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*Ovidiu Mircean*

**At the Confines of the Imaginary:**

**The Desert**

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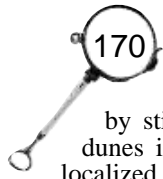
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**1. The eyes of the desert**

For the European sensibility, deserts are spaces defined by extreme and opposed qualities: between the heat of noon and the bitter cold of midnight, the horrible vacuum and the omnipresence of mirages, the absence of life and the ubiquity of hidden caves, oases, traces leading to fabulous worlds beneath the earth. Barren uninhabited land hostile to humans and home to a considerable number of spirits, djinnies and devils, the desert appears to be mostly a *hidden image*. From the very beginning of the European civilization, in the Caananite mythology<sup>1</sup>, the emptiness of the space was only an illusion meant to hide from the eyes of the unworthy, the unseen orchards of goddess Anith, wife of Shachar, god of the Moon. Hence, the interdependency between the nocturnal images, the selenar light and the desert emphasizes the ambivalent nature of the symbol, especially the paradoxical placing of this space (dominated obviously by the sun) under the Moon's dominion. It cannot be seen by the common traveller who will only find a valley of death nor touched by the sunlight which will only uncover dunes and the endless horizon; its essence is revealed only to the chosen ones: the desert is the garden of the night. This function of gate to another world opened is reiterated mostly in the Islamic culture as it is presented in the Arabian Nights in the travels made to the subterranean worlds of dwarfs and all kind of spirits, but it is also maintained in The Christian Middle Ages. It is not at random the fact that the Northern deserts of the medieval mappamundi<sup>2</sup> as the Hereford or

the Ebstorf map are crossed by the Acheron, the river which, according to the tradition starting from the Greeks up to Dante, encircles the Inferno in the depths of the Earth; in this case it connects the world of the living to that of the dead. Beyond the limits of the civilized world and not very far from the gates of Hell, the Northern wilderness will become an intermediate space between "here" and "there", populated by mythological creatures, mostly guides to the underworld, or by humans who gave up their natural human condition either by struggling to reach a superior ontological status or by falling into animality. Taking into account this function of "in-between space", the phenomenology of the imaginary cannot ignore the elements of *numinosum* associated instinctively with the image of deserts especially because, in psychological terms, it is one of the most meaningful symbols, as it exists both in the sphere of consciousness, of the diurnal images, and in that of the unconscious phantasms, projected in the form of mirages. For many centuries, at the confines of the known world and of the existing *imago mundi*, deserts have mirrored and separated the distinct areas of the human psyche.

In his book, *La vie des images*<sup>3</sup>, Jean Jacques Wunenburger analyses the effect produced by the landscape of endless sands in the mind of the viewer, starting from different literary fragments, memories and travel journals. Ignoring the problem of the *horror vacui* in the Oriental tradition and focusing mostly on European sources, the author discusses the irresistible attraction that deserts exert on the Occidental mind by betraying the presence of another place



beyond the visible void, and by stirring the desire to cross the dunes in search of a promised land localized somewhere at the limits of visibility. At the same time it evokes feelings of fear and rejection through the impression of absolute loneliness that it creates; the experience is therefore similar to a rhythmic play of drawing near and drawing apart. The study is one of the most interesting written on this topic because it employs different concepts borrowed from the phenomenology of the sacred, especially from Rudolf Otto, trying to explain the role of the image in so many religious contexts and its connection to the system of sacred representations. The physical space of the mineral desert, the rocks, the large enclosures of sand are the proper *topos* for dynamic images that allow a radical change of the soul's architecture, its inflation and eventually, the transition from body to soul. The desert imaginary is by definition the product of an exacerbated ego extended to the dimensions of a world without limits, that he had conquered. It offers the opportunity for a self de-centring, a pretext for reaching another ego, for searching an invisible presence, for being possessed by an Alterity. Symbols and metaphors, argues Wunenburger, exist only if the monadic wholeness of the being is cracked and opened to the void, only if Identity is sacrificed in favour of Alterity and the Presence becomes the echo of an Absence. The close connection between this theory of the symbol defined as an incomplete image, denoting a cryptic signification, born out of the continuous alternating of the absence and the presence and Rudolf Otto's concept of the Sacred<sup>4</sup> as the supreme Alterity, is extremely relevant as it confers numinous characters to the image, even without searching for arguments in the history of its occurrence in culture. European literature abounds in examples of people possessed by spirits, mystics, visionaries, and "God's fools", retired in the desert from the first Christian Gospels to Walter Scott's adventure novels. Extremely subtle, Wunenburger's perspective is still too much influenced by the post-romantic travellers who reached the desert with a new sensibility, accepting and perceiving the overwhelming image as a

sublime one. It cannot be ignored the fact that for centuries, it has been a refused demonized image, often associated to the Devil's temptations and bearing the mark of the Christian world view. Even if history confirms and also denies the above statements by adding hues and elements which could offer an excellent material for a more detailed study, the common element which seems to have survived throughout the centuries and is to be found from the antique tales to the modern novels is the hidden face, the intuition of a haunting Alterity.

The traveller who looks at the desert is possessed not by an obsessive image perceived as an object of sense experience; the crusader who once arrived will give up his wanderings in order to become a hermit is not the one contemplating the infinite space, on the contrary, he is the one contemplated and fascinated by some ineffable eyes. The anguish generated by a terrifying look has deep roots far back in the Greek mythology, as Pascal Quignard<sup>5</sup> proves it when talking about Medusa and the complex of the paralyzing glance defined in Freudian terms as mere terror in front of the *vagina dentata*. In our case the sexual and psychoanalytical implications are evidently out of context, but there is an important detail of the myth itself which should be taken into account: having killed the Medusa, Perseus flies over Lybia (approximately the contemporary Africa) and drops of her blood fall on the desert giving birth to venomous serpents<sup>6</sup>. Strabo, Herodotus and later on, Isidorus of Seville will mention in their works the existence of fabulous reptiles in the southern regions of the continent. In all the medieval<sup>7</sup> bestiaries, they have a common characteristic reminding of their mythological origin: different hypostases of Medusa's eyes. For instance, *amphivena*'s eyes shine in the dark like two lamps, *basiliskus* or *regulus* can kill humans with a simple look and *scitalis* changes the colour of its skin attracting people hypnotically and then eating them. The constant association of the desert with a Gorgon's look was further translated in moral terms in the Middle Ages when every such serpent was identified to a mortal sin or temptation induced by Satan to steal the Christian's soul. Similarly to appearance of the fabulous elementary spirits of the water

who can steal the soul of those lost in their contemplation or in listening to their songs, the unseen creatures of the desert can seduce the innocent traveller, devoiding him of his previous identity. Undeniably, a history of the desert will be a history of seduction, in a double acception of the term, implying on the one hand the diffuse erotic or mystic connotations recorded above, on the other hand making use of Jean Baudrillard's theory. "To be seduced means to lose one's truth<sup>8</sup>" affirms the postmodern essayist referring first of all to the way in which the simulacra replaced reality in the contemporary world. In our case it would be interesting to identify the way in which the phantasms projected on the desert, the symbolic value of this frontier space changed gradually depending mostly on every substantial modification of the *imago mundi*. A comparatist approach to this image and to its symbolic roles in literature contextualized in particular world views, must also reconfigure the history of the periphery, focusing on the relationship between center and margins, in order to reveal the elements of the imaginary which were exiled from the authoritarian consciousness. Navigating in centrifugal direction from this center, to the farther limits of the imagined universe, a complex study should also follow the mechanism of gradual usurpation and re-establishing of the center. Not only once in history, social and ideological systems were able to regenerate themselves by absorbing and including the excluded elements, the heresies. The geography of the world image changed also by inserting new territories in the inhabited humanized space. In this respect, European history has known two similar periods when an important mutation occurred in the geography of the *Weltanschauung* by the unexpected reversal of the hierarchy of symbolic places: the civilized center of human society was replaced by the space previously localized beyond the frontiers. In the late Middle Ages, and more recently, in the Late Modernity, the desert appeared in the center, in the former case by an overlapping of symbolic meaning, in the latter, by a total rehearsal of topography.

## 2. The rejected image

Before Romanticism when the endless spaces reproduced in landscapes start to produce an aesthetic effect very close to the sublime, as it happens in painting in the works of William Turner or Caspar David Friedrich<sup>9</sup>, the image of the desert seems to be closer to the Oriental way of perceiving distances. The romantic totalizing conscience, the expansionist tendencies are in clear contrast with the self-imposed humility of the medieval. According to Lucien Regnault<sup>10</sup>, once the Christian martyrdom disappears with the ending of the persecutions, a new form of mortification of the ego based on will sacrifices and the anatemization of flesh appears. If the Romantic includes the world in the expansion of his interiority, the hermit is the one rejecting it by taking refuge in the spiritual contemplation; if the former extends so much the limits of his conscience, that it usurps the Divine Image, the latter kills systematically his ego cleaning its spaces in order to be possessed by the divinity<sup>11</sup>. At the very beginning, the first form of hermits' retreatment from the center of the Christian community, implying giving up all their social rights and being declared death in this world, consisted of living in the ancient abandoned tombs. Localized outside the city along the sides of the main roads, the funeral buildings had often been homes for the society's parias. Now, they became the favourite dwelling place for those who proclaimed the violent separation from the old sinful soul, the punishment of the body, the urge to spend this life in intense contemplation of all spiritual things and finally the need to get prepared for the moment of death. The symbol of the inhabited tomb sustained the idea of a daily process of interiorizing death, of giving up the body pleasures, and in a way, it "tamed" the moment of natural death as the change of ontological status was not to be felt so dramatically. In his study, *Călugărul și moartea*, Cristian Bădiliță focuses upon the symbolism of the goat skin clothes that the hermits used to abandon when they felt their end approaching, an element suggesting an out-of-body experience, alleviating the anguish of immi-

nent death for which the “God’s athletes” had prepared all their life. During this first epoch of the Christian monachism, the hagiographies present plenty of images with thanatic connotations meant to establish by memorable examples the model of the saint, such as hermits wearing their long hair as unique clothing, talking to skulls or fighting the demons in the tombs. In spite of this, they are not macabre images. They only underline the mystical indifference, the futile character of the present life, the mourning and the hope for redemption, for the promised paradise. Therefore, we can notice a functional isomorphism between the tomb and the desert that will not stir the feeling of *horror vacui* as in the Islamic spirituality, nor the agoraphobic reveries of the modernist sensibility, but on the contrary, it will paradoxically be an enclosed space. The arid lands, Devil’s places, will be named “the valley of the shadow of death” where Jesus Himself descended to face the temptations. Here, where the visible turns into an ephemeral illusion, where the worlds of the flesh and that of the spirit are so entangled that it is impossible to separate them, the Christian must face a last test of faith: resisting and fighting the image. *Saint Anthony’s Life*<sup>12</sup> written by Saint Athanasius the Great presents moments when the devils try to confuse the hermit assuming the shapes of angels, but he rejects them naturally, arguing that because of the humble character of his human condition he is unable to rely on his senses for knowledge, but only on God’s revelation. The visible, the mirage is the arm of the demonic worldly temptations; on the contrary, redemption can be obtained only through the interior light of the Christian *logos*. The mystics will adopt this idea, sustaining that only by interior contemplation one can become part of the universal visibility. In one of Jeronimus Bosch’s paintings entitled *Saint Anthony’s Temptation*<sup>13</sup> and created some years after the well known homonymous masterpiece the hermit is surrounded by all sorts of demonic creatures assaulting him, but his eyes wide open to the sky cannot see any longer the images around, looking at something else not presented in colours. “*The one who sticks to the letter, the expression, or to the sensible fig-*

*ure of the vision* – writes St. John of the Cross – *cannot avoid falling into the greatest error, suddenly waking up lost and confused because he had allowed himself to be guided by senses, without finding a place for his spirit*<sup>14</sup>.” The hermit’s unconfessed dream is blindness, the opening of the spiritual eye free from the multiplicity of the images of the desert.

Following this centrifugal movement which takes the hermits out of their native communities, takes them to the tombs and thereafter to the desert, the fifth and the sixth century are the time of another movement in the topography of the imaginary, this time a centripetal one: the thanatic symbols mentioned above leave the desert and conquer the center of the city. Phillipe Aries<sup>15</sup> notices the way in which the tombs, considered at the beginnings of Christianity unclean, are gradually incorporated in the city, finally being placed in the center. The moment when the tombs enter the Church is synchronic with the period of maximal extension of the cult of the saints and also with the epoch in which the hermit, trained in his fight against the desert illusions descends into the city to fight the temptations of flesh. Paladius’s *Lausiac History* recalls similar anchorites considered idiots by the society but tolerated in the public places. They tried – according to Michel de Certeau<sup>16</sup> – to lose their distinctive definite traces, to lose themselves in the crowd, suddenly understood as a place that cancels the differences. The idiots were seduced, enchanted by an absence, being always retreated somewhere else in an unknown place. Their body turned into an orifice was possessed. Between the oral function that promised his presence and the anal one announcing his departures, the crazy mystic lived in an endless exercise of his own arrival and disappearance. In analyzing the reactions to time, Michel de Certeau proposes an opposition between the historiographer who articulates a representation offering certitudes instead of gaps and the mystic, who, on the contrary, guides his existence on the basis of a continuous connection to what he cannot know or understand. Living in the center of the community, often assuming the role of the scapegoat, the mystic dies and escapes. The historiographer survives,

but in order to build simulacra.

Between the fifth and the eleventh century, the visual nature and the *mirabilia* will be repressed, rationalized. In the twelfth century, the role of the desert as enclosed space will be assumed in the Occidental Europe by the forest<sup>17</sup>, the place of loneliness and of many legendary fears. The Gothic cathedrals testify the invasion of the forest and of the miraculous in the builders' obsession for ornamental details. The golden background of the Byzantine paintings was replaced by a schematic bidimensional landscape, turned gradually into a tri-dimensional perspective. Having surpassed the crisis of iconoclasm, the European paintings started to represent scenes from the lives of the saints, but, as in Giotto's case, the desert was populated by trees, and finally abandoned in favour of the more elegant scenery of the Renaissance paintings. The Renaissance is a period in which the visual is rediscovered, but once the spatial perspective is defined, the crisis of accelerated time starts to be felt.

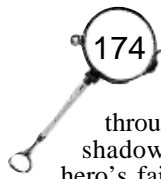
### 3. The rediscovered image

Recontextualizing the descriptive elements presented by the voyagers of the Enlightenment and the older magic deserts of the Baroque labyrinths, the Romantics rediscovered the fascination of endless horizons as a mirror of their own interiorized feelings, creating a reflexive identity between the external and the interior world. If for the medieval the wilderness presented the dangers of damnation, in modernity, it becomes an alternative to the alienating present. Dino Buzzati's novel, *The Desert of the Tartars* articulates a hagiographic scenario in a fictional universe. The young soldier Giovanni Drogo is sent to the Bastiani fortress situated on the Northern frontier of the kingdom. Old legends transmitted orally from the older soldiers to the new ones announce the promised arrival of the tartars that are supposed to invade the kingdom coming from the Northern desert. Even if the tales prove to be fictive, and the desert is barren, hiding no tribe of the tartars, the hero remains for a lifetime on the walls of the

fortress, seduced by its visual temptations. If the medieval anchoress protects his eyes from the demonic images, the hermit of the fortress assumes to the extremes the experience of the fascinating image. The space where Giovanni Drogo enters is, unlike the external desert of Saint Anthony, an interior endless space full of signs which must be deciphered. The imaginary world of the novel assumes a monadic, organic shape, because the macrocosm seems to reflect in multiple projections the narcissist image of the ego. The same role is shared by the chimerical shapes of the Northern lands, incarnations of the abyssal contents of the psyche as revealed in a moment of anamnesis:

“Dove mai Drogo aveva già visto quel mondo? C'era forse vissuto in sogno o l'aveva costruito leggendo qualche antica fiaba? Gli pareva di riconoscerle, le basse rupi in rovina, la vale tortuosa senza piante, né verde, quei precipizi a sghembo e infine quel triangolo di desolata pianura che le rocce davanti non riuscivano a nascondere. Ecchi profondissimi dell'animo suo si erano ridestati in lui e non li sapeva capire<sup>18</sup>”

Andrei Pleșu<sup>19</sup> defines this type of landscape representing remote lands, barely visible in the horizon, as “nostalgic landscape”, typical for Romantic paintings. Remoteness is according to Pleșu, “the ineffable trace left in space by a God”. Melancholy, understood as “the optical encounter of two lonely beings: of the contemplating and of the contemplated” is basically the affective space born between the remote images. The desert seen at the distance, the rocks, the mountains are closer to non-being reducing the real to the hypothetical. The spatial abyss becomes an equivalent of the temporal abyss; in this respect, to see means to remember. Even if focused strictly on paintings, Andrei Pleșu's theory meets Wunenburger's ideas presented in the first part of the text and it brings new light on the interpretation of Buzzati's novel. Giovanni Drogo's form of monachism and his search for a diffuse *numinosum* have inspired an interpretation of the text in Christian terms. Although the fabulous tartars do not exist

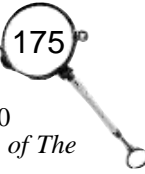


and they only appear throughout the novel as mirages or shadows of uncertain forms, the hero's faith and desire, his continuous watching the desert transformed into a kind of mystical exercise, will cause at the end of the novel the apparition of the tartars who attack the fortress. The illusionary mirages receive material bodies. Studying in parallel the formal structure of this novel and that of another one of Buzzati's, *One Love*, the critics<sup>20</sup> have discovered beyond the names of the protagonists, Antonio Dorigo and Giovanni Drogo, the re-employment of two hagiographies: the life of Saint Anthony, respectively the life of Saint John, the writer of the Revelation. In the *Desert of the Tartars* the melancholy of the landscape is overlapped on the Christian pathos, on the tensionate expectancy of the second coming, which is not mentioned explicitly in the text, but can be found by searching for the archi-text. On the medieval mappamundi<sup>21</sup>, the Northern deserts were localized beyond the Upper Scythia (the land of the tartars), close to the mountain where, according to the legend, Alexander the great had enclosed the pagan nations of Gog and Magog, very often identified with the peoples of the Antichrist. When the tribes of Gog and Magog escape digging a road through the mountain and crossing the desert, Apocalypse shall come. Many elements in Dino Buzzati's prose as the names of the miraculous creatures, (coluber, cerastosaurus), confirm the author's knowledge of the medieval manuscripts and legends and bring more arguments for this hagiographic interpretation of the novel.

The most provoking aspect of the fictional universe of the novel is the way in which it anticipates the theories regarding the postmodern world where fiction generates reality, where the simulacra are more important than the reality they initially mimicked. The arrival of the tartars at the walls of the fortress corresponds to the dawn of postmodernism in literature and to a new significant modification of the cartography of the world image. The desert will appear in the centre of the fictional worlds of the contemporary novels confirming J. Baudrillard's predictions concerning the rise of the void towards the periphery<sup>22</sup>.

## Notes

1. Qadash Kinahnu - [www.geocities.com/sotto/lofots/2938/majdei.html](http://www.geocities.com/sotto/lofots/2938/majdei.html)
2. Daneielle Lecoq – *Place at fonction du désert dans la représentation du monde au Moyen Age*, în *Revue des sciences humaines*, no.2 /2000
3. Jean Jacques Wunenburger – *Viața imaginilor*, Cartimpex, Cluj, 1997
4. Rudolf Otto – *Sacrul*, Dacia, Cluj, 1996
5. Pascal Quignard – *Sexul și spaima*, Univers, București, 2000
6. N. A. Kun – *Legende și miturile Greciei antice*, Ed. a tiințifică, București, 1960
7. for pictures and afferent texts see *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, accesible at [www.clues.abdu.ac.uk:8080/bestest/alt/translat/trans65.v.html](http://www.clues.abdu.ac.uk:8080/bestest/alt/translat/trans65.v.html)
8. Jean Baudrillard – *The Trompe l'Oiel of the Enchanted Simulation* in *Selected Writings*, Polity Press, London, 1988, p 64
9. Vivant Denon în Phillipe Regneri – *Les Saint-Simoniens au désert*, în *Revue des science humaines*, no.2 /2000
10. Lucien Regnault – *Viața cotidiană a părinților deșertului în Egiptul secolului IV*, editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1997
11. Cristian Bădiliță – *Călugărul și moartea*, Polirom, Iași, 1998
12. Athanasius the Great – *The Life of Saint Anthony*, [www.fordham.edumedieval/Orb.html](http://www.fordham.edumedieval/Orb.html)
13. Daneielle Lecoq – *Place at fonction du désert dans la représentation du monde au Moyen Age*, în *Revue des sciences humaines*, no. 2 /2000
14. Sf. Ioan al Crucii în Daneielle Lecoq – *Place at fonction du désert dans la représentation du monde au Moyen Age*, în *Revue des sciences humaines*, no.2 /2000
15. Phillipe Aries – *Omul în fața morții*, Meridiane, București, 1996
16. Michel de Certeau – *Fabula mistică*, Polirom, Iași, 1996
17. Jacques Le Goff – *Imaginarul medieval*, Meridiane, București, 1993
- 23 Dino Buzzati *Il Deserto dei tartari*, pp. 31-32
- 23 Andrei Pleșu – *Pitoresc și melanco-*



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lie. Humanitas, București, 1992

23 Giorgio Barberi Squarotti – *La fortezza e la forma: Il Deserto dei tartari*, in Dino Buzzati a cura di A. Fontanella, Firenze, L. Olschki editore, 1982

23 Daneielle Lecoq – *Place at fonction du désert dans la représentation du monde*

*au Moyen Age*, în *Revue des sciences humaines*, no. 2 /2000

23 Jean Baudrillard – *Rise of The Void Towards The Periphery*

[http:// www.uta.edu/ english/apt/collab/ baudrillard.html](http://www.uta.edu/english/apt/collab/ baudrillard.html)