

The Myth in de Martino's Italy

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ABSTRACT: Being a preoccupied researcher of the myth and contrasting the theories of Mircea Eliade, Ernesto de Martino elaborated an authentic teaching of the existential crisis by theorizing about the myth. Likewise, he has found solutions to the aforementioned matter, mainly by his own disappearance down in history: the cataclysm of non-presence. Without pretending to be a mythologist, de Martino studies the myth pertaining to the lower classes of Italian culture, respectively those of southern Italy. The matter of myth study concerns de Martino, resulting in him making up his own theories that contrast those of Eliade or even Croce. Preceding him, Giusepe Pitre had made himself known as an illustrious ethnologist due to his remarkable contributions. De Martino and Eliade's previously established relationships is an intellectual one based upon the discrepancies between their individual theories. Therefore, since de Martino mainly contradicts Eliade's hypotheses and demonstrations, the two theoreticians are mostly treated as oppositors. In de Martino's works it is to be noticed a clear evolution of concepts, as he initially dismantled various theories belonging to the myth, theories that he later reinterpreted. Thus, while dealing with myths that are part of the Italian cultural heritage and national identity, de Martino discovers the sacred, but also the persistence of the European ancient culture.

KEYWORDS: myth, culture, tradition, identity, the sacred

Introduction

De Martino's work and his way of thinking gather together the innovative force of a scholar who has managed, without any doubt, to bring about a revolution in the ways of ethnological and anthropological research. Initially disputed, De Martino was later rediscovered due to some favorable trends of cultural interest. He is, therefore, responsible for creating a complex mechanism of thorough study, analysis, understanding and valorification of the traditional social frameworks which are, after all, the origins of European culture. In fact, the capacity of traditional societies to stand up to the ordinary, to confront the present and the ways they have secured their constant presence throughout generations isn't only through the systematic and sometimes agonizing effort of subsisting, but also due to the existence of those cultural frameworks which represent the means of survival when it comes to mentalities, social rapsorts and psychological representations.

Beyond De Martino's huge share in the anthropology field, through his contributions and conceptual developments placed in the theoretical plan, however, the researcher's results have achieved the most significant status in the field research area. De Martino chose to manifest a different type of interest in relation to his object of investigation: understanding it through the effective approach into the intimacy of the issue, the direct confrontation with 'the vivid social' of the rural world and the placing of the observation method on an unprecedented qualitative scale. Obviously, we speak of all these placing them in a rigorous scientific and methodologic context, but they were initially looked at with skepticism, especially because of their strongly innovative character. Therefore, the cultural folk background becomes revalued, thanks to a rigorous but complex method specific to the scientist in the laboratory, who manages to extract evidence without the alteration of the study subject. Obviously, for the certainty of obtaining this kind of objective, De Martino was permanently aware of the importance of using the most efficient techniques and methods, some even unused before, but technically available at the time of his research. In this case, we are talking about social facts of the ordinary folk, in which De Martino participated by

generating a real reform in the study of ethnology, just like Pitre, in the same way up to him, chose to treat the rural world with an interest that was passionately focused on the documentation of the Italian folk ‘soul’.

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It is important to emphasize the parallels between De Martino and Pitre, especially noting their ways of being anachronistic to their specific times, both ethnologists usually being against any “fashionable” currents. Likewise, the former of the two can be recognized as a venturesome spirit in the field of knowledge, a researcher who has never shied away from innovation. The search for raw forms of knowledge coming right from the source, a process specific to De Martino, reminds us of Pitre’s uninhibited interest in gaining access to the inception of the folk spirit in its many forms of artistic expression: from songs to meaningful proverbs, from customs, beliefs and superstitions to values that speak about the authenticity of rural lifestyle, these make up Pitre’s specific interests. He therefore becomes one of the first researchers to attract the attention of academics towards folklore, just as De Martino manages to disinhibit, through the incorporation of modern technology, the research methods used in anthropology and ethnology until then. In doing so, he directly opposes Pitre’s ways. This constitutes the breaking point between the two, not taking into consideration their commonalities, such as their mutual interest in folklore and its most authentic forms.

In Pitre’s case, an especially remarkable fact would be his effort in adopting cultural codes of behavior and language specific for the traditional times while not limiting himself by being a simple observer, being De Martino’s precursor in on-site research and the use of various instruments in the process of observation. Therefore, taking advantage of the XX’s century innovative technologies, De Martino uses, without a second thought, the resources brought upon by the ethnological cinema (in this regard, he collaborates with many film directors, thanks to whom he uses both black and white and color film). His field research is, from then on, helped by many specialists in different domains, such as psychiatrists, sociologists, psychologists and even musicologists.

The approach best fits in the category known as “critical ethnocentrism”, adopted by De Martino as a reference point for his dense background in the scientific field, being in the position of surpassing his masters, who start from the idea of a thorough study of folk traditions with the ability to renew, complete and streamline the knowledge about a world that’s on the verge of disappearing. Thus, warding off Croce’s historical perspective, De Martino critically reconstructs ethnologic and anthropologic currents, practicing a systematic trade with the English Frazer anthropological school, even going through Durkheim or Bruhl’s historical and religious studies. Thanks to the aforementioned scholars he gets to put ethnology in the category of historic and cultural studies which incorporate the idea of “progressive folklore”. This last idea represents a solid argument for De Martino’s maturity in the scientific field, as he very well understands the changing character of creation, determined by social, cultural and historic changes. Since the study object itself is not a simple one in form, as it has a very complex substance, sustained by vast material that needs different kinds of analysis, De Martino starts using the comparative method, respectively the diachronic and synchronic one.

An innovative method of sampling folk material constitutes the next level of innovation proposed by De Martino in addition to the theoretical one (as shown above), this being one of the most important ways of enriching the folk texts archive. De Martino had proved to be a true pioneer of photography, an essential instrument in the elaboration of scientific probes and necessary for further critical analysis. Along with audio and video recordings, the new research tools allowed not only the streamlining of the research process, but also the capture of details and nuances with a crucial role in interpretation. Similarly to getting accustomed to

the modern techniques which De Martino presents to the world of academics, he restructures his method of applying questionnaires while elaborating individual files with an extremely efficient typological distribution.

At the same time, De Martino's pioneering work took place under the constant surveillance of teams of learners, for which the Italian scholar acquired not only the role of master and guide, but also that of true maker of a new research school that would later take over and expand his vision and work style. A particular aspect is constituted by the group of cinematographic arts professionals that have surrounded De Martino, making him an indirect initiator of the documentary-style cinematography, respectively that of Italian anthropology. From then on, De Martino acknowledges the importance of film in academic research, something even further proved by the making of *Lamento funebre*, a 1954 documentary under the direction of Michele Gandin. Later on, further research in Lucania and Salento would prove to be even more fruitful concerning the making of cinematic documentaries and short films.

Thus, De Martino proves to be a visionary spirit in a major sense, especially concerning the impact that visuals have come to occupy in our days, being an inseparable part of communication theory, a tool that allows the unaltered transmission (culturally genetic) of inheritance accumulated over the generations. Moreover, technology has been able to provide valuable information regarding the study and detailed understanding of the concepts that play a central role in De Martino's work, the most important of them all being the myth.

It needs to be noted that "the myth", beyond some interpretations of scholars like Blaga and Barthes, ends up being studied by De Martino through the practice of a difficult, but full of satisfaction incursion of deconstruction and conceptual reclassification. This approach, paradoxically, can be very helpful, especially when trying the approach suggested by De Martino – inextricably tied to the two essential elements, *rite-ritual*, that need to be understood distinctively, not through the conceptual similarity initially proposed by De Martino -, following the major keys of interpretation of the myth, both on the level of the environments of the Italian and Romanian academic territories, and pertaining to the fundamental aspects of the European tradition as a whole. Regarding this last aspect, De Martino has the merit of deconstructing and interpretatively researching the concept of the myth following, unapologetically and enthusiastically, the outlook of Eliade, together with the reflections of personalities like Benedetto Croce or Cesare Pavese. Therefore, we can ascertain that the analysis of the myth can only be made by truly exceeding the limits of a simple comparative approach, placing us on a higher analytical level, one related to the entire European culture.

Returning to De Martino's understanding of the myth, which he designates as the symbolic substance of cultural rite and an instrument used for transcending the limit: "namely, a critical moment for the existence on which weighs the extreme risk of the collapse of the ethos of transcendence and, therefore, that of presence" (De Martino 2005, 244), and will "also reveal the horizon that recovers this risk, a conversion of the annihilation of presence and its reintegration into simply being" (De Martino 2005, 70), such we may understand how is actually presents a double transcendence where the rite alters the cultural norm, expressing a "history of origins" related to the moment of crisis. In De Martino's terms, "each moment from the day to day life, from birth and until death and in every civilization, is a critical moment from an abstract point of view" (De Martino 1995, 122). Therefore, the cultural norm encompasses the entire human existence, during which the critical moments can be distinguished, so called "fundamental elements" (De Martino 1995, 122) that De Martino relates to the entire moment of becoming: "there is the possibility of a radical crisis, and this fatal existential misery can manifest itself by dragging us into nothingness even before physical death reaches us, and that misery is a much greater catastrophe than death" (De Martino 2000, 21-22). This is the moment when the ritual specific rule is applied to achieve

transcendence, De Martino emphasizing that not all cultural rules become ritual rules, but the latter become functional only once they reach the existential limits, identified philosophically by “the articulation of becoming inside a system of well-defined critical moments (birth, war, death)” (De Martino 2002, 662). Therefore, “each ritual party repeats periodically conforming to a precise ethnographic code, provokes a mythic period of time, more accurately a period of regeneration and rebirth in which symbolism and mythology have a considerable share” (De Giorgi Pierpaolo 2004, 21-34).

Being, as shown, substantially related to the very structure of being, the myth can be accessed via the mythical narrative. There can be found multiple aspects pertaining to human life and, therefore, of nature, aspects that most often remain hidden from a normal glance. De Martino remarks this concept’s significance, especially in terms of the most importance function that the myth brings around: a link between divinity and man as a constitutive factor of a community’s ethos. As such, a community is the place where traditions and rituals develop in a way that can tell us a lot about the structure of the human unconscious. Moreover, the myth becomes an important factor in the discovery of human aspirations in various fields such as art, literature, music, rituals. This furthermore proves why De Martino recognizes its universality, even in light of its multiple forms and, later on, metamorphoses. The myth presents both the cultural rituals and the tools used for overcoming existential and natural limits, especially when used with the precise function of breaking down cultural norms in history.

Conclusions

Focusing on the rich and complex conceptual content of the myth and contrasting the theories of Mircea Eliade, Ernesto de Martino elaborated an authentic teaching of the existential crisis by theorizing about the myth. Likewise, he has found solutions to the aforementioned matter, mainly by his own disappearance down in history: the cataclysm of non-presence. Without pretending to be a mythologist, de Martino studies the myth pertaining to the lower classes of Italian culture, respectively those of southern Italy. The matter of myth study concerns de Martino, resulting in him making up his own theories that contrast those of Eliade or even Croce. De Martino and Eliade’s previously established relationships is an intellectual one based upon the discrepancies between their individual theories. Therefore, since de Martino mainly contradicts Eliade’s hypotheses and demonstrations, the two theoreticians are mostly treated as opposites. In de Martino’s works it is to be noticed a clear evolution of concepts, as he initially dismantled various theories belonging to the myth, theories that he later reinterpreted. Thus, while dealing with myths that are part of the Italian cultural heritage and national identity, de Martino discovers the sacred, but also the persistence of the European ancient culture.

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