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Modernist Literature and Embodied Mind.

Introspection, Body, and Environment

Abstract: Drawing on New Modernist Studies and Cognitivism, this study focuses on the representation of the body in the works of authors writing between the latter half of the 19th century and the first three decades of the 20th century, who can be categorized within the historical framework of modernism, such as: Gustave Flaubert, Marcel Proust, Constantin Fântâneru, Hortensia-Papadat Bengescu, Sarina Cassvan, Henriette Yvonne Stahl, Mircea Eliade. Starting from the cognitivist theory of “embodiment of mind” and the premise that the development of transportation and public infrastructure, which intensified in the mid-19th century, is reflected in literature through the movement of the body, I will examine: (1) the relationship between self-awareness, introspection, and the body, as well as (2) the interaction between the body and the environment, focusing on their mutual influence. **Keywords:** Modernist Literature; “Embodiment of Mind”; Body; Mind; Introspection; Modernism.

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The history of modernism in 20th century appears smooth in hindsight. It emerged alongside the establishment of the modernist canon by the New Critics, who introduced it into universities, and was confirmed and further reinforced in the 1960s through biographies, anthologies, and individual studies in both the United States and United Kingdom¹. In Romania, however, the term does not hold the same weight. While we also refer to literature written in the 1920s and 1930s as modernist literature and to the literary-historical period as modernism, the authors who fall into this category could be also labeled interwar writers, without undermining their canonical status or diminishing their value.

Modernism is a critical historical category, whether we refer to the broader literary history or the Romanian context. It was largely constructed retrospectively by critics to group certain authors under the same label, as noted by Jean-Michel Rabaté in a recent interview for *Philobiblon*². It is a term that was “ingrained”³ in the 1960s in the United States and United Kingdom, and in the 1980s in Romania. This is evident in the emergence of what Romanian

postmodernists retrospectively referred to as the neomodernism of the 1960s, or the second modernism, which followed the first modernism of the interwar period and succeeded an era of socialist realism brought about by Romania's transition to communism.

Literary modernism today no longer carries the same meaning as in the 20th century, when it was associated with formal experimentation, the autonomy of aesthetics, and a retreat into interiority. Nonetheless, while Western Europe and the United States are witnessing a resurrection of modernism, in Romania, it has completely lost its aura. One possible reason is that postmodernism was a dominant theory that succeeded in anathematizing the autonomy of aesthetics, overshadowing a modernism that, by the 1980s, was considered by Romanian modernist critics to be dead and buried. Speaking today in Romania about a contemporary modernism or the afterlife of modernism in contemporary literature is seen as a provocative, even daring act.

However, in the Anglo-American world, after a history in which the dominant feature of modernism was the autonomy of aesthetics, New Historicism and New Materialisms, driven by Feminist Studies and the rise of interdisciplinary fields like literary sociology, have contributed to the emergence of New Modernist Studies in the 1990s. Once regarded as an experiment with form, modernism has been redefined through New Modernist Studies, shifting from a historical category to a temporal one that functions within contemporary frameworks. As such, for modernism to be validated today, it must not only serve an aesthetic function but also a social one:

it must engage in dialogue with the world we live in, addressing us from the vantage points of the past.

At the crossroads of New Modernist Studies and Cognitivism, this study focuses on the representation of the body in the works of authors writing between the latter half of the 19th century and the first three decades of the 20th century, who can be categorized within the historical framework of modernism, such as: Gustave Flaubert, Marcel Proust, Constantin Fântăneru, Hortensia-Papadat Bengescu, Sarina Cassvan, Mircea Eliade, Henriette Yvonne Stahl, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf. As such, this paper seeks to demonstrate that modernism, both Romanian and European, although critically interpreted in terms of aesthetic autonomy throughout the second half of the 20th century, negotiates its position on modernity, participates in it, and intervenes through the body.

Our hypothesis is that the refuge in interiority, with the mind conceived as the only means of imagining totality and constructing the truth of the self, was primarily facilitated by the mediation of the body. In line with Cognitivism, we believe that it is the body that in modernist literature shapes cognition and interacts with the environment in which it is immersed. The phrase "embodiment of mind" refers to the relationship between cognition and the body. With roots in James J. Gibson's theory of ecological psychology⁴ from the 1970s, "embodied cognition" is a movement in the cognitive sciences that asserts the psychological makeup of an individual is closely tied to their bodily constitution⁵, and that the body plays an important role in the development of the inner self. According to the cognitive science developed

in the last two decades, the barrier traditionally imposed by cognitive theory between “perceiving”, “thinking” and “acting” fades as the body, along with its sensory and motor systems, becomes central to explaining mental processes.

As such, in line with New Modernist Studies and Cognitivism, we will examine, on the one hand, the relationship between self-awareness, introspection, and the body, and, on the other, the interaction between the body and the environment, focusing on their mutual influence. We will also investigate the connection between the stream of consciousness and the body’s posture, aiming to analyze both the personal and social body as represented in modernist literature.

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Modernist literature seeks to adapt language to new realities and, interdependent with these, to transform the gaze into more than a mere tool for representation or the mental recording of general realities. Instead, it becomes a mode of being-immersed in the world, that transcends “consciousness” alone and “action”⁶ in its simplest sense, while encompassing both mind and body simultaneously.

In *Interior* (1932) by Constantin Fântâneru, the return to the “depths” of being is conditioned by a state of movement, one that belongs primarily to the body. Renting, a practice that proliferated and became popular in interwar Romania, speaks not only of a provisional nature of intimacy, but also of a liberalization of the physiological. The body, in all its manifestations, as it is addressed today in contemporary art, begins to emerge in modernist literature. The emotions, thoughts, sensations, and memories

of Călin, the protagonist from *Interior*, are all mediated through the body, influenced by interactions with public space, whether during moments of physical rest or while strolling through the city. What is important in these moments is not just the body itself, but the attention to the details of its movements. Once reality, as a substance filtered through the intellect and tempered by reason, is replaced by the correlation between self and environment, the relationship modernist literature draws is no longer synthetic, and hence no longer focused on knowledge; instead, it becomes analytical, emphasizing observation and contemplation.

The following paragraph can be read both as a reaction to the social acceleration of modernity (as put by Hartmut Rosa⁷), and as a need to isolate the objects of perception, to reduce their number, and make them less visible in a world where, driven by technology, mass production, the expansion of infrastructure and increased mobility, these objects have multiplied and replicated to the point of overwhelming saturation. The focus on detail serves as proof that, in a world increasingly mirroring itself (universal and universalizable), it is the detail that resists repetitive proliferation. In its detachment and ephrastic refinement, the body assumes a fundamental role, as seen in a longer excerpt from Fântâneru’s novel, *Interior*:

Leaning against the pillar, my legs had become twisted, and cramps were running through them. I stood up, and a faint sense of pleasure accompanied my first steps. I said my goodbyes. After parting ways with the clothing merchant, it was too late to catch the funeral procession, and besides,

fatigue was overwhelming me. To the left, ahead, the houses seemed to narrow, as if blocking the road. The sun was lingering on the metal roofs; it was setting sadly. Round patches of light flickered on the sidewalk.

(...) The impression that the moon was playing on the scaffolding of tiles helped me open my heart. A cheerful mood spread in the air, alive. It was a brief shiver. The body takes shape. Thoughts are bright. I remember Azia. On our last date, I acted clumsily. God, I don't want to act so confused with this girl!

(...) In the center of the square, there is a basin from which no water springs anymore. Yet, the naked nymph, lying on a moss-covered rock, on the pedestal in the basin, still holds a wild duck in her arms, with a bronze-green hue, from whose beak the water seems about to burst. (...) With my eyes fixed on the head of the nymph, I remembered Azia again, this time with more clarity. Oh, I am so ridiculous; my soul is broken; all the stars are falling. But now I feel such a sudden satisfaction that I almost glimpse the girl's figure. As I sit on the stone circle, I lift my right leg, my knee at a sharp angle. I swing my leg amusedly, cutting the air with it, and suddenly it occurs to me to stop the movement, as inappropriate, as if the girl were two steps away and would see me as ill-mannered⁸.

His body is first a personal body, one that experiences cramps, shudders, and memories – the movement, the gaze are what collaborate in the recollection of Azia. At the same time, however, it is also a

social body, in the sense that the swinging leg halts its movement when it feels seen, integrated into society, subjected to the gaze of the beloved girl. With representative writers of modernism, such as Constantin Fântăneru, Marcel Proust, Gustave Flaubert, James Joyce, Hortensia-Papadat Bengescu, Virginia Woolf, Sarina Cassvan, Henriette Yvonne Stahl, we are always aware of the location of the body of the one who speaks, thinks, or reflects on the past, as well as the relationship they have with the world and the medium they are a part of. The body of the one observing merges with the body of the world, becoming a “body-world” (“corps-monde”), a body with a world embodied within it, rather than a “body in the world” (“corps dans le monde”¹⁰) where the two are separate entities.

Moreover, the “individual”, personal, mind and the social mind or the mind “beyond the skin”¹¹, according to Alan Palmer, also become fluid. The modernist mind is never merely private. The mind of the self, of the subject who speaks opens to the outside world, able to be also public¹², as the narrator of Marcel Proust affirms in his monumental work:

M. Legrandin was anything but sincere when he inveighed against snobs. He could not (from his own knowledge, at least) be aware that he himself was one, since it is only with the passions of others that we are ever really familiar, and what we come to discover about our own can only be learned from them¹³.

Modernist literature is not the first to explore these interdependent relationships

between the mind of the individual and the other, but it is the one that integrates them on a larger scale. Thus, we can agree with the idea of the retreat into interiority in modernist literature only insofar as interiority appears in the dual role of a space for negotiation and the production of the negotiation itself between all that lies on the surface of the skin – body, world, forms, and contents – and the mind. It concerns the mind as a mode of being-together-with-the-other, the mind as the transparency of the other and as the dissolution of the boundaries between self (interior) and the other (exterior), a process that carries with it an entire post-Hegelian philosophical tradition.

In modernism, the other is no longer merely an object of observation, an absolute exterior to the self that perceives the world through a mind that is more affective and emotional than illusory and irrational. The other is not only made transparent through the act of looking, but becomes the “object” through which we can understand ourselves, as the Proustian narrator clearly states: “it is only with the passions of others that we are ever really familiar, and what we come to discover about our own can only be learned from them”¹⁴.

The body as an embodied spirit is both the relay and the platform for the modernist mind’s negotiation with the world. Epiphany (James Joyce) or “moment of being” (Virginia Woolf) are not just episodes in which the subject becomes aware of their own “privileged” perception, but, more importantly, moments of reconciliation, a truce with reality “through an integration into the surrounding world that may be felt in the body”¹⁵. Both in the works of Joyce and Woolf, the most intense moments of a daily life are those of the

body. Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu is one of the voices of interwar Romanian literature that already in her debut volume (*Ape adânci*, 1919) succeeds in creating such episodes where the body and its environment merge. Here is a lengthy excerpt from the story *Marea* from the afor mentioned volume, in which the encounter between the body and the sea is tied to an affective, material, and sensory gaze:

Sometimes you don’t want to, you can’t bear her touch, but you tell yourself, “I must” – and you don’t back away. And without backing away, you still refuse. In this refusal, there is a strong and strange voluptuous pain. Your conscience demands the gesture, your soul advises you, and your body refuses. You understand that you must, that it is right, and you dip your foot in the water, you don’t pull it back, you remain still, passive, without any outward shiver, you don’t tremble... And then, against your soul, against your conscience, you feel within you, to the edge of sensation, the violence of refusal. The flesh cries, screams, refuses. From your clenched lips, with your teeth locked, no sound escapes, and yet you hear it, and it seems that someone else could hear it too, how you groaned long. What a marvelous manifestation of instinctive life, of life in itself, independent of our will. I then know crucifixion, arms in target, the swallowed lime, the wheel of torture, the agony of water, I know it clearly in my suffocated throat from which the cry does not emerge¹⁶.

The gesture of the narrator is one that feels entirely natural today. It is the first

contact between the body encountering the sea and the state of vacation after a long period of daily toil. A hundred years ago, when tourism was just beginning to become a mass activity, such scenes had the aura carried in today's world by objects that used to be handcrafted. The narrator in *Marea* knows that describing such a moment, inserting it contrastively into everyday life – by explicitly detailing the physical contact between the skin of the body and the skin of the world (the sea water) – is a privilege that only literary narrative, with the developments in psychology and psychoanalysis, can offer. Despite the Cartesian split between the passions of the soul, the intentions of thought, and the unconstrained movements of the body, what emerges from the passage above is the idea of the interdependence between self-knowledge and instinct, in which both must be understood as a focus on the body's ethos – the way it reacts, acts, and forms its own environment. For the epiphany of the encounter between the subject and the sea to be described as accurately as possible, both the subject's body and the sea's body must surrender to the mind as a shared platform.

The body starts self-regulating its temperature from the late 19th century onward, as shown by Jean Starobinski¹⁷. The body is, initially, what can be perceived as matter in motion emerging from the brain. Thus, movement, the state of constant mobility brought about by the unprecedented development of transportation and public space infrastructure from the late 19th century, is primarily one of the body. The body of Emma in *Madame Bovary* (1856) by Gustave Flaubert does not suggest an inner conflict, as in sentimental novels where the body speaks on behalf of the soul. Instead,

the body constructs and is constructed by a repertoire of ordinary gestures and thoughts, forming a way-of-being-in-the-world. If Charles's gaze fixes on Emma's body, this is possible because Emma exists primarily as corporeal matter, her body being what Jean Starobinski describes as “a synesthetic apprehension of the body by itself”¹⁸. Emma's body “surprises itself,” “perceives itself”¹⁹ – “while sewing, she kept pricking her fingers, which she then raised to her mouth to suck”²⁰ –, anticipating a search for techniques of thetic exploration of space and time, as literature breaks away from the positivist rigor of the 19th century. Introspection can no longer ignore the embodied medium in which it takes place, because subjectivation, the tendency of modernism toward introspection, passes through the body, not beyond it. The reality of the body suggests and induces a fluid state of consciousness that is susceptible to moral freedoms (scandalous for the time), which only with Joyce will find a sufficiently comprehensive form.

If introspection is subjected to efforts of construction, which translate into literature the concerns for temporality and personal duration of early 20th-century (Western) society, in line with psychoanalysis, the body exists and moves in everyday life through “inattention”²¹. In the line with Henri Lefebvre's thinking²², Liesl Olson believes that “inattention” forms the basis of a non-eventful, random, and banal everyday life. It contributes to the creation of the habit regime, within which detail now appears as something that cannot be measured. The ordinary, a defining characteristic of modernism according to Olson, is not made up of “specific behaviors”, but “temporal rhythms” and “repetitions”²³.

Repetition, the rhythm of modernist daily life, is not rooted in a conscious, rational level of thought, nor in a fluctuating, emotional realm that cannot be measured or ranked, but in the reality of the body. The body is increasingly no longer reduced to a mere portrait or physiognomy, as it was in Romanticism, where it served only as a surface reflecting attitudes, personalities, emotions, and genealogies. Instead, it is more and more captured in its physiological dimension: Lina (*Concert din muzică de Bach*, 1927), experiences asthma when climbing stairs, rushing, or speaking quickly; Călin (*Interior*, 1932) suffers from cramps when he stays still for too long and rhythmically taps his foot when bored; Adrian (*În lumea Mediteranei. Răsărit de soare*, 1936) eats and drinks eagerly until he feels sick; Tomescu (*Huliganii*, 1935) gets sunburned because he is “blond and lymphatic”²⁴, and Mrs. T. (*Patul lui Procust*, 1933) is discomforted by her tight shoes.

This personal body, viewed both in terms of physiology and affect, is not just a body that is observed, but, first and foremost, one that “observes” itself through its interaction with the environment. For instance, in *Concert din muzică de Bach* (1927) by Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Lina’s asthma is triggered by moderate physical exertion, influenced by the texture of the space in which she moves. Furthermore, it is also a body that shapes the environment: verticality in literature is a characteristic of urban bodies, while working postures, bent backs, and contorted limbs are specific to novels set in rural worlds. Here is an excerpt from the novel *Voica* (1925) by a less-known modernist writer, Henriette Yvonne Stahl, in which the narrator describes the body of a rural woman:

When Voica stirred the polenta, I used to be amazed: she sat down, held it tightly, and with the rolling pin, stirred it quickly. The rhythmic metallic sound of her bracelets could be heard. When the heat penetrated her, Voica would briefly hiss through her lips – like the sound of water hitting fire – and twirl the pot. And all of this was done with the haste you have when you dare to pick up a burning ember with your hand from the floor²⁵.

This description, although rare in Romanian literature because there are few representations of the working body, and when they appear, they usually depict male bodies, corresponds to a Western imaginary that has existed at least since the 18th century. The “toiling”²⁶ bodies of the French women encountered by the traveler-farmer Arthur Young (*Voyages en France* 1787, 1788, 1789) reflects the physical effort required of women to carry out household tasks, as well as the complete involvement of their bodies in the domestic routine. The image of Voica cooking polenta aligns with that of a woman from rural France centuries ago, in that the body of Voica is completely immersed in the act of cooking. The spontaneity and confidence of her movements – “she took the cauldron off the stand and, so hot, without feeling its burn, she grasped it with the soles of her feet”²⁷ – indicate familiarity: Voica’s body has the memory of the place and the gestures associated with preparing this type of food. However, the punctum of the image lies in the “metallic sound of her bracelets”²⁸. Accessories at the time were typically seen in depictions of Romani women and were

generally associated with a sensual, objectified body. The image of the rural woman, as seen in Nicolae Grigorescu's late 19th-century paintings, is often portrayed as a face, with the body serving merely to accentuate the details of a specific, traditional costume. In contrast, Voica's body exists and is displayed through accessories – the bracelets – which reappear in a similar description at the end of the novel. It is a body that is “constructed” through an external gaze, provided by the third-person narrative, but it is also a body that is adorned through accessorizing.

Through her bracelets, Voica embodies what Liz Conor describes as a demonstrative appearance of the woman. Influenced by media culture, women at the beginning of the century – Conor's examples focus on Australia, but they have broader relevance – can be objectified, just as the male body is objectified in contemporary advertisements. However, they also often put themselves forward, creating “their own representation of visibility”²⁹. When Dumitru, Voica's husband, returns home with an illegitimate child, it is no coincidence that the reproach Voica makes focuses on the body and its exhaustion from the physical labor demanded by her role as a married woman: “I raise your child; you see well: I've worked so hard my hands have become calloused. I can feel how all the toil has settled on my body”³⁰. Despite Voica's “calloused” hands, the bracelets reappear at the end of the novel, both in a classical compositional symmetry and to signal a shift in how Western society begins to perceive the female body.

The idea of “appearing”³¹, meaning to make a spectacle of one's own appearance, is only subtly suggested in the case

of Voica and is generally absent from Romanian rural novels, where women seldom have a voice. A notable exception is found in the female characters of Slavici's works, such as Mara (*Mara*, 1906) and Vitoria Lipan (*Baltagul*, 1930). However, this idea begins to be more extensively explored in urban novels. In Sarina Cassvan's autobiographical narrative, *Trupul care își caută sufletul* (1932), Sarah not only discovers the pleasure of writing for magazines and being outside the conjugal home, but also the pleasure of using her body as a spectacle of her own appearance, viewing herself from the outside through the image others assign to her, as seen in the following example:

Suddenly, without any gradation, my temperament changed. I became “a funny little woman”, as the “brothers” used to say. I could no longer cross the street without attracting bold remarks from men. There was something provocative in my clothes, in my walk, in my gaze, and my smile seemed full of promises. I flirted with a superb unconsciousness, with everyone, without any awareness of the consequences³².

This gaze, from the street, both welcomed and pursued, reflects not only the significance of the gaze as a paraverbal form of communication, but also the democratization of the gaze, both emotionally and bodily, that began in the United States with the suffragist movement in the mid-19th century. In rural novels, the body is tied to the private realm of the home, where family bonds are both created and broken. However, in urban and slum settings, the rise and widespread popularity

of renting during this period points to an intimacy that is increasingly displaced by a public space offering greater freedom of movement for both the body and the mind. Space is now relative; the private and public mix, and because the narrative return to the interior, being dependent on stream of consciousness or inner monologue, is linked to the movement and posture of the body, as well as its sociability.

“What does the influence of the provincial environment on the intellectual mean?”³³ Dragu suddenly asks in *Huli-ganii* (1935) by Mircea Eliade. “It’s not the city’s fault [he continues], it’s the people’s souls, the superstition that dominates everyone, that an electrified city helps you be an idealist and an optimist, while one full of puddles depresses and ruins you”³⁴. These ideas are expressed during a conversation at a beachside buffet, where “David Dragu spoke, his eyeglasses slipping down his nose, holding another pair of black sunglasses in his hand, gesturing”³⁵, while Tomescu “was undressing there, in plain sight, and looking for a hanger for his robe”³⁶, Anton Dumitrușcu finds this gesture offensive, given the calmness and nonchalance with which Tomescu stages it. Not only are ideas increasingly expressed and constructed in public spaces, like the beach, but the body, like ideas, also needs a social environment, a gaze from others that validates and affirms one’s existence as a physical being.

The omniscience of the scholarly writer, who proudly observes his laboratory animals, disappears, and in its place emerges the generalized, limited, subjective, yet situated and lively perspective of a real gaze, one that sees more deeply through sensitivity than superficially through illusory

omniscience. Modernism takes root in this crisis of legitimacy of totality, from which literature cannot stop distancing itself. Shortly after “the two-piece swimsuit with high-cut briefs appears on the French Riviera”³⁷, and “the beach, transformed in the 1930s into a space for farniente and leisure, now invites the display of the bare body, showcasing a perfect tan, the symbol of a successful vacation”³⁸, Eliade’s “hooligans” expose themselves to the sun, study their bare bodies, and engage in intellectual discussions, all within the same space and time. Irina observes Tomescu’s body – “she turned to look at him more closely”³⁹ and describes it as follows:

He was emaciated, with a bony neck and bleached hair. His shoulders, chest, and face were almost like a wound, hideous; the skin had peeled off several times, revealing red patches, like an eruption of sores. Cezar Tomescu had rubbed almost a quarter of a kilogram of cocoa butter on his sunburnt body. Nevertheless, he stubbornly insisted on staying out in the sun today⁴⁰.

With modernism, the totalizing gaze of the narrator becomes ineffective. Pluriperspectivism, in fact, arises precisely to bring to literature what photography had already started experimenting with since the mid-19th century. Bodies, like minds, exist only as dialogical instances, subjected to communication and created from its very fabric. If Tomescu “had rubbed almost a quarter of a kilogram of cocoa butter on his sunburnt body”⁴¹, this relates to the trend of achieving the perfect tan, “the symbol of a successful vacation”⁴², and

reflects his need to inscribe his body on the production line of a youth culture, to see his body as a space for a way of being-together with others. Lucu's gesture of bringing his body close to Luiza's and playfully and mischievously questioning the presence of sand on her breasts on a windless beach day loses its significance unless it is recorded in a social record-keeping book. Although Lucu avoids the gazes of others, as the narrator notes: "no one notices, all eyes were directed toward the sea"⁴³, this bodily, public display becomes significant in the narrative only when it is observed and internalized by Irina. Despite her initial disgust, she comes to see such physical expressions of affection as appropriate, even necessary, in a relationship where equality between partners prevails: "She then saw Lucu's hand almost touching Luiza's breast. For a moment, the gesture disgusted her. But her indignation quickly passed. Why doesn't Dinu do the same thing, why doesn't he ever take the

initiative? She has to speak first, she has to kiss him first"⁴⁴.

In conclusion, there are two ideas we would like to highlight in regard to modernism. On the one hand, introspection and subjectivity can no longer disregard the environment and the body in which they occur; it passes through the body and is dependent on its mobility, as seen in the works of Constantin Fântâneru, Marcel Proust, Gustave Flaubert. On the other hand, the environment, and hence modernity, and the modernist body cannot be separated. The body shapes and is shaped by its surroundings, as seen in the works of Constantin Fântâneru, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Henriette Yvonne Stahl, Sarina Cassvan, Mircea Eliade. Both the personal and the social body are represented in modernist literature in relation to an interiority that functions not only as a refuge, but also as a platform for negotiation, producing the very negotiation between all that lies on the surface of the skin and the mind.

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NOTES

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4. See Vincente Raja, "J. J. Gibson's most radical idea: The development of a new law-based psychology", in *Theory and Psychology*, no. 6, 2019, p.5.
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23. Liesl Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
24. Mircea Eliade, *Huliganii*, Curtea de Argeș, Tana, 2008 [1935], p. 129.
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