

Vasile Voia, *Religia în epoca romantică: Un imaginar al Absolutului*, Cluj-Napoca, Școala Ardeleană, 2022



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## IN SEARCH OF THE ROMANTIC ABSOLUTE

The huge bibliography devoted to the Romantic period can serve as an indicator of the oversaturation of this topic and can inhibit researchers who want to write about it. Although it would seem that everything has already been said, that things have long been settled in this field, many of the studies on romanticism begin by declaring the impossibility of clearly defining this term, as there is little agreement on what characterizes philosophers or writers who can be specifically termed “romantic”.<sup>1</sup> However, this is not something that should be perceived negatively, but rather as a factor that facilitates the emergence of new perspectives through which the romantic period is approached according to the current phenomenology of scientific knowledge. Vasile Voia undertakes such a work in his latest book, *Religion in the Romantic Age: An Imaginary of the Absolute* [*Religia în epoca romantică: Un imaginar al Absolutului*, Școala Ardeleană, Cluj-Napoca, 2022, 322 p.], a veritable *tour de force* through the religious aspects of German and French romanticism, exemplary not only for the Romanian cultural space, but also for the international one.

In the *Foreword*, the author mentions two reasons that prompted him to write this book. The first one, of a subjective nature, is the attempt to completely rewrite an older book, *Novalis*, published in 1981 by Univers Press, in which, although the religious dimension was not ignored, it was much diminished, pushed into the background, and was treated cautiously, in an attenuated form. Wanting to do justice to

“the most representative religious romantic poet”, the author decided to resume the theme, but in a larger framework, this time placing the religious issue at the center of the book and “pursuing it exclusively in the most significant, original and creative countries from this point of view, Germany and France”.<sup>2</sup> The result, however, is a completely different book, because the forty years that have passed since the appearance of the monographic study on Novalis could not fail to leave a mark on this approach, even more so as the author could not ignore the current state of the studies in romanticism.

The second reason is of a bibliographic nature, namely the crucial encounter with Georges Gusdorf’s seminal books, “models of the contemporary research of the phenomena of Western culture, respectively of romanticism”: *Le Romantisme*, tome I: *Le savoir romantique*, 1982, and especially *Du Neant a Dieu dans le savoir romantique*, 1983 – “the big, comprehensive book of the great ideas and theological systems of romanticism, without precedent, I believe, in the more than a century of research into this unique phenomenon in the history of the spirit”,<sup>3</sup> which Vasile Voia consistently refers to, both for its theoretical value and for the information it contains. What results is a formidable “dialogue” on two levels: on the one hand, a retrospective dialogue with himself, at a distance of forty years, mediated by the 1981 volume on Novalis, and, on the other hand, a sapiential dialogue with the professor from Strasbourg, mediated by his writings on romanticism.

The introductory chapter of the volume, *Another Romanticism*, is dedicated to Georges Gusdorf and his perspective on the romantic phenomenon – a perspective

which constitutes, the author confesses, the pivot of the entire book. Unlike the numerous previous approaches, “limited mostly to considerations of a historical and aesthetic nature, to analyses and commentaries of works and authors”,<sup>4</sup> in the writings of the renowned French historian of ideas we are dealing with a completely different kind of research, as Gusdorf brings to the fore issues of epistemology, theology, religion, science, and romantic anthropology. In other words, he goes beyond the narrow perspective of exegetes who reduce romanticism to the fine arts and literature, paying attention to both the humanities and the exact sciences, arguing for “a romanticism understood in its totality”.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the novelty of the French scholar’s writings would consist, among other things, in the full view of these fields, in a change of optics and methods: from considering romanticism “a rhetoric of poetry and the novel” to integrating it into “the general phenomenon of epistemology, of science, too little or more rarely addressed by exegetes of romanticism”.<sup>6</sup> Within this approach, romanticism becomes a plural phenomenon, an epistemology of totality – a thesis that Vasile Voia also assumes.

Although he takes and develops throughout the entire volume a lot of the ideas, opinions and considerations of Georges Gusdorf, whom he implicitly portrays as a model of the dazzling scholar, Vasile Voia always remains equidistant and objective, not hesitating to firmly distance himself from some of the French professor’s considerations when he does not share the same opinion – for example, the way Gusdorf perceives the relationship between Enlightenment and Romanticism, as an irreducible opposition, or Gusdorf’s manifest

hostility towards the French Revolution, which he interprets negatively because of its failure, ending in anarchy, terror and war, thus showing “the inability of reason to master history”<sup>7</sup> The repeated references to the writings of the French scholar may give rise to the feeling of too much, but they fit perfectly into the methodological approach of the author, who suggests passing them through the filter of the romantic poet Novalis and perceiving them “in the spirit of the romantic poetics cultivated at the *Athenaeum* (1798-1800), where the emphasis was not necessarily on the originality of the idea or concept, expressed by one collaborator or another, but on the idea of *Symphilosophie* or *Sympoesie* (philosophizing together or making poetry together)”.<sup>8</sup>

Regarding the notion of the romantic absolute, easily discredited from the position of current postmodern theories, Vasile Voia specifies that he does not consider it obsolete, but “a central concept in romanticism, unconditional and perfect, unknown essence and synonymous with divinity”.<sup>9</sup> It is a philosophical and/or religious absolute, which we encounter throughout the book in different forms and connotations, when the author approaches the philosophy of German idealism (in Fichte, Hegel, Novalis), when he analyzes the philosophy of Kant, “who facilitated the opening to the absolute,” or, in a limited sense, when he discusses the writings of Balzac, Hugo, and the French romantics. “The free self, definable by itself, the absolutely creative self is, in fact, the absolute,” says Vasile Voia.<sup>10</sup>

The theme of the romantic absolute is treated in detail in the chapter entitled *The Search for the Absolute*, which begins with an analysis of Balzac philosophy and mythology, through the hero Balthasar Claës

from the novel *Le Recherche de l'Absolu* (1834) – expression of an age passionate about unity and synthesis, obsessed with mystery and with the feeling of the invisible. Vasile Voia's interpretation is corroborated by the comments of G. Gusdorf, who “accredits the idea that romanticism is a «search for the absolute» and an ontology of interiority, since the center of the world is located in the heart of individual existence. Empirical or rational exteriority folds into the domain of interiority.”<sup>11</sup> Like the professor from Strasbourg, the Romanian author considers Germany to be the cultural space of the most profound and authentic romanticism, where interiority was clearly privileged at the expense of exteriority and where the domain of letters was associated with philosophical and theological reflection (unlike France and England, where poetry and reflection communicated only occasionally, notes Vasile Voia). Being a non-unified country, divided into small states, Germany could not open itself to a social-political revolution as it happened in France. Instead, it opened itself to an intellectual, artistic, philosophical revolution. In other words, the idea of revolution was internalized in the German cultural space – a phenomenon that lies at the spiritual origins of romanticism.

While the Enlightenment moved the absolute outside of Galilean and Newtonian space, making the 18th century a century without an absolute (as Gusdorf states), 19th-century Romantic thought was “obsessed with the eschatological knowledge of what is beyond”,<sup>12</sup> but the absolute that the romantics were looking for, as the ultimate objective of the spirit, “is not an entity beyond man, towards a transcendent”,<sup>13</sup> it is not an absolute that resides in the metaphysical

sky of ideas or in the tabernacles of the churches. "It is present in every moment of every existence, close and yet hidden like a secret that hides beneath the mysterious transparency of beings and things. The real presence of divinity is not only located in the spaces consecrated to churches, nor in the conceptual edifices of theological systems; it announces itself to people willingly, without distinction of name."<sup>14</sup> This change in perspective was possible thanks to a relativization process of Christianity initiated by Herder and then marked by the appearance, in France and Germany, of two essential works, considered manifestos of romantic Christianity: Schleiermacher's *On Religions. Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1799), and Chateaubriand's *The Genius of Christianity* (1801). Both books plead for a non-clerical and less ecclesiastical religion, untainted by the traditional fixity that characterizes institutional Christianity. Consequently, the idea of the holy is freed from dogmatics, and the romantic absolute is understood as *erlebnis* (experience). This type of religion was embraced by the promoters of romanticism, who wanted to resacralize life, trying to define a new faith, able to substitute traditional Catholicism.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the author states, all the great romantic writers, "beginning with Novalis, Coleridge, and Chateaubriand, and ending with Schelling and Hugo, are religious thinkers, whose free conceptions, myths, and phantasms strive to negotiate the relations between humanity and divinity".<sup>16</sup>

In order to better describe the way in which the romantics arrived at such a conception of religion and to highlight the type of divinity they preferred, Vasile Voia undertakes, in the chapter *The Precursors of Romantic Consciousness*, a provocative

excursus of the history of ideas in which he discusses Jakob Böhme and Baruch Spinoza, whom Gusdorf called "the patrons of romantic consciousness". While Spinoza had a decisive influence on Schleiermacher, Schelling, Hegel, Schlegel and Novalis – the last saying that "Spinozism is a supersaturation of divinity"<sup>17</sup> –, being integrated by Goethe into romantic religion in a pantheistic logic (a philosophical conception very popular among the romantics), Jakob Böhme has the credit of having inspired romantic theosophy and of introducing into Christian theory the theme of a living God instead of a static, immobile one (Nikolai Berdyaev). Moreover, Böhme's writings inspired the Romantics in what was called the "nocturnal side of Nature" (A. Koyré), the demonic character of the hidden, obscure life, and helped them find an alternative to the divinity of the theistic and deistic traditions.

Therefore, as we also see in the chapter *From the Urgency of a New Mythology to the Philosophy of Mythology*, the romantic imaginary recovers and resurrects the unintelligible, the occult, mystery, fantasy, re-enchanting and romanticizing the world (that is, enhancing it qualitatively), mythologizing and aestheticizing religion and poeticizing and resacralizing the sciences. German romanticism, whose main representative is Novalis, heralds a new religious age. Nevertheless, the author repeatedly warns, we must not absolutize the role of religion, falling to the extreme of exaggerating the importance of the religious domain and reducing everything to it (as Georges Gusdorf often does), since the program of the romantics was equally religious, poetic and philosophical, and only together do these three areas "define

romanticism, in its German version, and express it in its entirety".<sup>18</sup>

This triple facet of romanticism accounts for the syncretic character of the romantic project – a defining feature, along with synchronism, from the point of view of Lucian Blaga –, an aspect investigated by Vasile Voia in the chapters *Romantic Encyclopedism* and *Introduction to the Romantic Theory of Religious Syncretism*. In Novalis' view, "the sciences are separated only by the lack of genius and the acuteness of the spirit", therefore he tries to unify in a total, transdisciplinary, unique, absolute science the parts of science that have been separated for a long time, to make a great synthesis of all domains. Together with F. Schlegel, Novalis dreams of a Scientific Bible and a new Encyclopedia – "nothing but the broad construction of the image of all branches of science, art, life".<sup>19</sup>

Encyclopedic interest obviously comes from an Enlightenment area, the author concludes in agreement with recent German studies dedicated to Romanticism. This is a finding that contradicts Gusdorf's research, built precisely on the irreducible Enlightenment-Romanticism opposition. However, unlike Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, which "was based on a will to demystify Western culture, a prisoner of religious categories, whose futility the progress of knowledge has demonstrated", the encyclopedic project of Novalis and F. Schlegel proposes the exact opposite: not a demystification of culture, but a resacralization and a poeticization of the sciences.<sup>20</sup>

A special chapter is dedicated to Hölderlin (*Religious Syncretism in the Poetic Work of Friedrich Hölderlin. From the Gods of Hellas to the Christian God*), whose writings represent a distinct case of romantic

syncretism. Unlike the other romantics, who were fascinated by the East or by Christianity, seeking refuge or salvation in these cultural and religious areas, Hölderlin, in the mythical poetry he writes, privileges Greek antiquity, "wanting to maintain the serenity of the Greeks not only aesthetically, but also religiously".<sup>21</sup> The mark of his syncretism is the attempt to unify Christian themes with classical, Greek ones.

Along with the sciences, religion must also be poeticized and aestheticized – a project actively supported, in addition to Novalis and F. Schlegel, by Schleiermacher, who, in his fundamental book *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1799), puts intuition and inspiration at the center of religious life, emphasizing the value of the primacy of subjectivity in approaching the absolute. The intellectual effervescence surrounding the *Athenaeum* journal becomes the object of study in the chapter *The Romantic Fragment – Poetic, Philosophical, Religious Manifesto*. Founded in 1798, *Athenaeum*, the only literary journal of the early Romantic era, united the young romantics through a common cause, embodying, in Gusdorf's view, "the community expression of the search for the Absolute".<sup>22</sup> United in the spirit of communion, philosophizing and reflection, they practiced collective writing choosing the fragment as their preferred form of expression. Replacing the Enlightenment aphorism, opposing the rigor of the system and being unburdened by all the constraints and forms of the classical genres, the romantic fragment (especially in F. Schlegel and Novalis) represents an innovative poetic form (forerunner of modern poetics of fragmentation) that facilitates the free manifestation of the romantics' ever-expanding interiority.

The mysterious way inward, a romantic tendency par excellence, runs like a leitmotif through the entire work of Novalis, a poet who, as the author confesses, “is at the center of this book, as the most authentic *homo religiosus* of romanticism and, at the same time, creator of metaphysical poetry”.<sup>23</sup> In addition to the numerous references to the German poet spread throughout this book, Vasile Voia devotes several separate chapters to him, in which he analyzes the religious problematic in Novalis’s writings. In *Christendom or Europe*, he leans on Novalis’s eponymous essay of religious prophecy, in which the poet mythologizes history in an attempt to create a new vision of the Middle Ages. It is a text built “on a conception of a genuine literary work, in its severe structure, developed according to a particular rhythmicity”, so that the author asks rhetorically “What is this essay if not poetry?”. In the chapter *Only in the Midst of Death does the Lightning of Eternal Life ignite*, titled with a quote from Friedrich Schlegel, Vasile Voia discusses the experience of death in Hardenberg’s writings, a theme that became the poet’s great obsession after the premature death of his fiancée, Sophie von Kühn, but also enhanced by the worsening of his health as a result of contracting pulmonary tuberculosis. Sophie’s death is seen as the triggering moment of Hardenberg’s transformation into a poet, constituting a

decisive source of inspiration in the writing of the famous *Hymns to the Night*, to which Vasile Voia dedicates a detailed analysis in the *Addendum: Metaphysical Poetry*. In these poems which offer a representation of the initiatory path of man and mankind in the empire of the Night, i.e. “the infinite empire of supersensible life”, Novalis’s Christianity becomes the expression of a poetic vision. They reflect the aesthetic-religious worldview of Novalis, a poet for whom “religion must become practical poetry” and whose philosophical core is summarized in the quote: “The more poetic, the more true”.<sup>24</sup>

In the concluding chapter, *Closure to the Concept of Romantic Religion*, Vasile Voia states that “the 19th century appears as the great religious century of history. In its early phase, German romanticism especially, the deepest and most genuine, saw in religion a fundamental component of the human spirit.”<sup>25</sup> The virtuosity with which the author approaches the difficult issue of religion in this century, his ability to clearly explain complicated philosophical, theosophical or theological topics, the ease and competence with which he manages the huge bibliography dedicated to romanticism prove that Vasile Voia feels at home in this field and that his book *Religion in the Romantic Age: An Imaginary of the Absolute* deserves to be included in the list of essential studies on romanticism.

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## NOTES

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