

Love and Initiatory Search in the Novel *The Forbidden Forest* by Mircea Eliade

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ABSTRACT • The purpose of the research of initiation is, from Eliade perspective, the knowledge of man, because the initiation is an act that engages not only the religious life of the individual, but it engages his total life (*Aspects du mythe* 1963). In other words, the initiatory component of the religious experience is related both to the miracle of life, which can be represented as a continuous initiation, and to the gnosiological course of the individual. Although for the most part, modern people have lost their sense of religiously life, so initiation has almost disappeared from the modern world, Eliade remarked that beyond the traditional formulas of initiation experiences, and even in the absence of “ecstatic journeys”, spiritual renewal and “clairvoyance” can be achieved when man falls in love, when life itself is understood as a continual trial. It is a (contemplative) path opened by the work of Mircea Eliade who in the Diary interprets his own life as a “labyrinthine initiation”. In the novel *The Forbidden Forest* (*Noaptea de Sânziene*), the labyrinthine initiation is impelled by the “nostalgia of paradise” related to the deep impulses of man, among which that of love is paramount, according to the image and likeness of the Creator. According to the evangelical hermeneutics of love, this is the dynamic expression of man’s divine image and likeness and at the same time of his power to overcome death, to have access to being, knowledge and virtue, to onto-gnoseological mystery. This text aims to show that beyond the power to resist the evils of the world, love can give the lover “foresight” and stimulates the imagination in a creative sense, as happens in the novel *The Forbidden Forest* (*Noaptea de Sânziene*) by Mircea Eliade.

KEYWORDS • Initiation, epiphany, imagination, knowledge, mystery, love

One of the main themes in the novel *The Forbidden Forest* by Mircea Eliade is that of the possibility to extend the human limits of the capacity to love, that finds its correspondence in the theme of the initiation search as an

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attempt to get out of the profane time, a topic that is at the centre's philosophical concerns of religions. The term "initiatory search" is borrowed here from the volume *Despre Ioan Culianu și Mircea Eliade, Amintiri, lecturi, reflecții* (*About Ioan Culianu and Mircea Eliade, Memories, readings, reflections*, Polirom, 2002), where referring to the novel of the philosopher of religions, Matei Călinescu considers that this could be one of the keys possible reading.

The main character of the novel, Ștefan Viziru, considers that more important than the earthly fulfilment of love, is the passion for the mystery that hides this feeling by which the human being is similar to the divine being.

The "mystical" love by which Eliade suggests the search for the Christian God, to which Ștefan arrives starting from life experiences (including alleged artistic experience) is compatible with the idea of recognizing the sacred in profane manifestations, another direction of the Eliade hermeneutics.

The character created by Mircea Eliade knows a reflected experience of a complicated love, that is unknown for many people, an experience through which he discovers "hidden" meanings of history. If love is for Stephen a way of escape from history, carrying the promise of a renewing life, beyond happiness and suffering, the way he chooses is to live regarding things with melancholy and "with inspired attention", to see what is hidden in their appearance or in what is apparent.

It is a significant attitude not only for the crossing from ignorance to knowledge, but also for the revelation that profane prejudices, daily life, everything that impedes our access to the sacred, can be overcome since love can be thought and sought in the historical world.

In this text I intend to reconstruct the path of Ștefan Viziru which can be considered initiatory, in order to discover the meaning of the search for love and to understand its Christian significance in the vision of the character and author of the novel *The Forbidden Forest*.

Initiatory Search, Epiphany, the Imaginative Power of Love

As with all the notions by which he systematizes his philosophical thinking of religion—initiation derives, in Eliade, from his theory of the sacred.

The famous assertion that the sacred opposes the profane¹ plays here the role of a premise that implies the definition of the paradoxical relationship between these two notions that mirror each other. In other words, the Eliadean construction is made to show that as long as it is shown to man in this life, the sacred is no longer absolutely opposed to the profane; but, on the other hand, this manifestation—so as not to be an attack on the ontological state of divine things—is incomplete: and then the sacred is also manifested through what seems profane. Therefore, the probing of the paths to the inaccessible dimensions of the sacred, as well as the attempts to fully understand the manifest meanings, are akin to a process of initiation.

And the “initiatory” human attitude, before being the concern of the elect, is prepared and cultivated by the “democratic” appearance of the sacred in the life of any man, a phenomenological situation that Eliade calls epiphany, as a sudden appearance of the sacred sometimes not accepted as such, but in happy cases viewed with inspired attention, to discover, recognize, understand more than mere observation or profane knowledge allow us. For example, the ideal conditions in which this is possible are achieved through the onto-gnoseological function of love, the state that brings man closest to God.

As we know, in Christianity, the fact that to love means the same as to be, is clear from the truth of the “reciprocal” of the famous and short phrase of the holy Apostle Paul in Chap. 13–2, First Epistle to the Corinthians: “(...) and if I have no love, I am nothing”. In other words, the experience of love is the only one that allows us access to being because it reflects in the clearest and most justly “possible” way the image and likeness we have from God.

In this respect, we can argue with the help of an interpretation from the chapter entitled “Consummation by union with God or by deification” from the work *Asceticism and Mysticism*, where talking about “Love and Passion” and in a completely Pauline way, Dumitru Stăniloae considers that man’s making in the image of God is reflected in the human capacity and tendency to love, and the resemblance in the realization of the fullness of love, in its fulfilment by faith:

“Man has the virtual capacity to become the subject of divine love, and to some extent he tends to it. This is the image of God in him. But love itself in its fullness cannot

¹ Mircea Eliade, *Le sacré et le profane* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965).

have it by itself, but receives it from God, which means that the likeness can only be acquired in communion with God”.²

In other words, according to Dumitru Stăniloae, rather “resemblance” implies an active, participatory dimension to the divine being, while the “image” is given in a “structural” way to our consciousness and our subconscious (which, according to Eliade’s philosophy of religions remains “religious” despite the most severe human rejections of the sacred).

Therefore, if the epiphany can be the image or even the loved one, it can also be the indicator of the way in which the lover approaches, by resemblance, God.

In Mircea Eliade’s system, where the most important notions are “sacred” and “profane”; “archetype”, “rite”, “myth”, “symbol”; “hierophany”, “theophany”; “cosmic Christianity”; “New humanism”—the *epiphany* refers to the dazzling presence of the sacred in everyday life, generally not received as such, as we have already shown. These apparitions in what is unusual and extraordinary “indicate the presence of something other than what is natural; the presence or at least the predestined appeal of this *something else*”. An example of an epiphanic relationship (hence the relationship of continuity between “something else” and what is given) would be history. This, with the help of the history of religions, “could one day find its true meaning: that of the epiphany of a glorious and absolute human condition”³.

The epiphany, in Eliade’s system, can be an exceptional event, even if sometimes seemingly trivial that marks our life directly or indirectly; it can be a borderline situation (comparable to moment of an initiation route), a “vision”, a feeling, a “revelation”, a person you fall in love with. And the “secret” of the epiphany is, finally, of a philosophical nature: most of the time we realize the epiphanic quality of a phenomenon, only after it has passed and after its possibility of occurring is exhausted.

Adequate understanding of epiphany is therefore about a culture of observation and finesse of interpretation, an inherited or self-constructed scale of values, aesthetic and religious attention and education, sensitivity, the ability to be present and receptive—“trumps” of the generous spirit, especially

² Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitatea Ortodoxă. Ascetica și Mistica* (Orthodox spirituality. Asceticism and Mysticism) (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1992), 37.

³ Mircea Eliade, *Traité d’histoire des religions* (Paris: Payot, 1953), 36.

to those who have exercised their inner senses with whom they have been blessed, and to those who have simply kept themselves “pure in heart”.

In other words, the realization of the epiphany is possible only if we are in one way or another “initiated” into the belief that everything that happens in this life has a meaning transmitted from somewhere beyond it. And it is possible especially when we become aware of our own inability to recognize the miracle: for this “delay” realizes not only our limitations in the realization of other experiences, but also the call to overcome this situation. Or, the initiatory search, the initiation aim at transgressing the limits⁴.

The scientist of religions pays great “artistic” attention to the epiphanies in his novels and short stories. The various fictional constructions understood by the writer as variants of reality have in common the fact that the events that give them meaning, although visibly unfolding in profane time and space, at some point acquire the aura of things that are not of this world. So epiphany is first a notion that has the role of signalling the rupture, on the one hand, and the continuity, on the other, between the history projected or “written” in the divine plan and the history lived in the human condition, seeking restoration from the spiritual point of view.

But the epiphany also has the ontological charge of the thing that mediates the camouflage of the sacred in the profane, and this can be a natural object or a creation, a visible event or being, a state or a phenomenon. At this level is also found the originality of Eliade’s choice for this term both formal and material, when exploring, interpreting and experiencing the literary property of epiphany to abolish the distinction between things accessible to sensory and mental faculties and inaccessible things in terms of perception or rationally unintelligible. Thus, it becomes possible for the epiphany to “open the heavens” (as in the novel *The Forbidden Forest*⁵) for those who enjoy an attentive and benevolent spirit, and this disposition to receive the miracle becomes a capacity, that of “seeing”, of recognizes from things,

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Naissances mystiques. Essai sur quelque type d’initiation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959).

⁵ In this respect, the title in Romanian, *Noaptea de Sânziene*, is relevant. This title could be translated literally as “Sânziene Night”, or “The Night of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist” (in French *La Nuit de Saint Jean*). The birth of Saint John the Baptist coincides with the summer solstice, when according to Romanian mythology the heavens open and Sânzienele, a kind of fairies who seduce mortals, can be seen.

events, individuals those that announce something essential for personal life or for the destiny of humanity.

Or, the change of the sensory regime is one of the finalities of the initiation⁶ that allows the access to unknown territories of the common human experience, finally even to the sacred condition and to the absolute reality. What we might call “the little epiphanic time”—that fleeting moment of the strange, bizarre phenomenon of the world we live in, or of the person we fall in love with — also opens the mind to an imaginary duration, that of the great mythical time⁷, the one that “institutes” and accompanies history, from the beginning to the present day. In other words, in the language borrowed from Paul Ricœur, the epiphany indicates a capital moment of the “course of recognition” of the sacred in the world, of recognition as identification and distinction, but also in its own cognitive sense, namely “through signs, features, clues, a person or thing we’ve never seen”⁸.

Mircea Eliade’s preoccupation with epiphanies goes from the philosophy of religions to the art, as a proof of the complexity of the postmodern imaginary, which integrates the classical idea of imagination, here, of the connection of imagination with love, so familiar to theological thought. For example, Dumitru Stăniloae’s conception of the role of imagination in the design of love also restores to this concept the connection with the divine image:

“Imagination is the force by which the lover brings out like a diver, from the indefinite wealth of the beloved, new beauties and lights and transparencies on his image and then on the image self, or on the common image and partly enriches him in a real way with them. When the imagination stops, love is extinguished. The power of imagination is love, and the power of love is imagination. And since love is in contact with a deep, true reality, the imagination also has a real basis. On the other hand, they have a real creative power”⁹.

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Naissances mystiques. Essai sur quelque type d’initiation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959).

⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Aspects du Mythe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963),

⁸ Paul Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance. Trois études* (Paris: Éditions Stocke, 2004), 27.

⁹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitatea Ortodoxă. Ascetica și Mistica (Orthodox spirituality. Asceticism and Mysticism)*, *op. cit.* 268.

An imagination accompanied by, or which necessarily leads to faith, so to speak: “But true love for all people, love that never falls, cannot be born without prayer and without asceticism that purifies passions”¹⁰.

The imaginative dimension highlights the specificity of the gnoseological dimension of the love that opens the being to an enlightenment impossible to express in conceptual language, as Father Stăniloae remarks:

“Love is a huge addition of knowledge, producing at the same time a huge addition of life in the loved one and in the one who loves, developing to the maximum his and mine being. But this knowledge cannot be captured by concepts”¹¹.

Thus, if the love of God can be acquired, beyond the practice of prayer, godliness, asceticism, also in a rational way, love of fellow man is a rather empirical form of knowledge:

“Love is thus realized when two subjects meet in a full mutual experience in their capacity as subjects, that is, without reducing each other to the state of objects (...).”

From the perspective of these two subjects of knowledge

“(...) love is the supreme union and mutual promotion and, precisely because of this, the supreme way of knowing in which the fellow is not passive, but freer than in any other state or relationship”.

At the same time, this form of empirical knowledge has a heuristic value:

“The more I love him, the more he reveals himself to me. The human subject can update such a connection with any subject when he has become acquainted with it through the senses”¹².

In any of these situations, as well as the power to see the sacredness of seemingly trivial things, love is a divine gift.

As we have shown, in Eliade’s system epiphany in general and love in particular as one of its species, is first revealed to us by the means of the senses, to guide us, if properly received, on a path of access to the abso-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹¹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitatea Ortodoxă. Ascetica și Mistica (Orthodox spirituality. Asceticism and Mysticism)*, op. cit., 267.

¹² *Ibid.*, 266.

lutely truth hidden in appearances¹³. In Eliade's literary writings, the most important things occur in "epiphanic" moments, when the heroes realize that they are being signalled, and I will exemplify here the connection between these moments and initiation through a few moments centred on the theme of love in the novel *The Forbidden Forest*.

The Mystery of Love from the Perspective of the Novel

Initially, Ștefan Viziru, the main character from *The Forbidden Forest* (*Noaptea de Sânziene*), does not understand very well what happens to him when he falls inexplicably in love with Ileana, whom he meets by chance in the Băneasa forest on the evening of the summer solstice¹⁴, but he intuits that this event is not an ordinary one:

"(...) This love could reveal something to me. Maybe I met you and I fell in love with you to teach me something. Teach me, then! Tell me why you appeared in my way (...). I don't like to flirt. I never cheated on my wife. But when I met you, I felt that a sign had been made to me".¹⁵

It is the moment when, thanks to love, Stephen becomes aware of his religious ignorance and at the same time the possibility of obtaining the sacred discernment through love.

From the perspective of Matei Călinescu, *The Forbidden Forest* is first and foremost a "great fairy tale", due to the novel's three main motives: the unrecognizability of the miracle (associated with the fairy tale *Prâslea the*

¹³ Mircea Eliade, *Mythes, rêves et mystères* (Paris : Gallimard, 1957), 168.

¹⁴ "The myth and symbol of the solstice have haunted me for many years"—Mircea Eliade, *Jurnal*, Volumul I 1941–1949 (*Diary*, Volume I 1941–1949) (București: Humanitas, 1993), 153.

¹⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Noaptea de Sânziene (The Forbidden Forest)* (București: Ed. Minerva, 1991), vol. I, 60. The mirage, the expectations from the cosmic moment of the meeting of this new love are also noted in the diary: "The summer solstice and the night of Sânziene keep all the charms and all the prestige for me (...) Once upon a time, in Portugal, I had imagined a kind of story with the miracle of regeneration and eternal youth acquired in one night by Sânziene. I imagined it, it's a little said. For many days in a row I lived as if under the spell of this mystery. I lived waiting: for something to happen to me, for something to be revealed to me"—Mircea Eliade, *Jurnal*, op. cit., 150.

brave one and the golden apples)¹⁶; the search for eternal life (associated with the fairy tale *Youth without old age and life without death*)¹⁷; the obsession with intangible love centred on the modern version of the inaccessible Ileana Cosânzeana (mythological character)¹⁸.

These motives correspond to three of the fundamental themes of Eliade meditation in the philosophy of religion: the concealment of the sacred in the world by adopting the appearances of the profane, and ultimately the “absolute immanence of the sacred (and therefore its ambiguity, if not outright its indeterminacy)”¹⁹; exploring the possibility of exiting the profane, historical time and rediscovering the beatific time of the beginnings; initiatory search.

The evolution of the central character of the novel, Ștefan (the name of the first Christian martyr, as Matei Călinescu remarks)²⁰, is pursued from all these “mythodological” perspectives (the expression belongs to Gilbert Durand²¹) (to which the reader can add others), simultaneously with the purely literary description (without any ideological sympathy or antipathy) of his daily life in Bucharest from 1936–1947, London and Lisbon in 1941–1942 and Paris in 1947–1948²². Ștefan’s life is also a continuous self-mystification, but at a different level of aspirations than the one to which the hermen-

¹⁶ In short, *Prâslea cel voinic și merele de aur* (*Prâslea the brave one and the golden apples*) is a popular Romanian fairy tale collected by Petre Ispirescu, about a brave son of an emperor able to recognize the miracle.

¹⁷ *Tinerețe fără bătrânețe și viață fără de moarte* (*Youth without old age and life without death*) is a Romanian folk tale about a son of an emperor who seeks eternal youth and immortality.

¹⁸ Ileana Cosânzeana or Ileana Sânziana is a figure from Romanian mythology, a fairy with great power of attraction.

¹⁹ Matei Călinescu, *Despre Ioan Culianu și Mircea Eliade, Amintiri, lecturi, reflecții* (*About Ioan Culianu and Mircea Eliade, Memories, readings, reflections*) (Iași: Polirom, 2002), 117.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 113.

²¹ Durand, Gilbert, *Figuri mitice și chipuri ale operei* (*Mythical figures and images of the literary work*), Traducere de Irina Bădescu (București: Editura Nemira, 1988). Romanian translation by Irina Bădescu (Bucharest: Nemira Publishing House, 1988). Here, the terms “methodology”, “mythanalysis”, “mitocritic” are constructed analogously after those of “methodology”, “psychoanalysis”, “psychocritical”.

²² “Ștefan Viziru is truly a ‘neutral’. In addition, he is obsessed with his own inner discoveries” –Mircea Eliade, *Jurnal*, Volumul I 1941–1949 (*Mircea Eliade, Diary*, Volume I 1941–1949) (București: Humanitas, 1993), 199–200.

etics of suspicion guide us, launching hypotheses of the virtualization of the author's past. I do not think, therefore, that Eliade is trying to intervene in his own past and to "repair" it through an apolitical character such as Stephen. If in the construction of this character we can detect certain autobiographical elements, we cannot deduce from this that his function would be to excuse Eliade from his own past, by "sublimating" it. Rather, it is a series of personal experiences of the author, whose need for communication imposes the language and conventions of literature to restore the events in their authenticity, to make them the source of new creative or bookish experiences in a continuous emotional-participatory regeneration or purely interpretive²³.

For, returning to the exegesis of Matei Călinescu,

"(...) The search for the hero takes place in another plan. What he does and says as he continues his quest for initiation, of which he is not fully aware, seems to the other characters, and sometimes even to the reader, slightly ridiculous, vague, or downright irresponsible. Eliade thus suggests that even the search for the sacred, in the secularized modern world, appears as distracted dreaming, comic inadequacy, the childish behavior of an adult, a behavior that is not without some charm, but whose real meaning is never understood. Stephen himself, insofar as he is a modern man—and cannot be otherwise — fails to understand it"²⁴.

Following this thread we can see in Mircea Eliade's hero a man thirsty for an authentic religious experience, whom he fails to live in the coordinates of such an experience, he approximates by trying an artistic or philosophical language that expresses the very idea of search. For the two great problems that define Stephen's deep existence and that could lead him to true faith or knowledge — are the love of two women at the same time and the saving of historical time.

Resigned to the idea that he cannot love two beings at the same time as the saints, that he cannot discover "a new and truer category of love" Ștefan paints. Initially following the desire to represent the car by which Ileana (which he falls in love with) would have come in his life on the night of

²³ "I had approved of Ștefan's 'search' for an initiatory quest. Finding Ileana was equivalent to the end of an initiation"—Mircea Eliade, *Memorii 1907–1966* (Memories 1907–1966) (București: Humanitas, 1997), 457.

²⁴ Matei Călinescu, *op. cit.*, 116.

Sânziene and who would have disappeared in the Băneasa forest, when the skies open, according to popular tradition. Unable to give shape to this state,

“he constantly added colors, without any artistic preoccupation, but only because this game charmed him, allowed him to find, somewhere, very deep in his being, a different Time, a different existence”²⁵.

And this is because Ștefan’s artistic endeavour, further camouflaging the secret he wants to portray, is driven by the desire to shape his love for Ileana, who had appeared to him like a supernatural being in the Băneasa forest at the summer solstice.

Let’s take an example in which Mircea Eliade’s hero “looks at himself experiencing” the art of painting, with the intention of expressing in this way this unusual appearance of love:

“I quickly realized that I didn’t have the slightest talent. But that didn’t matter. The important thing was to have a room of my own, a secret room, in which I could satisfy this desire: to paint. (...) I can’t tell you what a revelation was for me this seemingly simple thing: to paint. I did not have even the most basic knowledge of painting. I sat down in front of the easel; I took the brush and started (...). In fact, I didn’t paint anything specific (...) It’s hard for me to explain. I felt a great peace, almost a bliss. It wasn’t like I was the everyday one. It came back to the surface, from somewhere, from the depths of my being, another self, the real one, without worries, without desires, even without memories (...). Painting, I hadn’t personal past. I lived differently than I lived in my house, or at the ministry, or on the street. I was living in the present. Like the saints”²⁶.

Beyond the revelation of the depths of his own identity and the transcendence of history, the difficulty of the “artist” to explain his own creation is relevant, when he plays the role of guide for Ileana and Biriș in the small “museum” in his hotel room kept secret:

“(...) It is difficult to explain (...) these paintings that I want to show you hide a great secret, and if I do not reveal it to you in advance, I doubt that you will be able to see it”;

or:

²⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Noaptea de Sânziene (The Forbidden Forest)*, op. cit., 186; 206.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 69–70.

“There is only one canvas (...). There is only one and the same canvas for all the paintings. That’s why I said I have to explain; so you know how to look at it. Ileana’s car, for example, is the last picture I painted; but I painted it on the same canvas as all the other paintings. And in order to see it, I have to explain to you how you look at it; otherwise, you can’t recognize it”²⁷.

The answer to the room-mate exasperated by the artist’s monologue about this personal technique of the “palimpsest” (scene marked “self-ironic”: “Show it to them, sir, once! — I can’t show it to them [...] because they can’t see it”) contains, I think, not so much the drama of the artist who seeks the path (method) of transition from the “closed” opera to the “open” work, but the drama of the one who seeks the explanation of his own falling in love.

So, Ștefan’s artistic experience, further camouflaging the secret he wants to portray, is driven by the desire to shape his love for Ileana. The experience of a new love approximates both the aesthetic message and the religious message of the novel. And in a way it unifies them. And this would be obvious even if we read the story as a modern repetition of the myth of Tristan and Isolde, a novel whose title is even invoked in the novel at some point, by both Ileana and Ștefan²⁸.

Because indeed this “European myth of adultery”, this great and simple image, as a kind of primitive model of our most obscure sufferings”²⁹ (Denis de Rougemont) is visible in the fatal love between Ștefan and Ileana both by the fact that it associates love and death, and by that of adultery (however, a form of eroticism idealized in this case); and especially by the fact that at least for Ștefan, uplifting is “the passion of love than the fulfilled love”, he being an exponent of the conception of love which, perhaps imperceptibly, makes this connection, in principle, unbearable”. This “passionate thing” which also means suffering truly expresses in this case a “thirst for unhappiness” and signals, revealing and enveloping a “mystery of our life, of our

²⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Noaptea de Sânziene (The Forbidden Forest)*, op. cit., 94–96.

²⁸ “Where could such love lead? Anna Karenina, Tristan and Isolde? It would be too sad. One love that replaces another; an adulterer like any other, born of Time, cursed to death like a living creature born of death and returning to death. If I don’t love one as I love the other, what good can this new love have? (...) If this new, unexpected, unsolicited love will only lead to the replacement of Ioana by Ileana, it would make no sense”—*Ibidem*, 258.

²⁹ Denis de Rougemont, *Dragostea și Occidentul (L’Amour et l’Occident; Love and the West)*, Romanian translation by Mircea Ivănescu (București: Ed. Meridiane, 1989), 9.

spirit, perhaps of our history”³⁰ — despite the fact that Stephen tries to “creatively develop” the myth, to “process the archetype”, attributing a Christian value to his passion (where the original myth contradicts the Christian faith). He confesses to his wife Ioana:

“(…) I thought I could love you both (…) alike. But I’m overweight. I love you so much more… Sometimes I feel like I’m in love with her too, but I quickly realize that I’m not, that I feel alone. It seems so to me because I would like a miracle to happen to me: I wish I could love, like the saints, more people with the same strength with which I love you. But I cannot. I can only love you”³¹.

Stephen sees love as a way of evading history, carrying “the promise of a more living life, of a renewing power, of something beyond happiness and suffering, a fiery bliss”³². Stephen’s aesthetic-religious path is also included in the art of living looking at things melancholy³³, but also “with inspired attention”, having the revelation of the mystery, of the mystery half hidden, half revealed in everyday life (the condition of the sacred and implicitly of epiphany). And just as a landscape or natural light carries the revelation of the timelessness and fullness of being, the love by which man resembles God helps Stephen to see the things in their depth.

An important character in the novel, a friend of the protagonist, the philosophy teacher Petre Biriş, conveys the idea of this mystery by invoking the symbol of the labyrinth in which Ştefan had concentrated his seemingly unresolved search:

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 6; 9.

³¹ Mircea Eliade, *Noaptea de Sânziene (The Forbidden Forest)*, *op. cit.*, 111.

³² Denis de Rougemont, *Dragostea și Occidentul (L’Amour et l’Occident; Love and the West)*, *op. cit.*, 7.

³³ “What an extraordinary light (...). You could understand anything on such a day; you could understand any secret; as if you were really seeing the nature of things. These are not hours like all the other hours... That’s why I was asking you: do you think that one can love two beings at the same time? (...) If I had been a painter, I think I would have struggled to understand this: in a painting, a certain time could be kept completely favorable to revelations, a certain qualitative moment different from the rest of the moments that make up the cosmic Time? How could I have kept, at least for my own use and bliss, the hours of this afternoon, their light, taste, mystery?”—Mircea Eliade, *Noaptea de Sânziene*, *op. cit.*, 77.

“Ștefan had once sent me with a message to Ileana. He told her that he had felt lost in a maze, but that he had not given up in discouragement, and in the end he had discovered that he could get out of the maze”³⁴

— summarizes Biriș (caught and investigated by security following a failed attempt to cross the border through Arad, to Paris), the rediscovery of the Christian virtue of hope, without being too sure, as he claims, of the content of the message. The statement given to the security investigators does not tame them (typical characters who illustrate the opacity of the sacred), suspicious regarding an information about the organization of an invincible armed resistance in the Carpathian Mountains, unconquerable, like a maze. Biriș is amused by this concrete decoding (emblem of the “hermeneutics of suspicion”) of an existing message from 1938–1939, because he, like other positive Eliade characters, is a follower of the hermeneutics of trust.

Or, the symbol of the labyrinth signifying, through closure and wandering, the historical conditionings, the impossibility to escape from time and destiny, also concentrates the obsession of coming out of time, related to the “intellectual passion for theological mysteries and metaphysical problems”. Thus, the evolution of the character Ștefan is intimately linked to the course of a spiritual initiation, difficult to clarify until the enigmatic explicit end of this open work (because the character takes with him into the world beyond the revelation at the end, leaving the reader free to interpret). His new love that wants to be plenary, similar to that of the saints, leads Ștefan Viziru beyond love, opens the horizon of knowledge:

“Maybe there is something else besides love. Maybe there is a possibility open to miracles somewhere, an irreducible mystery, a secret that we have not yet been able to decipher. (...) Something that also starts from here, from a love, but that leads elsewhere”³⁵.

The most convenient interpretation in the Eliadean system leads us to the aspiration towards totality of the main hero and the narrator, expressed so doubtfully-confident. This love, which in fact seeks nothing more than the fulfilment of earthly love, finally awakens the understanding of the sacred that manifests itself in the world through unexpected appearances.

³⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Noaptea de Sânziene (The Forbidden Forest)* (București: Ed. Minerva, 1991), vol. II, 319.

³⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Noaptea de Sânziene (The Forbidden Forest)*, *op. cit.*, vol. I, 15.

The “mystical” love by which Eliade suggests the search for the Christian God that his character tries during experiences in which he alternates beauty (aesthetic side) with gravity (religious side) is compatible with the idea of recognition, on the one hand because “mysticism would be the knowledge of the hidden thing”³⁶. Or, Ștefan knows an experience of love that is hidden from many people, during which he pursues other “hidden” meanings (of a name, of a car, of history).

If we go out of the reference system of literature, without going too far, we can see in this doubled love of Stephen, two images of the muse of history, Clio. The date of June 24, when the story begins, marks in Christianity the birth of Saint John the Baptist, but also a popular holiday, “Sânzienele”, as I already mentioned. The ambivalence (Christian and pagan) of this holiday is found in the oscillation of the main hero between Ioana (the feminine name of Ioan, as Matei Călinescu remarks) and Ileana, whose name refers to the cult of Diana who became Sânziana, “the illusion of a summer night” which he falls in love with in a way which cannot be rationally explained.

The two loves that Ștefan would like to unify into one above human nature, could express the need to harmonize the Christian vision of history (symbolized by Ioana) with the archaic vision of history (symbolized by Ileana). Refusing to use his choice, given to man by the God, letting himself be carried away by destiny (Ileana is invoked as Ștefan’s “fate”), the hero condemns himself to death. In the end, Ștefan meets his “tragic destiny” embodied in the car that obsesses him, whose premonition he had, driven by his beloved woman: Ioana’s death “kidnapped” his historical life, the last meeting with Ileana “gives” him the exalted death, in love, the fulfilment of destiny³⁷.

In a study from a recent book, Sorin Alexandrescu, recalling the episode of the painting in the secret hotel room of the main character, makes the following observation:

³⁶ Nae Ionescu, *Curs de metafizică (Metaphysics lectures)* (București: Humanitas, 1991), 115.

³⁷ “I had approved of Ștefan’s ‘search’ for an initiatory quest. Finding Ileana was equivalent to the end of an initiation”—Mircea Eliade, *Memorii 1907–1966 (Memories 1907–1966)* (București: Humanitas, 1997), 457.

”Ștefan secretly paints what he thinks is the car that disappeared on the night of Sânziene, as he told Ileana, but the painting will turn out to be just an indecipherable splotch. The gesture also resumes a well-known cultural pattern, Frenhofer’s almost meaningless painting, the character of Balzac’s novel *Le chef-d’oeuvre inconnu* (1837), as Eliade himself suggests. What exactly happens to Ștefan then is therefore impossible to convey concretely, moreover, what seems to him a sign made by a mysterious Consignee, perhaps by Destiny and perhaps to announce it publicly, suffers, in the immediate perception of the other characters for lack of any meaning”³⁸.

But for readers, it will be revealed as “a symbol of death that awaits Stephen himself at the end of the novel”, in other words, “the symbol works for us only after we have read the novel to the end!”, for only readers are shown in the end “the fact that the car that obsesses Ștefan, without knowing why, and indirectly Ileana is actually a sign of death and that, in fact, their flight from each other, or the inability to be together definitively, had another, deeper meaning, of which they were not at all aware, namely the desire to postpone their death”³⁹. On the other hand, the interpreter wonders, “isn’t the theme of regenerating death” somehow “the most important dimension of the novel, as the author saw it?”⁴⁰. To this rhetorical question, Eliade himself gave an answer in his *Diary* as he approached the end of the novel: “(...) The symbolism of Death allows everything: extinction or regeneration, a true new life beginning”⁴¹.

I believe that this question of regenerating death based on love is full of interpretive promises, because in Eliade’s vision of human life as short as an epiphany and difficult as an initiation, nature, history, culture show us enough to believe that death also has a meaning, namely that of resurrection. For Stephen’s mystical attempt does not allow us to “close” the meaning of the novel. Initially, Stephen embodies the type of profane man who has religious “intuitions”, dissatisfied with his historical condition, apparently observing appearances (epiphanies) beyond this world. After choosing several wrong ways to unravel the mysteries he intuits (Mrs. Zissu’s secret, Vādas-trā’s secret, condemnation for a cause that is not his) towards the end of the

³⁸ Sorin Alexandrescu, “Mircea Eliade, mai de aproape”, *Lumea incertă a cotidianului* (“Mircea Eliade, closer”, *The uncertain world of daily life*) (Iași: Polirom, 2021), 70–71.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, 64–65.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 64–65.

⁴¹ Mircea Eliade, *Jurnal*, Volumul I 1941–1949 (Mircea Eliade, *Diary*, Volume I 1941–1949) (București: Humanitas, 1993), 263.

novel, the reader is invited to understand, due to the “message” that Ștefan sends to Ileana through Biriș, that he has found, that he knows in which direction the solution of the rescue must be sought:

“There, in the maze, I felt closed on all sides. It was as if I were a prisoner in a huge metal sphere. I could not see its edges anywhere, but I still felt irretrievably closed inside it, I felt that no matter how hard I struggled, no matter how far I advanced, no matter how far from the center I had left and closer to its edges, these iron edges remained inaccessible to me. I felt doomed for the rest of my life to wander, in vain, into its sphere, as in the darkness of a labyrinth. And yet, one day, almost without realizing it — I broke the shell and came out as if I were coming out of a huge egg, whose shell seemed inaccessible, invulnerable like a gravestone and which shattered when it was touched. And I came out into the light again, I came out of the labyrinth...”. Thus, the character had understood that the sphere that seemed infinite and impenetrable to him “was, in fact, broken in different places (...) that through all those cracks one could get out, that every crack was a window”⁴².

Ștefan is one of those who “saw” beyond, through his complicated love. Perhaps this “exit from the labyrinth” signifies the transition from ignorance to knowledge, revelation, the transition from unbelief to faith, the fact that profane prejudices, everyday life, everything that prevents us from accessing the sacred, can be overcome. That the historical world itself is made up of things that speak of transcendence, of God, and the things that are inserted in such a language are the “cracks”, the “windows” through which we have access to knowledge, to the experience of the sacred.

Thus, a particular experience is loaded with general meanings: the idea of search, starting from the unexpected appearance of a love, the power to see beyond appearances—and here, too, the reader can admire the art of the prose writer to render, in the fresco of a society and in a narrative language proper to the novel, these situations of life in which Christian virtues (such as love and hope) are naturally inserted.

Possible Conclusions

According to Eliade, the sacred manifests itself to remind man of an important thing — namely, the power, beauty, and love of the One who created him; to recharge him with the nostalgia of the lost paradise, to convey

⁴² Mircea Eliade, *Noaptea de Sânziene (The Forbidden Forest)*, op. cit., vol. I, 257–258.

to him the thirst to find his true condition together with the “divinity” in the “inaccessible areas of reality”⁴³. In *Naissances mystiques*, Mircea Eliade says that “initiation puts an end to the ‘natural man’ and introduces the novice to culture”⁴⁴.

We recall that from Eliade’s point of view, the term “hierophany” expresses in a very profound and economic way the fact that something sacred (that is to say “a reality that does not belong to our world”, “of something quite different”) shows itself to us, manifests itself “in objects which are an integral part of our ‘natural’, ‘profane’ world”.⁴⁵

It is a great mystery here, around which we can outline the initiatory question: why is the sacred manifested and why in this modality of hierophany, of which the epiphany represents a species? Because man needs to get to know the unknown to know himself better? Or because man, in his essence, is tempted to get to know the unknown, with the forbidden and with the power emanating from this area?

Hierophany, that manifestation of the sacred as the visible trace of the Supreme Being in the world, is independent, in a certain sense, of human contemplation or imagination, while epiphany is dependent on human presence, circumstances, contingency, proximity, the ephemeral, because it constitutes a particular mediation between the sacred and the profane. The epiphany is dependent on the condition of *Dasein*, the existing human being who, through language, through the ability to interpret the signs of culture and history, can discern it among other passing facts. The epiphany is a kind of fugitive image which waits to be unveiled in its profound and disturbing reason for the appearance, as a “beam of meanings which is true” (characteristic for the image) which remains in our mind, in our memory, or even in our heart, after the disappearance of the material support, and this could be the beginning of an “initiation”.

The purpose of the research of initiation is, from Eliade perspective, the knowledge of man, for “initiation is one of the most significant spiritual phenomena in the history of mankind. It is an act that not only engages the religious life of the individual in the modern sense of the term ‘religion’—it en-

⁴³ Mircea Eliade, *Naissances mystiques. Essai sur quelque type d’initiation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 18.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Mythes, rêves et mystères* (Paris, Gallimard, 1957), 168.

gages his total life”⁴⁶. In other words, the initiatory component of the religious experience is related to both the “gravity” and the miracle of life, which can be represented as a continuous initiation. If, however, the process of initiation proper has to go through ritual, the initiatory death (and not the initiatory life), it is only to show that access to the imperishable condition of the spirit presupposes the abolition of the condition determined by existence.

For the most part, modern people have lost their sense of religiously based life, so initiation has almost disappeared from the modern world, Eliade remarked. However, beyond the traditional formulas of initiation experiences, and even in the absence of “ecstatic journeys”, spiritual renewal and “clairvoyance” can be achieved when man falls in love, when life itself is understood as a continual trial.

It is a (contemplative) path opened by the work of Mircea Eliade who in the *Diary* interprets his own life as a “labyrinthine initiation”. In the novel *Noaptea de Sânziene*, the labyrinthine initiation is impelled by the “nostalgia of paradise” related to the deep impulses of man, among which that of love is paramount, according to the image and likeness of the Creator, because “the image implies a participation in the divine nature”⁴⁷, a loving state updated at every moment by the presence of God through creation, in man, while resemblance is the external action of the spirit on matter.

According to the evangelical hermeneutics of love, this is the dynamic expression of man’s divine image and likeness and at the same time of his power to overcome death, to have access to being, knowledge and virtue. It is the result and path of deification, an onto-gnoseological mystery.

Beyond the power to resist the evils of the world, love can give the lover “foresight” and stimulates the imagination in a creative sense, as happens in the novel *The Forbidden Forest (Noaptea de Sânziene)* by Mircea Eliade.

⁴⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Aspects du mythe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 223–228.

⁴⁷ John Meyendorff, *Hristos în gândirea creștină răsăriteană (Christ in Eastern Christian Thought)*, Translated into Romanian by Nicolai Buga (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1997), 122.