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BEYOND MAGIC AND MYTH WITH MIRCEA ELIADE AND MOSHE IDEL

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Abstract: Review of Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit* (Mircea Eliade. From Magic to Myth), translation by Maria-Magdalena Anghelescu (Iași: Polirom, 2014).

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Every once in a while, ignoring all previous efforts, mankind undertakes a different approach to a subject that apparently has been clarified. While each generation comes forth with new questions it is just as eager to offer different answers to problems of the past. This may as well be regarded as a new path to retracing the original marks left by our ancestors.

Throughout his new book, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit* (Mircea Eliade. From Magic to Myth) Moshe Idel creates just such a path. He does not try to defend, explain or recreate Mircea Eliade's acts or world view, but rather tries to understand the intricate web that combines two stages of interest in Eliade's life: magic and myth. There is a sense of profound understanding in these two (apparently) simple words, which are at the root of everything that involves understanding Mircea Eliade: his private life, academic research and fascinating literary creation. Magic and myth unite these three, creating a complex puzzle, in which each piece is equally important.

It comes as no surprise that Moshe Idel is the author of such an incredibly difficult task. An accomplished professor of Jewish Thought at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Idel is the author of several books, including Kabbalah and Eros1; and Hassidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic[2]. Quite interestingly, Idel uses the terms 'magic' and 'myth' to unravel one of the most uncomfortable aspects of Mircea Eliade's private life: his political affiliation and the author does not refrain from displaying his own sincere and passionate point of view, as it will be shown in the next pages.

In *Mircea Eliade: From Magic to Myth,* Moshe Idel conducts a symphony of concepts across the eight chapters of the book. What compels the reader is the underlying energy of Moshe Idel's writing, tailored to the subject of Mircea Eliade. There is a sense of an almost organic approach to Eliade's thought: if he is understood as a creative root originating his understanding of the world – as expressed in his fiction and academic research – then it comes as no surprise that his own private life should have marked by a constant desire to put to rest a series of personal doubts.

From this point of view, it becomes obvious that Moshe Idel is not concerned with providing yet another interpretation of Eliade's work; instead, the author sets off on a journey of discovery, hoping that at the end of the road he will have reached the essence rather than just another image of Eliade. Since this a considerable undertaking even for someone with his expertise, Idel focuses on a number of themes relevant for his final goal: the concept of the sacred camouflaged into the profane, the concept of androgyny, Eliade's approach to Judaism and Kabbalah, as well as his political involvement. All these major themes are intertwined in Eliade's fiction and his personal life. As one will see in the following pages, it is almost impossible to imagine one without the other.

The profane: a disguise for the sacred?

According to Moshe Idel, Eliade's work has been influenced by two different approaches, which can be seen in his academic research, but also in his literary work. Young Eliade found himself immersed in the world of rituals and techniques, while Eliade the mature focused on (re)discovering symbols and myths.[3] It is important to distinguish the two, as they represent different approaches to religion and life. Without any doubt, Eliade's place in history is synonymous with his studies on religion. His observations and findings have remained to this day an irreplaceable source of understanding religion. Despite this undeniable gift, it is almost unrealistic to believe that Eliade's ultimate purpose was to create history through his academic research. Closer to the truth – as shown by Moshe Idel – are Eliade's efforts to explore the sacred and the profane in the context of his visualization of the Universe: a fluid matter[4] in which the sacred and the profane meet.

The theory of camouflage is basically a form of explaining the presence of the sacred amid the apparently ordinary daily events. This particular way of thinking has served Eliade as a personal inner guide to his studies on religion.[5] The concept that stands behind the theory of camouflage is rather simple, but as shown below, speaking about Eliade in terms of 'simple' is an error not only for the researcher, but also for the reader of Eliade's work.

To better grasp the concept of camouflage, one must be aware of the meaning of signs in Mircea Eliade's life. This is the first time Moshe Idel introduces the readers to the personal-=fictional-academic weaving in Eliade's existence.[6] By doing so, the author proves that there is only one path to understanding the Romanian author: by creating a web of meanings which ultimately lead to his essence. This web is formed not only by his academic research, but also by his fictional characters and his personal life. The camouflaged sacred becomes present in every major aspect of Eliade's life, and is revealed through the ordinary events of the possibly secret life led by Eliade[7]. If indeed this major theory was the reason behind his religious studies, Moshe Idel makes a daring and yet sensible observations: how come there are so few explanations?[8] The fact that Idel tries to add some more observations using Eliade's own notes on his marriage and fiction proves that Eliade himself made no effort to offer any in depth description of what is considered to be the pillar of his valuable research.

Eliade only left the door ajar to understanding the essence of the camouflage theory. Although the fluidity of Eliade's Universe allows for such a theory to thrive, the blunt truth is that this concept can be better explained through the author's literary creations rather than through his own words on the matter. Although Moshe Idel does not specify it, there is

one short novel that brings much needed light on the subject. *Ghicitor in pietre (The Stone Reader*[9]*)* hasn't received much attention amongst critics, but its value lies in the concepts that Eliade uses. The presence of destiny, as well as the constant search for truth, which is ultimately a race with no winners, creates the feeling of a labyrinth, a presence that can be felt in Eliade's fiction due to the intricate way the characters come face to face with their own mortality or with life lessons.

Moshe Idel pays a great deal of attention to the theory of camouflage, which can be seen as an effort to create a structure that integrates the major themes throughout the book. As Idel acknowledges the lack of explanations offered by Eliade himself, he takes a step further and recreates the foundation of camouflage. The connection between Hinduism (through *māyā)* and Christianity seems to be profound[10], since both religions find it possible to encounter the sacred in the trivial. Still, what Eliade did was to deeply personalize this theory, taking it to a different level, one that regarded his personal life. His Indian experience, as well as the significance he sees in his romancing of various women, including his wife, prove that for Eliade nothing was fortuitous, everything was a sign of something higher, something sacred.

Although Idel tries his best to find the real root of this concept, the truth is it is almost impossible to establish whether Eliade tried to bring to light a Universal matter, or whether he arrived at that point by trying to satisfy a personal need. That being said, no one can deny Eliade's dedication to this theory, but in this case the academic, personal and fictional (through his literary creation) elements are closer than ever, as Idel shows by exemplifying with a series of novels by the Romanian author. This tight connection between the fictional characters and the reality of the studies conducted by Eliade shows that his every research had multiple connotations, which leads to the belief that Eliade devoted much time to contemplating his ideas, which permeated every aspect of his life.

Androgyny, totality and death

Given Eliade's view on the sacred, it should come as no surprise that he took an interest in the concept of androgyny[11]. He wasn't the first researcher to do so, of course, but this aspect of his studies becomes relevant when looked at from a considerable distance. Given Eliade's constant search for answers regarding androgyny, the latter can also be taken as a starting point for understanding his view on the Universe. In order to clarify things, Moshe Idel presents different aspects of the matter. By confronting the theories of Jung and Plato[12], Idel manages to create an articulate image of what the androgynous looks like in the eyes of Eliade: it stands for perfection, totality, as the androgynous being is completely integrated, a symbol for the two spheres that were once

separated[13]. At this point, Idel displays to the reader a notion that would later explain the entire way of thinking that Eliade used as a researcher and even as a writer: the 'archaic'[14]. By using this term, Idel unveils Eliade's foremost wish, a somewhat compulsive need underlying his studies, which is to return to the basic elements that stand for what may be explained as a spiritual phenomenon.

As regards the explanation of androgyny, Idel notices a connection between Eliade's and Plato's points of view, as well as the influence of the Zohar, via the work of Paul Vulliaud[15], whom the Romanian author admired. Even so, there are some contradictions between the image perpetuated in the Zohar and the way Eliade interprets it. As Idel argues, Eliade tried his best to prove that Adam was an androgynous being[16]. The analysis that Idel makes following this observation is one that validates an opinion expressed at the beginning at the book: there are differences – subtle, at times – between the time Eliade spent in Romania and abroad. Such difference is brought to light in the case of the studies on androgyny, where Idel notices a shift in the paradigms used[17]. The fact that the Romanian essays are not really known to foreigners does not mean they are less important, but simply put, the world cannot understand Eliade's work by looking at it from one direction only.

In order to add clarity and substance to the theory Eliade created around the androgynous, Moshe Idel brings to light the concept of *coincidentia oppositorum* (the coincidence of opposites), within the idea of totality and perfection that Eliade focused on[18]. Idel also discovers that in the author's eyes, masculinity is related to the idea of totality, but despite this argument, there is no mention of androgyny in this particular context[19].

The desire to be reintegrated in totality took Eliade to new heights in his studies, as Moshe Idel notes. The Romanian author started searching the desired balance through erotic rituals which included orgiastic practices. Although it may seem like an extreme approach, Eliade saw in his sexual behavior a technique that he could use in order to achieve some degree of equilibrium. Idel presents this type of expression as an outcome of Eliade's encounter with yoga, but it also shows Eliade's need to find a cure for his melancholia, which verged on depression. Not only did Eliade chanel this type of erotic behavior in his personal life, but he also created fictional characters that made his fictional work rather controversial with the critics. Despite this response, the Romanian author followed this path and thus demonstrated his interest and belief in archaic practices. He was truly convinced that by confronting a series of sexual and erotic excesses he might retrieve the balance that can bring him closer to reintegration in totality. [20]

There is no doubt that Eliade immersed himself completely in his belief system, hoping that on the other side he would find the ultimate

form of balance that would lead him to the primordial state of being. Still, there is a question that needs to be answered: did Eliade interpret correctly the texts that he studied or did he lend them a personal and convenient explanation?

Idel somewhat raises the question, suggesting that more than anything else, Eliade was an avid reader[21], and most of his research came to life by his ability to interpret other people's interpretation of texts. The reality is the Romanian author had very limited access to original texts, therefore it should come as no surprise that the majority of his studies can be seen as his personal perspective on different paradigms. Of course, that does not diminish Eliade's own contributions, but it does put things in a different perspective, one that many avoid, simply because it may seem an act of defiance. Yet, in avoiding it there is the risk of misunderstanding. There is no malice in Moshe Idel's words. On the contrary, his objective perspective testifies to his respect and admiration for Eliade; such an expression should be an example of professionalism and devotion to the realities with which Eliade was confronted during his life, be it a matter of academic achievement, literary creation or personal turmoil.

Regarding Eliade's interest in androgyny, there are some gaps. Influenced by different perspectives from varied cultures (Jung, Plato, Kabbalah), one might assume that Eliade saw in androgyny an archetype that resembled perfection and reintegration, but despite this explanation, Idel senses that there is no real structure behind Eliade's train of thought. What does exist, however, is a chaotic order in which Eliade believed, but the confusion thus created cannot bring the matter to a close.

While pursuing the idea of purification and fulfillment, Eliade takes an interest in the subject of death. As expected of someone with such a cosmic view, Eliade did not see an end in dying, but rather an open gate to the beginning of a new and different spiritual experience[22]. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Eliade believed in signs as well as in destiny[23]. This perspective had a great influence on his approach to death, a claim that is reflected in his fiction, just like other issues. For Eliade's characters, death becomes a matter of destiny, it is portrayed like a cathartic experience, but it also proves the fact that Eliade's private life merged with that of his fictional characters, some of which where 'borrowed' from Eliade's personal history.[24] Rather than considering it the final frontier, the author looks at death through the lenses of a symbolic experience, an explanation that Idel uses to bring up the subject of Eliade's affiliation to the Iron Guard (Garda de Fier), a violent, extreme political movement in Romania. [25]

Through the voice of his characters, Eliade envisioned death as a way to achieve totality, but there is also a sacrificial connotation behind death, one that might have prompted Eliade to join the Iron Guard, a matter that will be tackled in the following pages. In any case, Eliade's view on death

comes with a multitude of meanings and possibilities, but it is never viewed as an ending or a constant threat.

Behind Eliade's vision there is the influence of his yoga studies[26], some of which included techniques that would lead to immortality, something that Eliade was very interested in. Still, his search for significance in terms of passing away stopped at something very familiar to Romanians: legends found in the national folklore. Eliade turns to *Mioriţa* and *The Legend of Master Manole* to unfold the mysteries of death. There are two perspectives shown in these cases: as Idel notes, Eliade found in *Mioriţa* the perfect example of archaic Romanian traditions, returning to an interest which had never really left his thoughts. On the other hand, in *The Legend of Master Manole*, Eliade found the root of death as an act of creation; according to the legend, in order for a monastery to stay erect, Manole had to brick in his own wife alive. The Romanian author creates a pattern for understanding death: the sacrificial side on the one hand and death as the power of creation on the other hand. [27]

Despite controversies surrounding both the Romanian legend and ballad, Idel notices that Eliade used these powerful symbols in his fiction, proving once again that there is no divide between Eliade the researcher and Eliade the writer. In order to shed even more light on the matter, Idel presents the opinion of the Romanian author on the subject of death during war[28]. Even in this case, Eliade remained faithful to his previous idea, that death brings balance; at the same time, war is associated with an orgy, which in Eliade's case means it has a healing role, purifying everything around. The next step taken by Idel is to retrace the significance and the portrayal of death in the Romanian culture; Eliade was surrounded by the ideas of great Romanian personalities, such as Mircea Eminescu or Lucian Blaga, and although Eliade wasn't the only one who took an interest in the matter, his ideas were bold and ultimately led him to a dangerous path, one that later would explain his affiliation to The Iron Guard, as Idel explains.[29]

It would be safe to assume that for Eliade, death has two major connotations. Idel makes the distinction between the general perspective, which leads to a form of totality, and death from a social, even political point of view, where death is a form of sacrifice that makes man a part of history[30]. Whatever the case, Eliade saw in death a perspective through which the Romanian culture could be understood, given its roots: *The Legend of Master Manole* and *Mioriţa.* Despite all the implications Eliade found in the idea of death, Idel takes a rather rational stand, stating that all the concepts formulated by the Romanian author were just a way to find meaning in death, and yet they are all the products of immagination, rather than palpable discoveries.[31]

From a scientific point of view, Idel does make a strong case; Eliade's point of view isn't supported by any logical or rational proof; rather he

voices a series of hopes for what the other side might have in store, a hope that he nurtured during his research, but still not solid enough to make a powerful statement or even a plausible argument.

The face of Judaism trough the eyes of Eliade

Given the fact that Eliade kept a permanent interest in myths, history and time, it should come as no surprise that Moshe Idel analyzed these concepts in the context of Judaism. By doing so, Idel provides the much needed clarification of the arguments brought by Eliade, which doesn't necessarily mean that he rejects their validity. Eliade was deeply interested in everything that had to do with reversibility, something that was very close to the rediscovery of origins, whether in terms of spirituality or even politics.[32] In this context, Eliade approaches Judaism and its roots in an almost violent manner, arguing that the elites led to a monotheistic Israel, an idea that bothered Eliade and made him believe that time in the context of Judaism was profoundly connected to history and thus it was irreversible[33]. Idel makes his first effort to clarify a series of facts; by presenting the opinions of Jewish historians Yosef H. Yerushalmi and Arnaldo Momigliano, Idel proves that history was never the main characteristic of the Jewish culture, which can be defined rather as a mixture of historical and archaic elements.[34]

There is also something to be said about why Eliade saw in elites a negative influence. In this case too Idel brings to light a series of facts that prove Eliade's misleading interpretation. In the eyes of the Romanian author, the elites take an abstract approach to things, while life is based on real experiences. But as Idel argues, the elites Eliade talks about are most likely the prophets[35], a misinterpretation that might be the cause of Eliade's distorted view on the subject. If Idel is not particularly keen on showing this, the reader might have some conflicting feelings about Eliade and his perspective. Did his almost obsessive interest in rural religion blind him or was it just a misinterpretation? According to Eliade, a major critique to the desacralized world is represented by the immersion in time and history, but this should come as no surprise, since Eliade admired the archaic man, who managed to transcend time.

All these factors combined prove a fault in Eliade's approach to Judaism; despite his lack of interest in history from a temporal perspective, the Romanian author refused to see in Judaism an evolving religion, something that Idel expresses clearly by arguing that Eliade ignored the changes that occurred later on[36]. Rather than doing so, Eliade chose to remain faithful to his passion for what he thought was the better of the two: rural religion. He strongly believed that this particular type of religion was superior to others, an idea that Eliade pursued in his academic research. Still, as Idel shows, even Eliade had to bow to irreversibility, something he did when he admitted that the Romanian

people cannot return to that ideal state[37]. Despite this last argument, Idel's analysis plays a powerful role in understanding the way Eliade's mind worked, not only on his own beliefs, but also in the way he let them affect his studies.

As shown below, Eliade's perspective on Judaism can be related to his involvement with the Iron Guard, for which Idel has no sympathy, which is completely understandable. One might say that Idel's intent is to deconstruct Eliade's pattern in order to explain his controversial and regrettable political involvement, but more that that, Idel succeeds in creating a well constructed paradigm that sheds light on his manner of studying and understanding not only religion, but culture too.

Mircea Eliade and Kabbalah

Many would probably be surprised by the in-depth analysis that Idel makes on Eliade's connections with Kabbalah, and even Idel admits that this is the direct result of his academic researches[38], but through the latter's detailed arguments, the reader gets a glimpse of an obscure and rather glossed over side of Eliade's studies. It seems natural to have access to a different kind of sources that ultimately influenced Eliade, in adition to the so many known factors that contributed to Eliade's work.

Although the Romanian author hasn't put as much thought into Kabbalah as compared to his other studies, he did have an indirect access to it, through important Romanian figures such as Nae Ionescu and Marcel Avramescu, both being fairly familiar with the concept[39]. As Idel suggests, Eliade had a more positive approach to Kabbalah than to other expressions of Judaism, which may be the result of the fact that he found in Kabbalah a Jewish correspondent to cosmic religion, a rural type of religion that is connected to life in Nature. Eliade saw many things, including Kabbalah through the lenses of cosmic vision[40].

Idel unveils an amazing fact regarding Eliade's perspective: words such as 'magic' for instance, somehow carry information from the past[41], a fact that may offer another valid explanation as to why Eliade was so interested in the less obvious and in the rediscovery of the archaic. His own cosmic vision was an expression of a primordial Universe, containing all archaic religions, which explains Eliade's interest in totality and androgyny. Idel also identifies a strong parallel between Eliade and Gershom Scholem, the man who influenced the Romanian author on matters of Kabbalah. What seems even more intriguing is that Idel notices that, although in a different register, Scholem was too influenced by Eliade; from that point on, Idel conducts a parallel analysis of the two, giving the reader a complex portrayal not only of Eliade, but also of the people who inspired him.[42]

Among them, Idel mentions Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who, like Eliade, saw a connection between Christianity and magic, as well as between Christianity and Kabbalah, so there should be no doubts as to why Eliade found in Pico della Mirandola a point of reference[43]. Although this type of relation between ideas is quite fascinating, Idel brings to light an important and yet surprising fact: Eliade was not aware of the presence of Hasidism in Romania, although the most known form of Judaism at the time. Idel is quite puzzled about the failed meeting between Eliade and Hasidism, especially since its presence was undeniable in in Romania at the time. Moreover, Idel shows that he doesn't quite understand Eliade's obsession with the Romanian peasants as representatives of cosmic Christianity and paid virtually no attention to all the stories about Hasidic leaders, who seemed to be true miracle workers[44]. Not only does Idel prove the lack of valid evidence that supports Eliade's theory, but he also shows a sense of deep loyalty that the Romanian author had for his own beliefs and instincts. Just because there was no palpable evidence to support his case doesn't mean Eliade didn't stand by his cause.

As Idel admits at the beginning of the chapter, his investigations on Eliade and Kabbalah are founded on his own private interest and research yet he also shed light on the dual perspective that Eliade had on Judaism: on the one hand, he considered it an almost numb religion, whose immersion in history was the work of elites. On the other hand, he seems to have more positive thoughts about Kabbalah, and one could be almost entirely convinced that Eliade's view would have changed if he had been introduced to Hasidism which, ironically, was standing right in front of him. Of course, Kabbalah wasn't a major concern for Eliade, but he wasn't indifferent to it and he certainly could relate to its principles, especially since it represented something very important for the Romanian author: cosmic religion.

A most Romanian/Jewish controversy

It comes as no surprise that Moshe Idel's analysis of Eliade should influence the way the Romanian author is perceived. More than that, Idel brings to light a side of the Romanian culture and socio-political life that might have been missed by many, simply because people have a tendency to look closely at what meets the eye, rather than seek out the one pulling the strings. It may seem a rather metaphorical approach, and it is, but it is also true that Eliade's manner of thinking and his constant search for answers allows for such a perspective.

At this point in the book, the reader might have the feeling that he is part of a journey of rediscovery, and it would be a fair assumption, but Idel created a well structured discourse in order to be able to present a series of events that changed Eliade, and eventually changed the path he chose to follow. Before moving on to the Iron Guard and Eliade's involvement in

it, Idel exposes a controversial cultural event that took place in Romania in the 1930's. In 1934, Mihail Sebastian, born Iosef Hochter, published a book that dwells on the possibility of a Jewish-Romanian identity, which would entitle a union between cultures[45]. The real controversy was brought on by Nae Ionescu's introduction to it, Mihail Sebastian's mentor, who approached the book from a religious point of view; basically, Ionescu emphasized the need for the Jewish people to suffer, as stated in numerous theological arguments[46].

Despite the sensitive nature of the topic, Idel proves that both writers had a mythical approach: Sebastian had a prevailingly cultural view on the matter, which made religion a secondary topic, while Ionescu held on to the old image of the Jewish people. As a result, they are both led by the myth of the Jew that cannot change, that is stuck in time and history, an approach similar to Eliade's[47] own. Surprisingly, the Romanian author didn't seem eager to take sides or to force his own point of view on the matter. In a nutshell, Eliade tried to protect Ionescu and Sebastian from each other, putting emphasis on the fact that God should be looked at as a free agent, who can choose to forgive the Jewish people if he wants to[48]. This rather neutral position calmed spirits for a while, but only until people became interested in the theological controversy between Eliade and Ionescu.

Idel keeps his verticality, as he always did irrespective of the context, and revealed that no one had the courage to take responsibility for the true root of the Jewish suffering, which in Idel's eyes is Christian anti-Semitism[49]. Still, this is just the tip of the iceberg; as Idel notices, not even Sebastian managed to explain in his novel which were those Jewish values he talked about and how they can relate to the Romanian ones[50]. The fact that Ionescu's introduction is anti Semite is undeniable, something that would come as no surprise in the context of the Iron Guard.

Likewise, the possibility that Mihail Sebastian was influenced by Mircea Eliade is extremely real, given the friendship between the two; as Idel suggests, Sebastian found inspiration in Eliade's theory of camouflage, proving that Eliade molded in some way Sebastian's creative process[51]. Of course, one should not forget that Eliade rather sided with Sebastian during his book controversy with Nae Ionescu. As stated above, Idel manages to recreate Romania's cultural life in which Eliade thrived, recalling almost forgotten stories that could actually be seen as the core of a much larger problem: the Iron Guard.

This particular chapter may leave the reader with a ratter bitter taste: the friendship between Mircea Eliade and Mihail Sebastian vanished into thin air once the Romanian author joined the Iron Guard. This was the first victim of Eliade's choice. As it will be shown in the next paragraphs, many more followed.

The Iron Guard

Persevering in his pertinent and objective analysis, Moshe Idel tackles one of the most sensitive and controversial topics concerning Eliade. Although the topic refers to politics, Idel is not interested directly in this aspect but rather tries to retrace Eliade's steps as a researcher of religion, since the Iron Guard was a deeply religious movement[52]. This is a chapter of his life that Eliade preferred to forget, but as Idel shows, some mistakes are not as easily forgotten as others. As it often happens, Eliade's defenders tried to sweep under the rug his political involvement, tried to deny all evidence, but even in Eliade's case there is a point of no return, when all attempts at cover up fails.

But yet again, Moshe Idel's merit is to have viewed this delicate episode in Eliade's life through the eyes of the researcher, through symbols and signs, not as cold hearted politics. This can ultimately be described as the chapter that proves the high quality analysis that Idel has conducted throughout this book; without it, it would have been impossible for the reader to grasp the meaning of Eliade's political involvement from a strictly spiritual and academic point of view. As a consequence, Idel is not interested in labeling Eliade as an anti Semite[53], but rather focused on unraveling other aspects of this major chapter in the Romanian author's life.

In order to do that, Idel turns his attention to Ion Moţa, an emblematic figure among the leaders of the Iron Guard, analyzing his influence on Eliade. This particular case study is quite astounding to the reader, as Idel shows that despite being an intellectual, Moţa had an inexplicable fear of the Jews, which eventually turned him into an anti Semite. The fact that he died in the Spanish Civil War and that his funeral was attended by many influential Nazi and Fascist adherents proves just how dedicated he was to this most extreme and violent political movement in Romania. In addition to the fact that given his cultural background Ion Moţa was a paradox, Moshe Idel was also puzzled by the fact that Eliade seemed almost blinded by the so called spiritual meaning of the Iron Guard. Even if he claimed to have taken a step back when he became aware of the violent crimes committed by the members of the Iron Guard, it is still hard to believe that Eliade was ignorant of the extremist and criminal ideas they propagated[54].

The main goal for the Iron Guard was to eliminate the Jews, but Idel found an extremely disturbing view expressed by Nae Ionescu, which basically stated that killing Jews is actually a favor done to them, so it wouldn't necessarily be a criminal act, but rather a compassionate one[55]. Whether the reader chooses to understand such a perspective as a sadistic irony or a true creed shared by the members of The Iron Guard, in reality this is the true significance of the movement, which surpasses any spiritual meaning that Eliade might have seen in it. Simply because the

Romanian author tacitly accepted the vicious murders against the Jews doesn't mean that his admiration for Corneliu Zela Codreanu – the professed anti Semite leader of the Iron Guard – can be denied[56].

Moshe Idel uses a series of excerpts from letters and various documents that show this apparently improbable connection between Eliade and the members of The Iron Guard. More so, the radical and frightening perspective of the Guard is unraveled by the words of Ion Moţa, who suggested that the leaders and members of the Guard are similar to vampires who cannot find peace until they restore what others destroyed.[57] Eliade also writes an article where he seems to agree with the similarities between legionaries and vampires, but it is hard to believe that Eliade's better judgment was shadowed by naiveté when it came to understanding the comparison.

There are indeed a series of connections between Eliade's interest and the so called spiritual meaning of the Iron Guard. The interest in death, the spirit of sacrifice and the love for Romania may represent the reasons why Eliade found himself attracted to this political movement, but from a different perspective. While Eliade had an academic and scientific attitude, the Iron Guard perverted the themes mentioned above by mixing them with a profound hatred towards the Jews[58]. Idel does state that Eliade succumbed at the time to his nationalistic views, but he also chose to quietly accept the criminal stance of the Guard. It is astounding for the reader to realize that such a remarkable person should be so tolerant of violence and extremism.

Throughout his book, Idel proved the connection between the academic, personal and literary aspects of Eliade's life, and the Iron Guard issue is no exception. In this particular chapter, the novel *Miss Christina (Domnisoara Christina[59])* takes on a new meaning, the main character being a vampire woman who tries to resume a relationship with a man despite the fact that they no longer share the same dimension of human existence. In connection with the Iron Guard and its vampires, the novel turns from mere fantasy, into a bloody metaphor that explains Ion Moţa's lines on the subject of vampires. [60]

Curiously, the issue of The Iron Guard dogged Eliade to Chicago, where apparently there was a group of legionaries. Chicago was also the place where Ioan Petru Culianu was murdered. Did the Iron Guard have anything to do with it or was it a simple coincidence? As expected, the Guard denied all accusations, but that doesn't mean the question has been answered[61]. Despite all these hard facts, what bothers Idel the most is the fact that Eliade has never admitted to his involvement or his mistakes. It is clear that he did not take part in the crimes committed by The Guard, but by remaining affiliated to it he couldn't expect the world to believe that he was against them. As harsh as this may sound, it does express the reality that Eliade wanted to forget.

As Idel has proved, The Iron Guard did play an important role in the history of religion, simply because it proved how easily obsessions and irrational fears can lead to countless crimes and extreme acts[62]. The spirituality that Eliade saw in The Guard faded the moment violence and hatred towards the Jews became the prevailing traits of this terrible organization. As Idel concludes, it's possible that Eliade denied everything simply because he was scared that the Guard might turn against him, which is possible, but in the end, the reader might come to a different conclusion: instead, Eliade became aware of his actions and faults and realized that the only way to be forgiven was to forget his own shameful acts.

Final words

Without any doubt, *Mircea Eliade: From Magic to Myth* is an in depth analysis of one of Romania's most treasured personalities. What takes this particular book to a higher level is the undeniable honesty with which Eliade's life and way of thinking are approached. Whether it was religion, fiction, personal turmoils or political involvement, Idel stayed true to reality, refusing to be blindsided by the desire to picture the perfect Eliade. The title of the book, too, might be puzzling to some readers in view of the topics discussed, but it can be interpreted in two ways: one can see in magic and myth two stages in Eliade's life, but they can also be related to the belief system by which Eliade lived his life.

Moshe Idel leaves the reader wondering whether Eliade died feeling that he had accomplished his destiny or ultimately defeated by the very things he thought he knew? There is no wrong or right answer, but neither is possible without reading this book.

Notes

[1] Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005)

[2] Moshe Idel, *Hassidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995). See also Sandu Frunză, Mihaela Frunză (editors), *Essays in honor of Moshe Idel*, (Cluj: Ed. Provopress, 2008).

[3] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit,* translation by Maria-Magdalena Anghelescu, (Iaşi: Polirom, 2014), 31.

[4] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 21.

[5] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 43. See also Mihaela Paraschivescu, "'We the People' and God. Religion and the Political Discourse in the United States of America", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 11, issue 33 (Winter 2012): 21-38.

[6] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 44.

[7] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 47, In the context of Eliade's personal life, as portrayed by him in Mircea Eliade, *Autobiography I*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 274-275.
[8] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 63.
[9] See Mircea Eliade, "Ghicitor in pietre" (The Stone Reader) in Mircea Eliade, *La tiganci si alte povestiri* (With the Gypsy Girls and other short stories), (Bucuresti: Editura pentru literatura, 1969).
[10] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 51.
[11] See Mircea Eliade, *Mefistofel și androginul*, translation by Alexandra Cuniță, (București: Humanitas, 1995).
[12] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 75-76.
[13] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 76.
[14] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 76.
[15] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 78.
[16] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 84-85.
[17] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 78-86.
[18] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 92.
[19] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 93.
[20] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 96-98.
[21] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 100, 182.
[22] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 122. See also Mircea Eliade, *Textele "legionare" și despre "românism"*, (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 2001).
[23] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 25.
[24] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 125-129.
[25] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 130.
[26] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 132-133.
[27] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 135-139. See also http://www.icr.ro/bucuresti/creation-and-destruction-in-folk-culture-24-2004/a-case-of-reduction-to-human-scale-the-legend-of-master-manole.html
[28] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 141-142.
[29] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 142-145.
[30] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 141.
[31] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 145.
[32] Sandu Frunză, "Political Communication and the Median Space of Religious Experience", *Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială*, vol. 39 (2012): 176-186.
[33] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 156-157.
[34] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 163-164.
[35] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 158.
[36] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 170.
[37] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 160.
[38] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 175.
[39] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 176.
[40] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 179-181.
[41] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 182.
[42] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 180-184.
[43] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 185.
[44] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 188-190.

[45] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 193-194. See also Mihail Sebastian, *Jurnal 1935-1944*, text îngrijit de Gabriela Omăt, prefață și note de Leon Volovici, (București: Humanitas, 1996).
[46] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 196.
[47] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 196.
[48] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 198.
[49] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 199.
[50] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 205.
[51] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 206-208.
[52] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 214.
[53] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 214.
[54] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 218-224
[55] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 216.
[56] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 219.
[57] As part of the introduction Ion Moța wrote in 1936 to his collection of propaganda articles.
[58] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 225.
[59] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 228-229. See also Mircea Eliade, *Domnișoara Christina* (Miss Christina), (Bucuresti: Litera, 2011).
[60] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 226.
[61] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 234-235.
[62] Moshe Idel, *Mircea Eliade. De la magie la mit*, 240.