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The Metamorphosis of Ovid: Exile, Identity and Regeneration in Vintilă Horia's *God was Born in Exile*

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Abstract

An exile himself after the advent of the communist regime following the end of WWII, seeking refuge in Italy, Argentina and then Spain, the Romanian writer Vintilă Horia chose to condensate his own experience of both emigration and inner exile into the novel *God was born in exile*, for which he received the Goncourt Prize in 1960. The novel is often compared to Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian* on account of both its structure – the novel takes the form of Ovid's apocryphal diary in Tomis, the place of his exile – and theme – the oscillation between distrust of ancient polytheism and the incipient faith in a monotheistic god. However, Horia's novel centres on exile, both external and inner exile, and on the work of mental and spiritual transformation that exile implies as well as on empire as a dissolving structure. Adapting to what he perceives to be a barbaric city – though established and still mostly inhabited by Greeks – Ovid starts to metamorphose slowly, along the lines of Nietzsche's claim that he chose exile in order to speak the truth. Ovid's transformation from a Roman citizen into a poet of the truth is triggered by his encounter with a barbaric world view and their monotheistic religion of Zalmoxis, that of the Getae living around Tomis, and reinforced by his relations with the inhabitants on the margin of Empire. The article explores the concept of exile in relation with Christianity. Ovid's exile embarks him on a journey of self-discovery through the discovery of the Other. As he travels through Gaetic and Dacian lands, he befriends local characters who share the tragic history of their tribes with him. He

also encounters Theodore, a Greek physician, who shares a prophecy regarding a future Messiah. This prophecy provides Ovid with a fresh perspective on his experience of loss, resulting in a spiritual renewal. Theodore's teachings align with the philosophy of Mircea Eliade, implying that Ovid's banishment functions as a form of initiation into the sacred mysteries. His initiation follows the path outlined by Eliade, involving the experience of initiatory death and rebirth as part of the challenges faced during the initiatory journey. Therefore, Horia's depiction of exile connects with his own religious consciousness, shaped by a type of Christian mysticism that he embraced. The 1927 generation – which included Emil Cioran, Constantin Noica, Mircea Eliade, and Vintilă Horia – sought to redefine Romanian identity, emphasizing spiritual renewal, traditionalism, and Christian mysticism. The focus on Christian mysticism served as a bridge between these thinkers and the Iron Guard, a fascist group in Romania that garnered support from the Romanian Orthodox Church. In Horia's novel, Ovid is portrayed as an embodiment of the new man envisioned by the intellectual legacy of the Iron Guard a poet who has experienced spiritual transformation, rejected his former self, and adopted a faith akin to Christianity.

Ultimately, *God was born in exile* engages with the literary and cultural legacy of Ovid by connecting the historical figure to Christianity in order to incorporate it as a crucial component of Romanian national identity, as it was understood by Horia and other intellectuals of his generation.

Keywords: exile, Christianity, identity, regeneration, initiatory journey

The only writer of Romanian origin who has been awarded the Goncourt prize for literature, Vintilă Horia is still far from being known and appreciated in his native country. Though his novels have been published by prestigious French publishing houses like Fayard, Plon, Julliard, La Table Ronde, Lâge d'Homme or Rocher, they became available to the Romanian reading public only after the 1989 Revolution and the fall of the Iron Curtain. Even so, his literary work remained at the periphery of literary discussion and critique, with only a few devotees engaging critically with his work. The present paper aims at analysing *God was born in exile*, the novel

for which he received the Goncourt Prize in 1960,[1] as a specific form of identity fiction, in close connection with the author's own experience of exile. The novel was appraised as the contemporary Ovid novel by Katharina Volk and was compared to Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian* on account of both its structure – the novel takes the form of Ovid's apocryphal diary in Tomis, the place of his exile – and theme – the oscillation between distrust of ancient polytheism and the incipient faith in a monotheistic god. However, on closer inspection, it reveals a profound connection with a certain strand of Romanian nation-building, a focus on specific Romanian issues as well as a larger, messianic strand of Christian orthodoxy, with which Horia was perhaps familiarized during his early years in Romania. Although at the time he received the Goncourt prize he faced accusations of having been a fascist and a member of the Romanian Iron Guard, the extreme right-leaning party which had attracted the sympathies of other famous Romanian intellectuals like Mircea Eliade and Emil Cioran, it should be mentioned that when the Iron Guard came to power in 1940, they dismissed Horia from his office as a press attaché in Rome, because he was not officially a member (Nedelcu, 1990, p. 198).[2] Towards the end of WWII he was imprisoned in the concentration camps at Krummhubel and Marie Pfarr (1944-1945). Upon being freed by the allied British troops he refused to return to Romania, where the communists had seized power.

Vintilă Horia was a contributor to *Gândirea*, one of the foremost Romanian journals during the interwar period, a journal oriented towards Romanian myths and legends and traditional orthodox Christianity (whose main collaborators were Nichifor Crainic, Lucian Blaga, Nae Ionescu and Ion Pillat) and also among the founders of *Meșterul Manole*, a literary journal with a more international leaning than traditionalist *Gândirea*. Horia's *God was born in exile* takes over the tradition started by Romantics like Vasile Alecsandri, who regarded Ovid as a powerful symbol of Romania's Latinity and constructed his figure along the lines of a proto-Romanian, transforming him into a cornerstone of nation-building (Ziolkowski, 2005, pp. 112–24).

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[1]Horia was awarded the Goncourt prize, yet following the fierce press campaign against him (led by leftist journals such as *L'Humanité and Libération*), he wrote a letter to the president of the Goncourt Academy, announcing him that he refuses the award (Grigore, 2023, p. 38).

[2]The information about Horia's past leaked to the French newspapers via the Romanian Secret Service. In a note published by Stelian Tănase at the end of his article about Horia and the Goncourt Prize, the Secret Service detailed how they gathered materials about Horia's fascist past and handed them to the French press. The novel (which was referred to with a wrong title, *Dumnezeu se află in exil* [God is in exile] was considered to be "slanderous" towards the Romanian communist state (https://www.revistasferapoliticii.ro/sfera/153/art14-arhiva.html).

His strand of Christian orthodoxy can be also read from the perspective of the tradition of Western esotericism as a type of esoteric knowledge.[1] A professor of literature at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid during the 1970s, Horia taught an introductory course in the literature of the 20th century, based on the idea that literature is a form of human activity which evolves as a technique of knowledge of the same standing as biology, astronomy, psychology or painting. Natural and humanist sciences are for Horia different forms of knowledge, infused by different epistemologies, yet converging towards the same finality, which is, as Basarab Nicolaescu argues, the creation of a third space through the articulation of the invisible within the visible world, a transgression of the ordinary division instituted by Cartesianism between subject and object, individual and world, science and art/religion (Nicolaescu, 2011, p. 5-10). This third space is "the plenary world of the undivided man, a world in which eternity dissolves time" (Nicolaescu, 2011, p.56).

God was born into exile. Ovid's diary in Tomis is the first novel in what several critics have called "the trilogy of exile": *Dieu est né en exile* (Paris, 1960), *Le chevalier de la resignation* (Paris, 1961) and *Perseguid a Boecio* (Madrid, 1983), a series of novels in which Horia rediscovers Romanian topoi from the perspective of nostalgic memory. Nostalgia can be explained, according to Manea, as the other face of cosmopolitan modernity: the centrifugal drive towards globalization (migration and exile) creates its other in the "centripetal need (or at least nostalgia) for belonging" (Manea, 2012, p.3). As the native land seems to be lost forever, migrants, exiles or expatriates create what Salman Rushdie has called "Indias of the mind", imaginary versions of their own country, through which they can still (re)connect with their roots.

God was born into exile is a multi-layered, gnoseological novel centring on exile (which is both outer and inner), and on the work of mental and spiritual transformation that exile implies, "a radiography of transformation", as Adrian Dinu Rachieru notes (Rachieru, 2017). Exile is intimately connected with change, as dislocation implies a re-evaluation and re-configuration of identity.[2] It is structured in eight chapters, each chapter recounting both the poet's experience and his inner turmoil during each of the eight years he had spent on the shore of the Black Sea. On a higher level, though, Horia's novel turns into an attempt to reconstruct his homeland

[1]Dan Silviu Boerescu calls Vintilă Horia a "modern mystic" (Boerescu, 1991, p.14).

[2]In *Refugee Conversations*, Bertold Brecht noted that "Exile is the best possible school for dialectics. Refugees are the sharpest dialecticians. They've become refugees as a result of changes, and they spend all their time studying changes" (Brecht, 2019, p.79).

from an exilic (and nostalgic) perspective and thus becomes at least partly utopian, a fictive Utopia of the monotheistic/Christian roots of the Romanian people.

One of the modes of resisting exile and displacement is, as Rilke urged young Franz Kappus in *Letters to a young poet*, to "go into yourself" (Rilke, 2011, p. 33). Interiority means not only inner exile, but a daily confrontation with one's limitations, which often leads to increased self-knowledge. As a structure generating self-knowledge, Exile is opposed to Empire, a social and political order that reproduces the subjection of individual to power. Literature – and poetry – are seen as subversive and transgressive activities, as they lead to self-knowledge, a type of knowledge which resists the Power/knowledge binomial. Through art, the individual becomes capable of refashioning himself according to an ideal which evades the mechanisms of power. Power – and Empire – aim at thought-control, uniformization and regulation of desires. On the contrary, Ovid's poetry, especially his *Ars Amatoria* (The Art of Love), considered subversive by imperial power, contributes, as it will become evident, to a deregulation of the Roman subject's desires, which become uncontrollable and thus a menace to imperial order. Ovid, as a poet of Love, even if at first only carnal and sensual love, is set into sharp contrast with (Octavianus) Augustus, the Emperor, who rules by fear:

> I close my eyes to live. [...] This is where I prove myself to be the strongest, for he closes his eyes only to sleep, and sleep itself brings him no comfort. His darkness is swarming with dead people, with cruelties that haunt him. I know he does not like rest, just like all the powerful people in the world. Rest leaves him alone with his conscience and his remorse, with the regret of always having acted like a powerful man, that is, a man frightened by his own power (Horia, 2016, p.15).

The novel begins under the sign of introspection. Sleep is a human being's most private activity, the domain where a silent dialogue is conducted between the id, the ego and the super-ego. While Ovid's sleep remains for him the only activity connecting him with his native land and beloved Rome, the sleep of the Emperor is compared to a haunted space, a place of inner torment, dominated by fear. Ovid also notes that though the Emperor "is hailed like a god, nobody loves him" (Horia, 2016, p.15). Power is the enemy of peace and love.

Ousted by imperial decree for an alleged corruption of the morals of Roman youth, at first Ovid oscillates between his inner desire for poetic freedom and outer conformity to the Emperor's injunctions. However, by slowly adapting to what he perceives to be a barbaric city – though established and still mostly inhabited by

Greeks - Ovid starts to metamorphose slowly, along the lines of Nietzsche's claim that he chose exile in order to speak the truth. Godel observes that "Ovid in Horia's novel undergoes a transformation from a representative of Rome who recognizes the threat of Roman politics and imperialism to someone who searches for new meaning and new faith in life" (Godel, 2014, p. 458). At the beginning exile is a frozen condition, somewhat similar with the landscape of the Black Sea winter: "What is amusing, in the depths of my despair, is that I cannot get used to the idea of change. I have been here for about 10 days; I left Rome three months ago, but I am in Rome, and I feel that all I need to do is prolong a thought or an image a little longer to change my location and reintegrate myself into my usual rhythm and familiar surroundings" (Horia, 2016, p.16).[1]

Ovid's transformation from a Roman citizen into a poet of the truth is triggered by his encounter with a barbaric world view and the monotheistic religion of Zalmoxis, that of the Getae living around Tomis, and reinforced by his relations with the inhabitants on the margin of Empire. The opposition centre-periphery is seminal for the understanding of Ovid's progression from a citizen of Empire to a free individual, and its dialectic movement becomes the inner journey that the Roman poet embarks on in search of himself. Though outwardly pining for Rome and the sunny Roman landscapes he had left behind, Ovid gradually learns to switch his gaze inward, hold conversations with himself and discover new horizons of knowledge. The violence of his uprooting and the "rerouting" to the land of the barbarians leads to a new consciousness of his self:

> Only when I arrived, uprooted from my past and all the falsehood that made it up, did I discover myself. I suffer because I am here and I fight in letters to obtain forgiveness and to be able to return home one day, or at least to be exiled elsewhere, to a more bearable climate and among people who are not barbarians, but I will never regret the moment when I was able to freely lean on my soul, without coercion, without fear, and without humiliation. It was only on the shores of the Pontus Euxinus, whose waters sometimes appear black, as if night had its abode in their depths, that I truly began to be human (Horia, 2016, p. 27).

It is this very dialectic center-periphery, Empire-Poetry, subjection-introspection which prompts the inner journey and lends the novel the form of a diary. We

[1]The novel draws heavily upon Ovid's *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto.*

are used to thinking of the diary as a modern genre, and at first it is a bit difficult for the reader to conflate the modern introspective gaze with the classical world-oriented view, which was typical of Ovid's literature. Because we are not used to ancient writers turning their gaze upon themselves, but more upon their contemporaries, their past and traditions or their natural surroundings, Ovid's diary is often read in a symbolic key, with Ovid as an example of a proto-Christian slowly becoming acquainted with the principles of a new faith. This is one possible reading among many. True, Horia tries to balance the introspective gaze with witty commentaries and astute observations of the people and habitat of Tomis, yet as the novel progresses, the ratio of inner gaze/outer gaze increases in favour of the first. Amorous meetings with Artemis, a Greek/Milesian[1] prostitute from Tomis, fierce barbarian attacks on the city and the cultural shock of finding himself at the margin of Empire gradually make way for a more profound interest in the mentality which had given shape to such a strange world view as that of the Getae. It is all part of the accommodation and acculturation process, as we would say today.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the focus of Horia's novel is not on the construction of an exilic/diasporic identity, but on the gradual development of an interiority which is "the third space" that I had mentioned before. Rainer Godel, analyzing modern novels which have Ovid as a protagonist notes that

> in contrast to Ovid's exilic poetry, this novel does not show its protagonist in despair because of his lost home and cultural roots, but depicts his search for a new religion, which replaces Ovid's skepticism. Horia's protagonist searches for a new metaphysics after he discovers that he lacks meaning in life. Religion (in this case a proto-Christianity) and myth are eventually functionally equivalent, providing a consistent and reliable way of perceiving the world (Godel, 2014, p. 455).

This inner space gradually develops as a result of the clash between the subjective interiority of desire/pleasure and the power operations of Empire. At the beginning of his exile in Tomis, Ovid meditates on the reasons for his exile. This reflection involves a re-membering of his former life in Rome, with all the additions of comfort, fame and passion. It is due to this exclusive focus on mental and bodily pleasure – the very spring and fountain of his verses – that he sees himself as the victim of the Emperor, Octavianus Augustus. Desire – Ovid admits to himself – is sub-

[1]Tomis was an ancient colony of Miletus before becoming part of the Roman Empire.

versive, and somehow finds subtle ways of resisting the operations of power. Yet, as Ovid meditates, the downfall of the Empire does not come from the corruption of morals of which he was accused, but from the inside, from the workings of imperial power: "He did not want to realize that the empire itself, and therefore Augustus, had caused this disaster and that, moreover, the more peoples were conquered, the more the empire declined, ruined by the riches that flowed in waves to Rome from all sides" (Horia, 2016, p. 26). It is exile which forces Ovid to reassess his own past, and find new ways of being.[1]

From the clash between his earthly pleasures/desires and the emperor's tyrannical will to power, a new interiority is born, first manifested as a sort of enhanced consciousness of his advanced age. In his new surroundings, no longer protected by his fame and social circle, Ovid realizes how vulnerable he has become to anything exterior, even to his former passions, like drinking, conversing and loving. This new sense of vulnerability is enhanced by his perception of the Other: first the Greek, who are different, yet not totally incomprehensible to him, and then the Getae, whose strange habits and behaviour he notes initially with fear, and then with something akin to curiosity. Horia takes over one of Ovid's most quoted passages in his *Tristia*, about the freezing cold of the Pontic winters, and transforms it into a wider commentary on the city and its inhabitants. Ovid writes down that he has the habit of visiting local wine places, "generally kept by the Greeks". The wine there is good, "for it comes from the islands", but there are other owners who sell the local wine, "slightly sourer and quite strong". He notes that this kind of wine "tastes like this land I don't know. I was told that the Getae are hard drinkers and that during winter they bury their vines so that they won't freeze. The freezing cold often makes amphoras crack and then they are forced to crack the frozen wine into pieces which they then heat so that once again it turns liquid" (Horia, 2016, p. 29).

Ovid's inward journey is one of discovery, one of self-discovery through the discovery of the Other, for at the margin of the Empire he comes across other Roman citizens, not exiles like himself, but fugitives, people who gave up the stability and advantages offered by Empire in order to live a life of freedom among the barbarians. These former Roman citizens have local Dacian/ Gaetic wives, and earn their living from farming. Their life is not an easy one, because they are constantly raided by tribes of nomad invaders, their lands are plundered and their houses burnt down.

[1]Norman Manea makes a similar observation: "For the mature adult, exile tardily reformulates the premise of initiation and becoming, reopens the gate to life's extreme risks and potential, calling into question all the steps of past experience" (Manea, 2012, p. 8).

Space is an important cultural matrix for the development of personal identity. As exile is synonymous with dislocation, the crossing to a foreign space (an alter-locus) represents, according to Eliade's theory of the sacred and the profane, a movement from the sacred space of homeland into the unknown, often equated with chaos (Eliade, 1959, p. 31). It is the same with Ovid. Forcefully relocated from his sunny Roman land to the shores of the Black Sea, with frozen winters and heavy winds, Ovid feels the violence of his relocation and turns into a more melancholy, more philosophical poet. His thoughts acquire a depth of which he himself is sometimes unaware. Yet apart from the open space of the Black Sea, a mixed cultural matrix, he will get to know, following an initiatory journey to the Carpathians and the caves of Zalmoxis, another type of space, described by Lucian Blaga as the cultural matrix of Romanianness, the mioritic space, the undulating landscape of hill and valley.[1] His journey is prompted by the meeting with the relocated Romans: they offer him a model for adaptation, showing that it is possible to transform the barbaric, profane Getic space into a lived and living cosmos.[2]

His new self is thus born from the double knowledge of the "melting pot" of Tomis on the shores of the Black Sea, the city where Absyrtus, Medea's brother, had been torn to pieces, and the mioritic space of the Carpathians, which hides at its core the primeval cave of the god Zalmoxis. This double space traces the journey of the poet from a worldly pleasure-seeker to the visionary that he turns into at the end of the novel. Tomis is the place where his former identity is dissolved, torn to pieces, shredded and finally abandoned. From the ashes of his former self a new one is born during his initiatory journey in search of Zalmoxis. His initiation retraces the steps identified by Eliade: initiatory death (the physical tearing to pieces of Absyrtus

[1]Lucian Blaga, whom I already mentioned as one of the founders of *Gândirea* was a Romanian poet, philosopher and intellectual of the interwar period, who located the particularity and uniqueness of Romanian culture in the 'mioritic space'. This undulating space (hill-valley) was the background of *Miorița*, a folk balad which the Romanian Romantics saw as expressing a sort of national spirituality. Blaga, however, focused less on the bland acceptance of death of the main character, the shepherd, and instead identified the undulated spatial horizon as governing the rhythm of all Romanian cultural creations, including language.

[2] In *The Sacred and the Profane* Eliade argued that "[t]o settle in a territory is […] equivalent to consecrating it. When settlement is not temporary, as among the nomads, but permanent, as among sedentary people, it implies a vital decision that involves the existence of the entire community. Establishment in a particular place, organizing it, inhabiting it, are acts that presuppose an existential choice – the choice of the universe that one is prepared to assume by "creating it". Now, this universe is always the replica of the paradigmatic universe created and inhabited by the gods; hence it shares in the sanctity of the gods' work" (Eliade, 1959, p. 34).

standing for the spiritual dissolution of Ovid) and rebirth through the trials of the initiatory journey.

According to Pompiliu Crăciunescu, the idea of imagining Ovid as a precursor of Christianity in the Roman province of Dacia may have been born from Horia's reading of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. Dante meets Ovid in the Limbus, an intermediate space between the Hell and Paradise, where, together with other ancient illuminati like Pythagoras, Plato and Virgil himself (Dante's guide throughout the Inferno), he atones for the guilt of having been born before the Revelation. Horia re-imagines Ovid's exile as a sort of spiritual metamorphosis, where the Roman poet, through the ancient Dacian doctrine of immortality attributed to Zalmoxis (a disciple of Pythagoras) comes to re-evaluate the meaning of his experience. Thus, the sufferings of exile gradually turn into a self-revelation that leads to spiritual ascension. As Crăciunescu notes, "A novel of surpassing Limbi, *God was born into exile* is the novel of Ovid's first step towards Paradise" (Crăciunescu, 2011, p. 72). Exile becomes the alchemical crucible where despair is turned into freedom at the end of the World (ultimus orbus terrarum), and Tomis, the place of rupture and amputation becomes a sacred land, "a land of expectation and revelation" (Crăciunescu, 2011, p. 73).

During his first year of exile, he perceives Tomis, the Roman fortress governed by centurion Honorius as an Inferno, not of fire, but of ice: the snow, the howling winds and wolves, the frozen sea, all point to his inner feelings of isolation and fear. Beginning with the second year, when he slowly starts to get himself acquainted with the local population of Getae, he finds himself confronted with his past again, yet not in any nostalgic sense: he regains a sense of enthusiasm when he comes face to face with traces of his youthful beliefs: Pythagoras and Zalmoxis, and re-members *The Metamorphoses* through the legend of Medea and Absyrtus. His work comes to him in fragments, torn like the body of Absyrtus, as come memories of his former loves, Gaia and Corina, of his wife Fabia, his friends and his literary glory. In Tomis, the work of writing will turn into self-writing, as his gaze gradually switches from the external to the internal.

As Dante had Beatrice as a guide through Paradise, Ovid will have Dochia, a local woman, as a guide in his spiritual journey of self-discovery and self-revelation. At first he finds himself intrigued by her mysterious personality, by her lack of feminine vanity, her directness and honesty. He finds peace in her presence, and notes that he loves her in a way which does not involve desire. She guides him in his first journey out of Tomis, to the fishermen village where he meets Mucaporus, a Roman deserter who initiates him into the significance of freedom:

> Freedom comes at a high price, but it is always worth it [...] All you need to know is how to choose: a new existence, anywhere, beyond the borders of the empire, a new God, the true God, in order to be reborn right here on earth, and not after death [...] Anything is possible. From time to time, we must have the courage to desert, to break abruptly with the past (Horia, 2016, p. 76).

Deeply impressed by the religious faith of the Getae, and prompted by Dochia and her father, Ovid starts on an initiatory journey to reach the place where the priests of Zalmoxis lived. This journey carries him across a great part of Gaetic and Dacian lands, and he meets and befriends local characters like Comozous, Scoris and Sedida, who familiarize him with the tumultuous and often tragic history of the Thracian and Dacian tribes. After he returns from this journey, he meets the Greek physician Theodore, who introduces to him the prophecy of the future Messiah. It is though this prophecy, which seems to offer a meaning to all his losses, suffering and initiatory experience that Ovid realizes his exile has helped him gain a new perspective on life and led to a sort of spiritual rebirth. Theodore, through his vast experience and esoteric knowledge, could be an alter-ego of Mircea Eliade, whose philosophy of the sacred and of ritual initiation the Greek doctor espouses. It becomes obvious at this point that Ovid's exile represents a rite of initiation into the mysteries of the sacred.

As Eliade writes, "Initiatory death is indispensable for the beginning of spiritual life. Its function must be understood in relation to what it prepares: birth to a higher mode of being" (Eliade, 1959, p. 7). After being initiated into the mysteries of death and rebirth (the mysteries of Zalmoxis), eventually Ovid is required to cross the threshold into eternal life. In the last chapter, as he is slowly dying, the invisible guide towards the other world is his brother.[1] The reader is left to guess whether the presence of his brother is real or imaginary. It may be both: Ovid himself acknowledges that though he is dead, he is also present. "He is not a hallucination," Ovid writes, "nor is this his first visit" (Horia, 2016, p. 235). This silent presence which speaks "to a profound and mysterious part of myself from where the words, once gotten there, cannot go out" (Horia, 2016, p. 235), is the sign of the eternal life in which he believes, after being transformed by the experience of exile, of loss. This conversation with the dead is both an omen of his impending death and the visible sign of his metamorphosis: "The contact between us two is made through what is eternal and invisible in us two, through what my body also hides in its depth, unknown

[1]Eliade notes that initiatory death is symbolized either "by darkness, by cosmic night, by the telluric womb, the hut, the belly of a monster" or by "joining the company of the dead and the ancestors" (Eliade, 1959, p. 7).

to itself, like a stone waiting for its release from the perishable flesh of the ripe fruit" (Horia, 2016, p. 235). His ability to communicate with the dead and feel their presence, his foreknowledge of Theodore's death show that the poet is now ready to lose the ultimate and his most precious possession, his carnal body. The diary revolves around the acknowledgement of the fight between body and soul: "The battle between body and soul, between time and eternity is the most difficult thing in this last period of my old age. The battle takes place on the threshold of death, between fear and hope" (Horia, 2016, p. 236). He is aware that during this last initiatory journey, from life to death or from death to eternal life, he will have his brother as a guide. As he nears death, the landscape becomes again the frozen sea shore from the beginning of his exile, and he seems to hear the gulls chanting Medea's name. This apparent return which closes a circle of loss and resurrection points to another circle which will begin soon; in fact a spiral, leading from one cycle of life to the next.

The idea of exile as a regenerating spiritual force is in itself deeply Christian. Iulian Boldea notes that Vintilă Horia's novel resembles "a parable of the creator excluded from the City, who claims an inner exile with a regenerative role. After overcoming trials and traveling an initiatory path, the exiled poet has the opportunity to recover the chance of eternity" (Boldea, 2019, p. 7). In his diary Ovid confesses that "Augustus exiled me to make me suffer and so I did. But I know now that Rome, this Rome which was, at the beginning of my sufferings, the mirror of all thoughts, is not at the crossroads of all roads on this earth, but elsewhere, at the end of a different road. And I also know that God was born in exile too" (Horia, 2016, p. 7).

Along the same line, Dana Bădulescu writes about "the metaphysical dimension of exile" in Horia's novel (Bădulescu, 2013, p. 263), and Ion Simuț enlarges upon the sacred significance of exile as a Christian dimension of life:

> Exile is an essential initiation for Jesus, for Ovid, for Vintilă Horia, for man in general. Man (Adam and Eve and their successors) began to truly understand God only after being expelled from paradise. Jesus was born in exile, in the manger in Bethlehem, but his power could not be contained. Ovid discovered God in his exile in Tomis, and that is why his faith, born in the most adverse conditions, would be all the stronger. His earthly homeland, Rome, depraved and ungrateful, no longer deserve the longing and nostalgia of return. Ovid's exile is for Vintilă Horia a compensatory fiction, a winding path to knowledge of the divine. Only the God of exile truly reveals the saving meanings of salvation through suffering and recovery of the heavenly homeland (qtd. in Boldea, 2019, p. 8).

Thus, the conception of exile as a regenerative and even creative force does not merely stem from Horia's personal experience, but it is intimately tied to a sacred, mythical or religious consciousness, which the historical figure of Ovid probably lacked. The protagonist of the novel, however, is conceived along a tradition which leads back to the beginnings of Romanian Romantic nationalism and Vasile Alecsandri's interpretation of Ovid. For Horia, as for a significant part his generation, the notion of national identity was not only tied to the Latin roots of the Romanians, but also to their Christian identity. The generation of 1927, which included Emil Cioran, Constantin Noica, Mircea Eliade and Vintilă Horia sought to redefine Romanian identity during a period of intense crisis, often focusing on spiritual renewal, traditionalism, and a Christian mysticism. It was this focus on Christian mysticism which constituted a point of rapprochement between these young intellectuals and the Iron Guard, the Romanian fascist organization which drew heavily on Christian symbolism and gathered support from the grassroots of the Romanian Orthodox Church.[1] Radical nationalism and Christian mysticism went hand in hand, and the response to the spiritual crisis that Romania was traversing at the time was thought to be a new man. One important point in the spiritual politics of the Iron Guard was, according to Meale, that it "held the rebirth and purification of the Romanian nation as its primary aim, which was to be achieved through a process of returning the intellectuals and Romanian middle classes to the Orthodox morality of the peasantry" (Meale, 2016, p. 62). Ovid in Horia's novel is actually an avatar of the new man envisioned by the intellectual legacy of the Iron Guard,[2] a spiritually regenerated poet who renounces his former self and embraces a mystical faith which is a harbinger of Christianity. Ultimately, *God was born in exile* engages with the literary and cultural legacy of Ovid by establishing a link between the historical figure and Christianity, in order to integrate it as a pivotal element within Romanian national identity, particularly as it was perceived and articulated by Horia and the other intellectuals of his generation, influenced by the ideology of the Romanian Iron Guard.

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[1] Jordan Meale describes the Romanian Iron Guard as "a unique brand of fascism", due to its "seemingly genuine Orthodox Christian principles" (Meale, 2016, p. 61) and notes that from its very beginning, unlike other European Fascist movements, it "held no specific political program, but instead aimed to pursue the development of spiritualism as could be found in the peasantry" (Meale, 2016, p. 65).

[2]Meale further notes that "the Romanian Iron Guard attempted to breed the "New Man" sculpted upon those very principles it stood for" (Meale, 2016, p. 62) and Rebecca Haynes argues that the primary aim of the Iron Guard was to create and educate "the 'New Man', a spiritually regenerated Romanian" (Haynes, 2008, p. 944).

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