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Between Life and Books: Words

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Abstract

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Words play a crucial role in our existence. They are the fundament of the entire life schemata of the human being, and the very world of a subject of consciousness often identifies with them. The present article is aimed at analysing the mediating function of the word in the logic of life representation, as well as in its transfiguration in the book of an emblematic thinker: N. Steinhardt's *Jurnalul fericirii*.

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1. Introduction

No one can reflect on the meaning of a life or writing – be it one's own or that of others – without resorting to the weight and power of words. From the very beginning, words are the building materials in the construction of the universe of any human being. Words institute and govern man's relationship with his own existence; that is why they cannot be a mere instrument of designating a neutral reality. Words organize and 'cut out' reality in a particular manner, specific to each subject of consciousness. They intervene between the human subject and his lived reality, a reality whose objectivity is put between parentheses when – or maybe only when – it is conferred a certain value through meaning or meanings attributed to it. Meaning is actually the *a priori* condition of the examining of words.

The present study is aimed at highlighting the negotiation of meaning in the text of *The Journal of Happiness* by Nicolae Steinhardt, a heart-rending testimonial inscription of survival in the *gulags* of Romania under communism. Steinhardt himself, whose life can be appear, seen from the outside, as rather unhappy, is in search for the meaning of words and, through them, for the meaning of his own existence. The present article attempts a critical discourse analysis of his text and its underlying struggle with meaning at all levels and layers of significance. It explores the cognitive, linguistic, and psychic mechanisms which come into play in the author's confessional articulation of the resorts of survival as active resistance. While scrutinising the semantic layers of the text, the present author's analysis aims to extract a general discursive model of spiritual resistance to totalitarian imprisonment of thought, which answers a vivid international interest in studies on the memory of totalitarian experience. We demonstrate how, once elevated to the level of the exemplarity of a model of existence, words have the power to transform everything, including, as in the present case, the transformation of *unhappiness* into a sort of *happiness of submission* and through this, of life itself.

2. Confessional discourse between factual experience and linguistic signification

In the space of Romanian spirituality, N. Steinhardt is a distinctive figure for at least two reasons. The first is that he represents a singular case of a cultural personality who, in full awareness, converted from Judaism to Orthodoxy. The second – another thing out of the ordinary – is that, after years of imprisonment, because of his refusal to give false evidence against his fellows, N. Steinhardt ends up writing, despite all evidence to the contrary, a *Journal of Happiness – Jurnalul fericirii*. In the face of such a destiny, endured and fulfilled with the patience of a saint, how many people could still have the power to write a journal about the joy of his earthly passage? (Steinhardt, 1991)

N. Steinhardt is not a traitor. He refuses to save his own hide by turning in his friend, Constantin Noica, with whom he will remain friends for life. And when people become true friends – which is so rare after all – they know what would be good for the other, what would gladden or sadden him, where and how he could find his peace and tranquillity. I wanted to point this out after reading that Steinhardt's withdrawal to the Rohia monastery was due to the fact that Constantin Noica had chosen Rohia as a perfect place where his friend was to prepare his passing to the *world beyond*. And so it was. Apparently Noica must have seen that place blessed by God as Steinhardt himself was to see it when he decided to withdraw from the turmoil of this world, being attracted "first of all by the silence, the

smallness and meekness of the buildings, by the majesty of the forest and the glimpse of the possibility of long hours of uninterrupted meditation”.

The world of Steinhardt and Noica, as well as that of other illustrious members of their generation (M. Eliade, E. Ionescu, E. Cioran, M. Vulcănescu, A. Ciorănescu, A. Dumitriu and many others) was not at all an innocent one. But how many people’s worlds can be deemed as innocent? In how many of them is history exempt from treason and torture, while men – as François Mauriac wonders rhetorically in one of his journals – “are lambs in a larger number than they are wolves”? (Mauriac, 1970)

N. Steinhardt did not have the face of a traitor. Albeit cast into the maelstrom that brought together people who betrayed or were betrayed, or who refuse to betray (everything, in the history of the 1950s and 1960s revolved around *to betray*), N. Steinhardt considered that it was not the same to be imprisoned and turn in your fellows or, on the contrary, refuse to turn them in. Certainly, there is in man an innate penchant for honesty or dishonesty. Second to this native given, there is the influence of your environment and education, for which everyone around you is responsible in one way or another, at one moment or another. One cannot overlook the fact that a father – Oscar Steinhardt, in this case – tells his son, before the latter is taken away for questioning by the Security: “Do not disgrace me, don’t be a fearful Jew [...]” In such extreme moments when the self-preservation instinct would naturally push anyone towards a solution favourable to one’s own being, the father’s intervention categorically inclines the scales on side of honesty. And this even if it comes at the cost of his own son’s freedom. This does not make him less of a parent. What kind of heart-breaking reasoning does it take to arrive at such a decision? Without a doubt, the decision is definitive, endorsed by the authority of the parent (“Do not disgrace me...”) further supported by the argument of a reflection which defies the loftiness of many theories about human condition: “[...] don’t be saddened, you’re going from one large prison into a smaller one, and don’t rejoice too much in getting out, you’ll pass from one small prison into a larger one...”.

This fact of life is telling in several ways. First of all, it is because in totalitarian universe you can find yourself convicted without being guilty of any real offence. It clearly indicates that, in politics, complying with the will of men sometimes means opposing divine will. Does not this mean breaking that commandment forbidding one to give false evidence against one’s neighbour? Instigation to evil-doing is raised to the status of law and shows that renouncing one’s innocence is the only way of getting out of trouble. But if one’s nature is not crooked or warped, there is no way one can adhere to the ideology of such a system, of a history which irremediably places the individual under its flattening march. The system, inherently repressive, even under its “freest and democratic” forms, is ready to annihilate any gesture impinging upon the inflexibility of its laws. N. Steinhardt was asked to be a witness for the prosecution in the trial against Constantin Noica and Dinu Pillat, accused of mystical and legionary activism, and his refusal resulted in his being sentenced, on 4 January 1960, to 12 years of forced labour, alongside other twenty-two prominent personalities of Romanian culture (Alexandru Paleologu, Sergiu Al. George, Vladimir Streinu – to mention but a few). An explanation for the strangeness of such a tragic and unjust experience is given by N. Steinhardt in a speech to his cell-mates at Aiud prison, “after supper, during the heavy time until blackout”. He wants to make them understand something of the mechanism of the regime “accommodating” them there. He first invokes

Andersen, with his story about the naked king: “Everyone sees and knows that the king is naked, but nobody can say it. Nobody can say that two and two makes four. Little by little everyone gets used to that, they resign themselves and become indifferent to whether he is naked or not.” The king is, in their case, the system, which is believed to have been instated for ever and cannot be changed. And the child, who blurts out the truth in Andersen’s story, is, in the given context, each lucid individual living under the system. He will be told “cautiously and protectively” not to speak the unspeakable. Consequently, he will be taught that there is an order which he cannot but submit to or he will be subjected to a different kind of teaching. By different methods and by other teachers. And if he has the misfortune of seeing reality as it is and not as he is told it is, if he has the audacity to take the liberty of telling it like it is (the liberty of “two and two is four”), he should expect the ensuing suffering. Not all these things are explicitly expressed by Steinhardt, they seem to be inferred from one another, especially since they resonate with the reflections of other thinkers, enounced in the very first pages of the *Journal*: «I knew, otherwise, from Camus that “there always comes a moment in history when those who affirm that two and two makes four are punished to death”. And from Dostoyevsky that two and two makes four is not life any more, but the origin of death. Man, says Dostoyevsky, has always been afraid of this rule; he keeps searching for it, he sails the oceans in search of it and sacrifices his life in this quest, but he dreads to think that he will find it. It is a deadly principle and it is a good thing that two and two makes sometimes happen to make five for once. But Orwell thinks otherwise, that freedom means the freedom of saying that two and two makes four and that, once this is acknowledged, the rest follows naturally». From the daily notation of crude facts to the leaps of history, metaphysics and literary quotations on which it weaves the fabric of its patterning, Steinhardt emerges as an incessant meditation on the fundamental problem of human condition. The ideational debate thus becomes a continuous shuttle between real and imaginary history, linked by the matchless charm of a permanently waking conscience. And conscience does not opt for any of the two kinds of history but it is permanently *between* them, trying to explain each one through the other or to fundament the one starting from the other.

3. Critical discourse analysis: the necessary deconstruction of meaning

Between Life and Books/Între viață și cărți, this is how N. Steinhardt appears even to those readers who are not familiar with the first book he authored, published by Cartea Românească in 1976, due to Mihai Gafița. In the volume of essays entitled *Între viață și cărți*, highly acclaimed at the time by critics in the domain, the underlying rule of the writer’s undertaking is not to give a biographical interpretation of the work, by reference to those reflections which could be attributed to the dimension of eventuality in the life of the writer being analysed (Steinhardt, 1976). The rule of the approach is the perspective of *between*, a word with the power of linking the ontological and cultural spheres, but also with the power of transfiguration which only the act of creation can accede to. In fact, “*it*, the connecting word, states N. Steinhardt, is the most important, not the life, nor the books, but this *between*”. The middle space between life and books exists at some halfway point, where the forging of the creator’s experience and its transfiguration in art cannot be framed within precise limits. That is why he will always situate himself *between* real life as a concrete ontological given and the leap into

spirituality which already presupposes an act of total liberty, assumed beyond pre-established patterns or laws. Any great creator is tempted to oppose the finality of life with the restlessness of freedom and irreconcilability with the constriction of his own finiteness. It is probably from here that the ideal of any perennial work begins to take shape, conceived out of the double perspective of the *ethical courage* proved by the creator and of the *aesthetic daring* that creation invites. If a man lacks courage, at least his aspiration to escape the constriction forced on him should help him forge his own dignity. Aesthetic courage cannot substitute ethical courage, but it can illuminate the privations initially deriving from being confined in space and time. “Life, when it is insidious, wicked and inimical wants precisely this: to turn us into puppets, manoeuvred by strings and ropes, into some parrots or freak shows for the circus profiteering and the vanity fair”, reflects in one of his confessions the one who had become, in the meantime, Nicolae, the monk from Rohia.

Courage is the primal virtue on which N. Steinhardt dwells systematically either in his own reflections or in his references to biblical lines or writers such as Descartes or Brice Parain. From Descartes’ “all hardships are caused by one’s lack of courage”, the writing takes the reader to the notation obsessively recurrent in the *Journal*, which, simple as it may be, is so uncompromising in its articulation of the idea of courage derived from Brice Parain’s philosophy of life: “If we want to be free, we should simply not be afraid of dying, that is all.” There is a crescendo of the discourse on courage at the end of which the absence of courage is identified with the presence of stupidity itself: “Enquire. Demand. Knock. Dare. Do not be afraid. Do not get frightened. Insist. Rush. Be awake. Stay sane. There are so many urges clearly showing that it is not proper that we be stupid.”

The lucidity as to the lack of alternative created by the threat of imprisonment is once more demonstrated by the father, Oscar Steinhardt, who sees the courageous refusal to betray as the only way out of the impasse: “‘It is true’, says my father, ‘that you are going to have very hard days. But your nights are going to be peaceful’ (I must repeat what he told me, I must; God would punish me if I didn’t) ‘you are going to sleep well. Whereas if you accept to be a witness for the prosecution, you will have, indeed, fairly good days, but your nights will be dreadful. You won’t be able to sleep a wink. You will have to live only on sleeping pills and painkillers, numbed and dozing all day long, but excruciatingly awake at night. You will torment yourself like a madman. Be prudent. Come don’t hesitate anymore. You must go to prison. My heart is breaking, too, but you have no choice. In fact, even if you take the stand now as a witness for the prosecution, don’t be a fool, in six months they will come after you anyway. That is certain.’”

It is not incidental that the *Journal of Happiness* begins with the evocation of that “January of 1960”, the year in which N. Steinhardt is convicted, then moves on to the days of 28 and 29 August 1964, when he is released from prison together with the third and last cohort. It is these two reference points that frame the distillation of the whole discursive substance of the *Journal*, mainly generated by a “noble defiance of reality”. The darkness of prison, with everything it entails – with all kinds of humiliations and sufferings – Steinhardt will counteract by the light irradiating from his inner freedom, which nobody can take. Revealing in this sense is the confession which shocks by the unusual feel of such an experience: “In this almost surreally sinister place I was to experience the happiest days of my life. How completely happy I could be in room 34! (Nor was I any happier in Braşov, during my

childhood with my mother, or in the endless streets of mysterious London; neither on the decorous hills of Muscel, nor in the blue postcard scenery of Lucerne; no, nowhere else).”

Not anyone is capable to talk about happiness in the conditions of imprisonment. Nor about the triumph of inner freedom while one is deprived of physical freedom. It is no less true, however, that not anyone is destined to attain such heights. The life of the spirit, of superior spirits, works according to laws different from those of the so-called “normality”. The fettering real can only be confronted, defeated and metamorphosed by such spirits.

The *Journal* is discontinuous in space and time. It does not observe the chronological principle (it covers the period Vienna 1928 – Bucharest 1971), being written according to the flux of images, memories and impressions, which eludes the strict linearity of objective time. It also eludes any common classification, being neither an autobiographical novel nor a mere journal of ideas. It has been said to be a testimonial of “survival through literature”. Although it often starts from the notation of everyday facts, reflection is not confined to a mere account of them or to a single voice. There intervene, one by one, the most highly resonant voices of world culture: Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Saint-Exupéry, Huxley, J. P. Sartre, Henry James, Balzac and numerous others.

The *Journal of Happiness* does not capture a single aspect or isolated aspects of human condition. The book vibrates with everything that is human. With everything that can be experienced in a man’s life and even more. Beyond what could appear as the concreteness of a particular destiny, the writing rises to generalizations which, without necessarily pertaining to the reader’s experience, are instantly accepted by virtue of the verisimilitude they emanate. And this can only be attained by the profoundness of the experience or of the ideational leap actuated by the writer’s inspired writing. The book’s substance consists, first of all, in the writer’s encyclopaedic learning – which surprises not only by the variety of the voices inserted, but especially by their being so well orchestrated that it feels as if they all speak only through his voice. But the work does not stop at that. From an encyclopaedic scope which is not at all forced or ostentatious, the tonality rises toward that sphere in which nothing is unfamiliar to one, albeit not experienced by everyone. Steinhardt talks about *friendship* (it will never be of those who say “if I can”), about *impotence* (which he finds, “sometimes more convincing than the authentic model”), about *suffering* and *pain* (“the spectacle of suffering is sacred”), about *life* in general (as a “way of having come to terms with the unacceptable human condition”), about *justice* and *injustice* (“injustice, when done not to you, but to another, must be denounced, cast down, set right”), about the *human condition* (“Experiences are not transmissible. We do not believe each other. We won’t, we can’t, we don’t know how, we don’t dare, we don’t strive to believe the others”), about *patriotism* (whose teaching does not qualify as judgements or prejudices, but as feelings, with their “gift of tears”), about *trust* and *suspicion* (the former pertaining to the knight and the gentleman, while the latter to the rascals who like to believe that all the others are “as corrupt as they are”). From *trust* and *mistrust* Steinhardt moves on to *faith*, defined as “trust in the Lord, although the world is evil, despite injustice, meanness and the negative signals coming from everywhere”. Then, he configures the *steps of forgiveness*, three in number (“We find it hard to forgive our trespassers”/“We find it even harder to forgive ourselves”/“We find that the hardest to forgive are those against whom we trespassed”). Then come the *steps of sin*, with the hierarchy of those in prison (*forgivable* and

unforgivable sins – the latter being blackmail and betrayal). Steinhardt also talks about *patience* as a restraining of the mouth and through it of the entire being, about *the Pharisee's great guilt* – self-sufficiency – about the *feast* as a manifestation of the joy for *the other*, about *the chief human quality*, which “is not so much self-love but hatred and envy towards another”, about the *courageous man*, seen as the one who “does not care about external perils and for whom danger can only come from himself”. The dialectic of *good-evil* is founded on a lifelong belief: “In the face of evil, good is more delicate, more unstable, of a slighter makeup. Good is always in a position of inferiority (fragility), it cannot wrestle with its adversary”. Steinhardt also shows a political vision when he distinguishes in the general evil *three phenomena of the time: the vertical invasion of the barbarians, the reign of fools and the betrayal of good people*. “The first: the invaders are not the barbarians from other continents, but the rogues, coming from the bottom up. These barbarians take over the leadership positions. The second: the stupid and the uneducated have rose to power, pure and simple. The third: instead of opposing them, decent people adopt benevolent expectations, they pretend not to see or hear, in brief: they betray”.

Of no less interest is the reflection on the *archetypal fundament of the Romanian soul* “just as it is: joyful, longing for friendship, willing to see the contentment of the other, incapable of rejoicing alone, anxious to share any good fortune”. Towards the end of the book, being, quite understandably, unable to avoid talking about “the inevitable character of the disenchantment at the end of any life, any adventure, any event”, Steinhardt still retains the tonic feeling which only *the goodwill* between people can sustain. The quotation from Henry James is significant: “There are three important things in people’s lives. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind”. Kindness, as the expression of our opening towards *the other*, endorses the concept of the Christian sentiment invoked by the biblical quotation at the end: “it makes one happier to give than to take” (Acts 25, 30).

The creed underlying the *Journal of Happiness*, which made possible the transformation of the prison’s darkness into the light of salvation, is for N. Steinhardt none other than the desire to be Christianised into Jesus Christ and God. “I believe, oh Lord, help me in my disbelief”, the book’s motto, taken from Mark (9, 24) is naming the existential dilemma of “I believe and yet I know that I don’t truly believe. I believe insofar as I call Christ “Lord”. And I don’t believe insofar as I ask him to come and help me in my disbelief”. Steinhardt admits thus to not having found the ultimate, complete formula for salvation. He will find it twenty years later, not as the writer Steinhardt, but as Nicolae, the monk from Rohia, the formula being *kindness, the good-heartedness* of which he speaks in one of his conversations with Ioan Pinteă (Steinhardt & Pinteă, 2009) and which we could conceive once more as an *in-between*: between life, books and the road to salvation:

“What’s the good of having it all: intelligence, culture, cleverness, erudition, doctorates, super-doctorates (as the professor in *Lecția/The Lesson* by Eugen Ionesco), if we wicked, vicious, rude, vulgar, stupid and foolish, we are worth nothing, there goes intelligence, down the drain, and erudition, and super-doctorates, and all the international congresses we take part in and all the study grants we win through tough competitions. Nothing can replace or be a substitute for a little kind-heartedness, a little benevolence, tolerance or understanding. A little sustained civility. Good-heartedness is not a subtle or refined virtue, but a basic attribute of the human being and an attribute of culture at the same

time. Goodness is another name for Aristotle's definition of man: a social being. Without goodness we can only cohabitate in terrible conditions, endorsing the bitter affirmation of Sartre: the others, this is hell! There is an elemental altruism expressed through goodness, which is an axiom of communal living. Berdiaev said: bread for me is a material problem (implying a selfish, vulgar one), but the bread of my neighbour, Berdiaev went on, is for me a spiritual duty. It clearly results from this that nothing can fully substitute goodness. We know that if we could speak all the languages and all the dialects on earth and if we could classify according to decimal classification all the volumes printed in all the world's languages, from Gutenberg to this day, and if we were full of learning and erudition, and if we knew the usage of all the terms specific to all sciences and technologies, we would not be worthy of being deemed as cultivated people if we are still envious, uncouth and vicious at heart. Whether we like it or not, culture is not merely an accumulation of knowledge, but a certain delicacy of character and the capacity of not considering kindness as a mere obsolete and sentimental virtue".

4. Conclusions

Withdrawn from the world as in a real self-exile, N. Steinhardt gives thus, through the voice of Nicolae, the monk of Rohia, his testimony regarding the meaning of man's sojourn on earth. A testimony more likely to be a living example for others, insofar as it affirms the necessity of the triumph of goodness over that area of darkness inherent to human condition. It is a conclusion or life-lesson to be learnt by anyone who believes in the perfectibility of the human being.

We have endeavoured to demonstrate how the words of this genuine life lesson textually construct the stature of a personality and of a written work which cannot ignore the dimension of lived historical experience. Always occupying the middle ground, words define the signification of the two reference points of *life* and *books*. As the only linkage between life and books, Steinhardt's words give shape to the creator's experience and transform it into a work of art. It marks the beginning and the end of an entire world, which we could unmistakably categorize as a classical testimonial of 'survival through culture' and of opposing monologic ideology by the dialogism of humanist discourse.

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