

CONSIDERATIONS ON LIFE AND DEATH IN LATIN LITERATURE – *THE ETERNAL RETURN*

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Rezumat. Viața de apoi este văzută de majoritatea credințelor ca un nou început, adică ființa umană se transformă în altceva, nu neapărat în neființă, ci într-o altă stare. Și la romani, lumea de apoi este imaginată ca un nou început, există credința că sufletul unei ființe umane supraviețuiește morții. Soarta aranjează totul, și tot ea aranjează felul veșmintelor ce-l vor purta oamenii și funcția pe care o vor ocupa pe pământ. Când oamenii mor, Soarta le ia totul înapoi – acestea le-au fost doar împrumutate pe parcursul vieții terestre. Când omul moare, toate cele lumești sunt uitate la judecată: funcția, seminția, nimic din toate acestea, toată fala pe care au avut-o pe pământ nu-i ajută cu nimic: veșminte bogate, morminte impunătoare nu-i vor salva de la judecata pentru faptele săvârșite pe pământ. În lucrarea de față ne vom opri asupra literaturii latine, încercând să surprindem câteva aspecte cu privire la veșnica reîntoarcere a sufletului așa cum este ea imaginată de scriitorii latini. Se conturează în literatura latină un Infern temporar, un fel de du-te-vino continuu între viață și moarte prin care sufletele trec în ambele sensuri pragul dintre lumi și circulă liber dintr-o lume în alta, moartea fiind astfel echilibrată prin renaștere, tradiția Infernului veșnic devenind astfel mai puțin credibilă, iar teama de viața de apoi mai suportabilă.

Cuvinte cheie: suflet, viața de apoi, infern, moarte, renaștere.

In most religious beliefs, death is considered to be a new beginning, by which the human being is transformed into something else, not necessarily into non-being, but into a different state¹. In life, the soul resides in the human body, but death is the end of life. The association of the body with the soul is so habitual, that it is sometimes hard to imagine their separation after the great passing, being easier to imagine that the soul joins the body in its resting place or takes over the place where the human being lived. The belief that the soul of a human being survives the death is so widespread that there is the temptation to say that it is universal and that the eschatology is merely the foreshadowing of a cosmogony of the future². The belief in the survival of the soul was omnipresent in Greece and widespread in the Roman culture. The Greek believed that worlds were born from the infinite matter which, after a period of time melted down and thus returned into the infinite matter. That is, a life once finished

¹ Căliman, 2010, p. 5.

² Eliade, 1978, p. 50.

would start a new existence again in the eternity of time and so on³. As soon as it had left a body, every soul could be reborn into a different human or animal body. The idea of the eternal return is encountered at the Pythagoreans, at Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and Neoplatonists⁴.

In the following article we will focus on several aspects considering the belief in the *eternal return* of the soul as it is illustrated in Latin Literature.

Ancient authors imagined the *After World* as resembling *This World*, as a place where every soul would have a social status similar to that held in *This World*. This representation was probably the result of the frustrations humans had in *this world* and of the fears and frustrations concerning the Great Passage, as well as the concerns regarding the *After World*, or what was to be expected to happen after the terrestrial ending in a world represented after *This World*. The Inferno was given a clear significance only after the Orphic movement developed a proper literature featuring ideas on punishment or reward in well -defined places of the afterlife: Tartarus, The Isles of the Blessed or the Elysian Fields. The infernal punishments were considered to be either eternal or limited, the souls reincarnating after a period of penitence, thus introducing the idea of the immortality of the soul.

In Roman literature, the most famous guide through the Inferno was imagined in the 1st century A.D. by Virgil⁵. He considered that the Inferno was temporary. The souls of the dead who got in Inferno were purified after a period of time and released by the burden of the evil deeds performed during their terrestrial life. They spent some time in Elysium and, after another thousand years, after drinking water from Lethe, the river of oblivion, they would reincarnate into another body⁶, resuming the cycle of life.

The migration of the soul after death and its re-embodiment into a human or animal being is also present in the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid⁷, written on the pattern of Vergil's *Aeneid*:

*“souls are all exempt from power of death.
When they have left their first corporeal home,
they always find and live in newer homes”.*

In the 1st century A.D., Silius Italicus also imagines a provisory Inferno, where the souls spend a certain amount of time before reincarnating:

*“...in a place apart and radiant from gloom dispersed, stands a shining
portal which leads to the Elysian Fields by a secret shady path; and
here dwell the righteous, not in the realm of Hades nor under the cope
of heaven, but, beyond the Ocean stream and hard by a sacred spring,
they drink the water of Lethe and forget their past. Last is the tenth
gate; glittering with gold, it enjoys the privilege of light and shines as*

³ Tilgher, 1995, p. 11.

⁴ Tilgher, 1995, p. 15.

⁵ Vergiliu 1979

⁶ Chiş, 2003, p. 227.

⁷ Ovidiu, 1922, *on-line* <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0959.phi006.perseus-eng1:15.153-15.251>

if the moon's disk were close beside it. By this gate the souls rise again to heaven and, after the lapse of five thousand years, enter new bodies and forget Pluto”⁸.

In the 2nd century A.D., Lucian of Samosata, by means of Menippus, concludes that the life of people may be considered to be a long procession⁹. Everything is arranged by Fate, including the type of garments people would wear and the position they would have on earth. When people die, Fate takes everything back – everything people had was merely borrowed during their life on earth. Nothing is taken into consideration after death, at the Last Judgement: neither position, nor origin or glory on earth. All are useless: rich garments and sumptuous graves won't save the soul at the moment of the judgement from the deeds performed on earth.

Menippus considers that in the after world proud kings and satraps are punished to do poorly paid, humble jobs. In afterlife, they are taunted and tormented by wise men and philosophers as they were in their life on earth. Menippus goes in the Inferno at the exact moment when a law against the rich is passed:

“Whereas the rich are guilty of many illegalities on earth, harrying and oppressing the poor and trampling upon all their rights, it is the pleasure of the Senate and People that after death they shall be punished in their bodies like other malefactors, but their souls shall be sent on earth to inhabit asses, until they have passed in that shape a quarter-million of years, generation after generation, bearing burdens under the tender mercies of the poor; after which they shall be permitted to die. Mover of this decree — Cranion son of Skeleton of the deme Necysia in the Alibantid tribe”¹⁰.

The law is passed by magistrates, accepted by the people and approved by Hecate and Cerberus. Reaching his goal, Menippus meets Tiresias who shares with him the secret that

“The life of the ordinary man is the best and most prudent choice; cease from the folly of metaphysical speculation and inquiry into origins and ends, utterly reject their clever logic, count all these things idle talk, and pursue one end alone”¹¹.

With the help of Mithrobarzanes he reaches Greece in Lebadea, where the Boeotian descent into inferno.

There was a limited number of souls. The soul that a human being received at birth was not necessarily new. It might have been a soul that had known one or several previous experiences. But the soul did not remember these previous lives as it had drunk from the water of the rivers Lethe or Ameles or the cup of Dionysus. There was no important difference between humans and beasts: souls were ordered to inhabit at a time

⁸ Silius Italicus, 1961, p. 245.

⁹ Lucian, 1959, p. 185.

¹⁰ Lucian, 1905.

¹¹ Lucian, 1905.

the body of a king or warrior, an eagle or a monkey¹².

In the moral works of Plutarch there is a dialogue between Circes, Ulysses and Gryllos. Ulysses tries to persuade Circes to give back her victims their human shape: “*you are smart! answered shortly the witch, but ask them if this is their desire!*”¹³. Gryllos, one of the metamorphosed, proves to Ulysses how the condition of the animals was by far superior to that of humans, as they surpass humans in courage, sincerity, faithfulness and intelligence. Gryllos reminds Ulysses that poets consider men to be brave in battle as lions, wolves or wild boar and he challenges them to reverse the role and declare a lion to be “*as brave as a man*”¹⁴. Souls go happily in the unseen and divine after world if they inhabited in life a pure body, from which they tried to separate themselves as much as possible. Released from all evil, souls join the gods¹⁵.

The soul remained connected to the body and the bodily matter was heavy and earthly, if, in lifetime, souls loved the body with its pleasures and desires, if they lived only to satisfy their pleasure, neglecting the Invisible and the Reason, the object of philosophy. This burden pulled the soul to the sensitive world. Thus, the spectres, seen wandering around graves, were a mixture of souls with bodily matter which made them visible to humans. They were doomed to wander until they would be attached to a new body¹⁶.

Souls would choose their new companion according to the mentalities they had in their previous lifetime¹⁷. Ordinary souls with the common pleasures of gluttony, drunkenness, or violence would re-embody donkeys or other similar animals¹⁸. Those that were responsible of injustice, tyranny or robbery would reincarnate wolves, eagles of mockingbirds¹⁹. Those who were socially virtuous, but only out of habit or routine, rather than reason, would become social animals such as: bees, wasps, ants or would become simple good men²⁰.

The law of re-embodiment appears early in literature, in the myth of Er, in the 10th and final book of the *Republic* by Plato. Souls that chose a particular lifestyle would take a body according to their passions from their former life. The idea is introduced that after death virtuous people would be rewarded and immoral people would be punished. Orpheus wanted to become a swan, Ajax the Telamonian - a lion, Agamemnon - an eagle, Tersites the jester - a monkey and Ulysses, familiarized with all his misfortunes, wanted to become an ordinary human again²¹. In his quest along other souls, Er reached a wonderful place with four entrances – two in the sky and two on earth. Here, between these entrances, sat the judges and directed the souls what path to follow:

¹² Buffiere, 1978, p. 399.

¹³ Buffiere, 1978, p. 399.

¹⁴ Buffiere, 1978, p. 399.

¹⁵ Platon, 1919, 80 e, 81 b.

¹⁶ Platon, 1919, 81 e.

¹⁷ Platon, 1919, 81 e.

¹⁸ Platon, 1919, 81 e.

¹⁹ Platon, 1919, 82 a.

²⁰ Platon, 1919, 82 b.

²¹ Platon, 1923, p. 620, a, c.

the good were shown the way to heaven and the immoral to the underworld. But when Er approached the judges, he was asked to stay, listen and observe to be able to recount his experience to the world.

The virtuous souls floated down from the heaven, narrating about beautiful landscapes and wonderful feelings. The souls who returned on earth looked dirty, void of vitality and exhausted, complaining about the dreadful experiences they had to support while they were forced to pay for all the evil deeds they committed when they were alive. There were, nevertheless, souls who could not be released from the underworld, such were killers, tyrants and other villains, doomed to remain in the underworld for eternity, without the possibility of ever being released. After staying there for seven days, Er and the souls who travelled with him were asked to leave. After four days they reached a place where they could see a rainbow brighter than anything they have ever seen before. After another day of journey they reached that rainbow and the souls were arranged into rows and each received a different note by dice. According to these notes, they were asked to step forward and choose their future lives. Er noticed that many times the souls who made the journey through the sky choose a harsh destiny, while those who had been punished several times choose a better life. Many preferred a life different from their previous experience. Animals chose to return as human beings, while humans often chose the seemingly easier lives of animals. After they made their choice, each soul was given a guardian spirit as a protector in life. They continued their journey to the Land of Oblivion where run the river Lethe. Each soul, except Er, was asked to drink from it in different amounts. After drinking, each soul forgot everything. While sleeping at night, they were carried into different directions to be reborn, thus completing the journey to the afterlife.

This is the principle of reincarnations, of the ladder of sins, of human depravities, to which was equivalent a ladder for animals. Timaios arranges them according to their hierarchy in the animal kingdom. First come birds, corresponding in the human world to astronomers, always studying the stars. Four legged creatures were not concerned with the matters of the spirit; they ignored their reason, being only interested in their belly. In the lowest part of the ladder fish and molluscs were the least intelligent. Animals reincarnated onto various forms according to the way in which they gained or lost intelligence²².

At the moment of reincarnation, the souls, who indulged themselves in the lowest vices, have at their disposal the widest variety of options and will choose a new body in the form of the animal most appropriate to satisfy its cravings of gluttony, drinking, lechery. Consequently, one must seek purity before dying; the soul must be protected from any bad influence so that upon death, the body left behind to be of a wise man²³.

The belief in the eternal Inferno becomes thus less credible, and the image of a new, temporary inferno emerges, which is imagined like a continuous place of bustle between life and death where the souls cross both ways the threshold between the worlds and walk freely from one world to another, death being just a passage to an-

²² Platon, 1993, p. 91, d, 92.

²³ Buffiere, 1978, p. 408.

other, new, state of being, a new posthumous life²⁴. These are beliefs that were adopted by popular Christian eschatology and transmitted verbally in the present funeral rituals.

²⁴ Hurduzeu, 2017, p. 11245-1253.

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