective remembrance, which helps the individual resist the aggressive historical Time; "We, the Romanians", he argues, "don't have any reason to love History. For more than ten centuries History has meant for us successive barbarian invasions. For five more centuries it meant the Turkish yoke and now History means Soviet Russia".<sup>10</sup>

Significantly enough, in his *Memoirs* Eliade recalls the long process of writing the *Forbidden Forest* and places it, in retrospect, within two topographical horizons. The first is Lisbon, which he describes in his dialogues with the French journalist Claude Henri Rocquet as an unhistorical city: "Lisbon seemed to me a city that had managed to avoid the terror of historical time. And it is Lisbon too that stimulated me to start writing a book about the *Myth of the Eternal Return*". The second is Paris, where the historian of religions produced essential studies about ways in which individuals can trick the aggressive time. The narrative pattern of Eliade's novel embodies this type of historical philosophy. The Story and the narrative Discourse are engaged in a shrewd sabotage of traumatizing History. Free of its compulsive pattern, the "testimonial imagination" let the events be dilated or compressed, underlined or erased, following only the laws of memory and oblivion.

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<sup>10</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Noaptea de Sânziene* (Bucuresti: Minerva, 1991), p. 311.

Throughout his life Eliade himself wrote more than 10 000 pages of diary, some of which were published in French as *Fragments d'un Journal* (*Fragments of a Journal*). Nonetheless the essential points about the options made by him during the war are to be found in his retrospective *Memoirs* and in his imaginary testimonial, *The Forbidden Forest*. Eliade's imaginary work reminds us that recollection is always a cultural phenomenon, and therefore part of larger narratives, consisting of the cumulated weight of dispersed and fragmented individual memories, based on the consensus on what a given event or period of time *means* for a particular community.

History and memory are not abstract forces: they are located in specific contexts and therefore in producing narratives decisions always have to be made, by individuals and by groups of individuals, about how and what story is to be told.

#### 4. *A Few Concluding Remarks: The Great Chain of Writing*

In an ostentatious way that calls to mind André Gide, Eliade remembered the Second World War, fostering the most diverse types of testimonial recollections: autobiographical, secondary and imaginary. In *The Forbidden Forest* many of his fictional characters do the same, over and over again. It is worth adding that in his confessional dialogues with Claude Henry Rocquet (*L'Épreuve du Labyrinthe, Ordeal by Labyrinth*) Eliade insists on his successful struggle with History by means of a very selective, inter-textual and self-reflective strategy of recollection: a “memory of memory” and at the same time, a “memory of oblivion”. This strenuous effort to shape his own memories illustrates the well-known axiom that memory is always a matter of choice: the selection of a certain dimension of the past. We remember in order to explain and justify our past, to demonize it or to praise it, in order to ascribe/give it a meaning.

As an autobiographical or as an imaginary remembrance, Eliade's recollection of the Second World War relies on the essential tool of the written story. For him memory gives meaning to the past exclusively by means of a far away perspective made possible by cultural distance.

This is a horizon that only the process of writing can offer.