

THE LONELINESS OF THE ARTIST'S SPIRIT

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Rezumat: *Lucrarea analizează frustrarea - ca un dat al spiritului evreiesc - și felul în care aceasta este oglindită în operele unor scriitori evrei, cum ar fi: Franz Kafka și Mihail Sebastian. Opera lor are valoarea unei confesiuni-marturie, de vreme ce se afirmă că spiritul evreiesc este chinuit de o vină de nesuportat. Una din principalele teme abordate de artiștii evrei este singurătatea și felul în care ea poate fi depășită; pentru majoritatea dintre ei, izolarea este un sinonim pentru vină, deoarece provoacă frustrare, angoasă și culpabilitate. Spiritul evreului este copleșit de angoasa care, conform lui Heidegger, „îi dezvăluie individului, în fînța sa intimă, cele mai autentice posibilități de a exista.” Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, 1977: 147)*

Cuvinte-cheie: *frustrare, angoasă, singurătate, iudaism, corectitudine politică, spiritualitate, alteritate, spaimea, filozofie*

Résumé: *L'article ci-dessous analyse la frustration- comme donnée inexorable de l'esprit juif- et la manière dans laquelle elle est vue dans les œuvres de certains écrivains juifs, comme par exemple Franz Kafka et Mihail Sebastian. Leurs ouvrages ont la valeur d'une vraie confession, puisqu'ils affirment que l'esprit juif est tourmenté par une culpabilité difficile à supporter. L'un des principaux thèmes abordés par les artistes juifs est la solitude et la manière à travers laquelle elle peut être dépassée; pour la plupart, l'isolement est un synonyme pour la faute, parce qu'il produit la frustration, l'angoisse et la culpabilité. L'esprit juif est accablé par l'angoisse qui, selon Heidegger, «révèle à chaque individu, dans les profondeurs de son esprit, les plus authentiques possibilités d'existence».*

Mots-clé: *frustration, angoisse, solitude, judaïsme, correction politique, spiritualité, altérité, peur, philosophie*

It is important to mention that, in the context we have just mentioned, the anti-Semitism of the Romanian culture and society is prevailing, being, in a way, part of the history. Becoming stronger because of the rise of Nazism during the 1930s, the anti-Semitism of the Iron Guard changed the life of the Jewish students into a permanent torment; they had special seats and they were continually insulted and assaulted; sometimes the police was even called in order to protect them when they were leaving the lecture rooms. There is a touching passage in a novel from 1934 by Mihail Sebastian/Iosif Hechter (*For Two Thousand Years*), who was for a while member of Eliade's circle, in which the autobiographical main character, having been slapped, confessed: "Keep on telling yourself that you are the child of a nation of martyrs...hit your head against the walls, but if you wish to be able to look yourself in the eyes, if you don't wish to die of shame, do not weep." (1990: 28)

The "supreme" personality of the university, the one who had an overwhelming influence on the writers of that time, was Nae Ionescu, professor and philosopher. He was considered a perfect speaker, able to have an unusual effect upon the audience. He had bright and special students around him, including Eliade and Sebastian; we can state that the young people of that time were fortunate to have such a professor of philosophy. Even the Jewish Sebastian had been "hypnotised" by Nae Ionescu until 1936. Before Sebastian published his book - *For Two Thousand Years* - approaching anti-Semitism, he had asked his beloved professor Nae Ionescu to write the preface of this book. This preface was awful, as Nae Ionescu justified his anti-Semitism considering the presumption of deicide. However, Sebastian published his book with the antisemitic and accusatory introduction written by Nae Ionescu and continued to be his loyal follower for some years. It was only Eliade the one who attacked their common professor and idol (after obtaining his permission) and defended his friend in several articles. In order to show his solidarity for this respected professor, Eliade even published some articles showing sympathy for the Iron Guard, articles which became the basis of all future accusations.

The Iron Guard was very cruel, just like other fascist groups, even more cruel than some other groups when it came to violence against Jews, but it was different from the others as it contained a religious component, not only a nationalistic one. Mircea Eliade described it as "having the form and vocation of a mystical sect, more than of a political movement." (Mircea Eliade, *Memorii/Memoirs*, 1997: 158)

Another philosopher of that time, Emil Cioran, raised the issue of the minorities integration and not only that he defended the Romanian xenophobia, but he also attempted to develop a systematic and historical anti-Semitic argument in order to prove that Jews were impossible to assimilate: "We have been living for one thousand years under their domination of strangers and not hating them, not getting them out of the way, would be a proof of lack of national instinct." (*The Change of Romania*, 1995: 87)

Referring to the Jewish people, Cioran wrote that "every time that a people becomes conscious of itself, it fatally comes into conflict with Jews" (1995: 122). Someone can learn to live with other minorities, such as the Hungarians and the Saxon Germans, but this is impossible with Jews "because of the particular structure of their mentality and of their inner political orientations." (*idem, ibidem*) Cioran continued to repeat the usual anti-Semitic charges, but tried to give them a logic they would not otherwise have, connecting them to essential features of the Jewish mentality.

Another member of the anti-Semitic group was Eugene Ionescu. But Ionescu also had a past he wished to hide although it was quite "innocent" compared with that of his fellows. Firstly, it was the issue of his family; Ionescu's father was a Romanian lawyer with a French PhD and his mother was French. But it was a question about her origin: she might not have been French and she was probably of Jewish ancestry. Nothing was mentioned in Ionescu's autobiographical writings; but he talked about his mother with Mihail Sebastian, whose friendship, unlike that of the others, continued to cultivate and who mentioned: "I had known for a long time that his mother was Jewish." (Mihail Sebastian, *For 2000 Years*, 1990: 97) This conversation took place in 1941, only fifteen days after an cruel Iron Guard pogrom had taken place in Bucharest.

As for Franz Kafka, he was born being Jewish and remained a Jew for the rest of his life. The situation in Bohemia was a tolerant and normal one most of the time, with exceptions such as the 1899 anti-Semitic uprisings in Prague. Later, Kafka became very interested in Zionism and other aspects regarding Judaism. For a while, he was interested in Kabala and mysticism and tried to learn Hebrew. For a time, he wished to go to Palestine and open a restaurant with his girl-friend - Dora Diamant - the daughter of an Orthodox rabbi, who had knowledge of Hebrew and Judaism. Nothing of this came true, certainly, but he felt Palestine to be a refuge, even if it was only a mental one for him.

When Kafka was just a boy, one of his friends argued for the existence of God; thus, having a world without the God who created it was

just like a clock without a clock manufacturer. Kafka strongly rejected this argument and seemed to take pride in this achievement. As a student, he declared himself to be an atheist and as an adult, he seldom went to the temple and was not a practicing Jew, even if there were elements of the culture which interested him a lot. However, as we can see in the *Blue Octavo Notebooks*, he was interested in the metaphysical issues of the sin, truth and supreme reality, thus writing: “There is nothing besides a spiritual world; what we consider to be the world of the senses is the Evil in the spiritual world and what we call the Evil is only the need for a moment in our eternal evolution.” (*Blue Octavo Notebooks*, 2001:136) And he continued: “The fact that there is nothing else but a spiritual world deprives us of hope and gives us certainty.” (*idem, ibidem*) Many critics, especially his best friend and biographer Max Brod, consider Kafka to be as a religious writer, thinking that the object of K.’s quest, i.e. *the Castle*, is actually God, supreme love or eternal life. Whether this approach is justified or not has been debated a lot, but it says a lot about Franz Kafka’s sensitiveness and that his works can be understood in this way, even if they often seem completely bereft of hope, less hope in a transcendent and religious sense.

Although there is a lot of Jewish sensitiveness in Kafka’s words, there is also a sense of universalism. When religion is openly mentioned, Judaism is almost never expressed; but Christianity is. For example, the Samsa family from *The Metamorphosis* is definitely Christian, praying to the saints and crossing themselves and the maid at the end of the Judgment buries her face in the apron and cries out “Jesus!” Moreover, the tradition of the “wandering Jew” is used for the wanderings of K. in *The Castle*, although in a secularized and universal way: “This tragic urge had something from the wandering Jew, wandering in an absurdly dirty world.” (*The Castle*, 1987:101) It could be said that Kafka simply wished his books to be more inclusive more than being exclusively Jewish in nature. The feelings of alienation, loneliness, being an outsider and knowing that one’s life is subject to forces beyond one’s control, as well as a sense of tormented survival, frequently associated with the Jewish sensitiveness and which often appear in Kafka’s work, are definitely among the common feelings among people of all religions and races in the 20th century. In a totally real sense, Jews’ feelings were made universal and K. regarded these feelings from the perspective of both a Jew and as a member of humanity, generally speaking.

Mihail Sebastian’s (Iosif Hechter) childhood was undoubtedly a frustrating one, the writer evoking it like a tormented childhood, which was to afflict him for the rest of his life, “aware of this enormous inferiority. That

is why I understood what the tragedy of the parent pauvre hero meant. I do not know... Should it be a remote memory coming from a terrorized and shy childhood?" (*Letter about the Good Manners and Proper Behaviour in Society*, 1928). However, it was not the material privations that hurt little Iosif's sensitiveness, but a frustrating and insulting appellative which obsessed him throughout his childhood years: "coward Jew"; thus, he admitted his complex of deep inferiority: "I grew up with this yell thrown at me like a spit." (*For Two Thousand Years* 1990: 9). He considered the anti-Semitic outbursts to be an abasement of the human being; he was denied the right of being Romanian and this humiliated him the most. The space of childhood turned into a space of loneliness and isolation: "A shadow of terror falls over my childhood memories." (*For Two Thousand Years* 1990: 10)

Repressing his memories, Sebastian tried to get out of the childhood's narcissism, by "destroying" a frustrating and anguished past. That is why, as a mature man, he would often feel the social void, manifested through depressions and anguish. The writer's remarks on his childhood reveal the feelings of confusion and helplessness that he really experienced. It was about a self-esteem hurt by a society which tried to isolate and humiliate him; there is a total discordance between the magical landscape of his childhood and his inner condition, crushed by shame and despair.

Although Franz Kafka's work seems (and it really is) totally different from Sebastian's (but not as far as their content and finality are concerned), the two writers can be considered "soul-mates", considering that both of them suffered from the "solitude dilemma". Indeed, their works belong to two isolated artists, who regarded their isolation as an unforgiven guilt. As Ileana Mălăncioiu states in her book - *The Tragic Guilt* - Kafka's work is "an endless monologue on the verge of the precipice, questioning the sense of the human existence. [...] Kafka's hero continues to hope, considering hope a reason for living his life, from the desperate-hope-where-there-is-nothing-to-hope." (1978: 43). This seems familiar for Sebastian's characters who, beyond their whole despair, still try to find a salvation, a victory of the Eros, even an illusory one: "Clench your fists, you idiot, if there is no any other way out, consider yourself a hero, pray God!" cries out the narrator-character from the novel *For Two Thousand Years*. (1990: 26)

The two artists' consciousnesses were torn apart by unfulfilled wishes, by vain love stories and abnegations with no answer. Both Kafka and Sebastian led their lives as two eternally exiled human beings, caught between forces and realities which were in conflict. Kafka also wished to fight against his loneliness, but all his attempts ended up in failure. In his

Journal he wrote: "I have very seldom left this border area between loneliness and collectivity; on the contrary, I have settled down in it more than in my own loneliness." (1995: 235) By writing, both artists wanted to reach a collective existence; for them, isolation was a synonym for guilt, as loneliness causes culpability. Happiness is negative, it is a deficient mode of anguish. Kafka wrote in his *Journal*: "You can reproach the Jewish people that special anguish." (1995:247) In his turn, in *For Two Thousand Years*, Sebastian admitted: "Jews are a tragic people" (1990: 249); or, in the same novel, one of the characters told the narrator: "You have a tragic spirit." (1990: 191) This reminds us of Nikos Kazantzakis, who considered that: "Whenever you touch a Jew, you will actually find a wound." (1986: 360) This statement is not fortuitous, as the tragic feeling is a collective complex of the Jewish people. For this reason, Sebastian almost desperately expressed his affiliation to the Jewish people: "Certainly, I will never stop being a Jew. [...] Has anyone ever needed a homeland, a land with plants and animals more than me?" (*For Two Thousand Years*, 1990:128) The tragic experience of the psychological isolation made him remember that he spiritually belonged to a people he would never give up on. And, in January 1914, Kafka admitted: "What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself and I should stay very quietly in a corner, at least content that I can breathe." (*Journal* 1995: 103). In his case, there is a spatial and temporal emptiness, a loneliness and isolation caused by the lack of affiliation, a Paradise lost in the darkness of history. And, last but not least, the overwhelming fear which is unlikely to ever disappear: "You are Jewish and, therefore, you know what fear means." (*Letters to Milena*, 1990: 92) In a psychoanalytical approach, this could be interpreted as the fear of life and the fear of death, the two concepts advanced by Otto Rank. (in *Studies of Psychoanalysis*, 1988)

Nowadays, as the disease of the modern world becomes more and more serious, the Judaism reflected in Kafka's and Sebastian's works seems to be more universal than ever. The uncertainty, the alienation, the sense of being outsiders in the world, the loneliness are felt by all of us and the reflection of these feelings in the two writers' books make them not just some Jewish artists, but also universal ones, able to sublimate the feelings of the whole mankind into impressive works of art.

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