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THE ETHICS OF RESPONSIBILITY IN ELIE WIESEL'S WORK

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Review of Sandu Frunză, *God and the Holocaust in Elie Wiesel's work. An ethics of responsibility* (Dumnezeu și Holocaustul la Elie Wiesel. O etică a responsabilității), (Contemporanul Publishing House, Bucharest, 2010)

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Elie Wiesel (born September 30, 1928, Sighetul Marmăției, Romania) is better known in Romania for his 1986 Nobel Peace Prize than for being a writer, given the Romanians' obsession to have a Nobel Laureate of their own. There are, of course, some examples of scholars or writers who were born in Romania but lived, created and worked abroad. Some continued to live in their native country, but were marginalised: George Emil Palade (USA), who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine (1974, together with Albert Claude and Christian de Duve); Ioan Morar, member of "International Physicians for the Prevention of the Nuclear War", who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985 (together with Mihail Kuzin – former Soviet Union – and Bernard Lown – USA); last but not least, Herta Müller (Germany), born in Romania, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2009.

Sandu Frunză's recent book is the first and only Romanian monograph dedicated to Elie Wiesel. Yet no other Romanian author would have written a better book: endowed with a solid education as philosopher of religion, Sandu Frunză has already published *Philosophy and Judaism*, 2006; *Religious Fundamentalism and the New Conflict of Ideologies*, 2003; *The Religious Experience in Dumitru Stăniloae's Thought. A Relational Ethics*, 2001; *Love and Transcendence*, 1999; *A Mystic Anthropology*, 1996; with Mihaela Frunză, he coordinated the volume *Essays in Honor of Moshe Idel*, 2008.

Last but not least, Sandu Frunză was the ideal Romanian author to write such a book because, as it is well known, Elie Wiesel is not only a writer, but also a renowned philosopher and theologian, although he refuses to assume the latter status. "I would be in favor of the writer in a dialogue with Richard D. Heffner, I am a mere storyteller". And so he is, a special storyteller, one who, in his masterpiece *Night*, confesses his personal dramatic experience as a prisoner (no. A-7713) in the Auschwitz concentration camp, a place he miraculously survived (his parents and younger sister having died there).

The first chapter of the book, *Introduction into the issues of evil and responsibility*, brings up a topic which is intensely debated in contemporary culture and philosophy: can morality still exist after Auschwitz, considering that God allowed the Nazis to do as they wished? Note that the philosopher Theodor W. Adorno raised a similar question, in relation to poetry; in his article *Barbarism, poetry, salvation*, Vladimir Tismăneanu stated: "Adorno meant that it is frivolous to care about poetry after Auschwitz. Nevertheless, how can poetry be frivolous? It is poetry itself, as it happened to Celan, that helps people survive the death of their mother and the despair of writing in the language of their executioners, as well as the lack of sympathy from the rest of the world. Eventually, the Holocaust, too, can be defeated through poetry, in the same way as Anna Ahmatova stood up against the Gulag that killed her husband and kidnapped her son,

by means of her poem, *Requiem*. Isn't the poetry of the Hebraic Bible what helped the children of Israel survive deportation and exile?"¹

Sandu Frunză claims that "the interference between memory, confession and responsibility is the foundation of Wiesel's entire work". In this work, Wiesel proposes an ethic based both on the religious thinking of Judaism and on contemporary laic philosophy; thus his statement that he is neither a philosopher, nor a theologian, but a mere storyteller should be considered as an excess of modesty (the Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica, author of *Stories about Mankind*,² also rejected his philosopher status, saying that some people should be ashamed to call themselves philosophers just by thinking of Socrates!). Although he indignantly asks himself where God was while the crimes in Auschwitz took place (*Night* is a protest against a God who stood silent and indifferent to the atrocities committed against innocent people in concentrations camps), Wiesel focuses on the importance of faith and religious hope in people's lives. (This reminds me of a similar example of another great writer, Eugen Ionescu, who was born in Romania, but became famous in France; all his life he was an atheist and then, right before his death, he stated in a will of sorts: "At the same time, in spite of everything, I believe in God because I believe in Evil. If Evil exists, then God exists, too."³).

Approaching Wiesel's literary work, Sandu Frunză highlights that, according to the artistic vision of the writer (closely related to his philosophical and theological outlook), literature itself should be rethought after the Holocaust. Nevertheless, despite the fact that Elie Wiesel does not consider himself a philosopher or a theologian, but a mere writer/storyteller, his literary work deals with fundamental issues belonging to the above-mentioned disciplines: the human condition, life and death, the boundaries of reason, the ambiguity of faith, human indifference and the expression of absolute Evil, the silence of God and the silence of humans, etc. His literary work is based on two pillars: *memory* and *confession*. The problem is that literature itself has limits when it comes to revealing the Ineffable of the Holocaust, because "the experience of the Holocaust cannot be rendered into words, the enormity of what happened there is so very ample that human words are helpless, even if they are skillfully used by the writer."⁴ Without becoming moralistic or propagandistic, literature, according to Wiesel, must assume its role of inviting human beings to introspection and self-reflection, two acts that will trigger the maximum ethical exigence in confrontation with daily reality. Following in the steps of certain Western analysts (such as Robert McAfee Brown), Sandu Frunză agrees that, as far as Wiesel is concerned, words (*id est*: stories!) come into being out of the fire of crematories and the blood of victims and thus have a double role: a *destructive* one, meant to annihilate the state of indifference and passivity, as it became obvious that "indifference proved to be a much heavier burden than sin itself, that indifferent people become accomplices to the tragedy taking place right in

front of their eyes, should they prefer to look away"⁵; and a *creative* role, as they "herald a new beginning, self-discovery and the awakening of responsibility".

In the Romanian author's opinion, Wiesel's literary work is based on two permanently interacting poles. On one hand, there is a *nocturnal* register (indifference, sadness, suffering and death), on the other, a *diurnal* one (responsibility, memory, hope, joy of being alive). Sandu Frunză proves that, thanks to Elie Wiesel's literary work and his esthetic vision centred on *memory* and *confession*, victims appear "as shadows, mere products of the imaginary reality for as long as they are fed on the substance of memory and confession".⁶ A great Romanian writer, Ștefan J. Fay (1919-2009), who spent the last two decades of his life in France and died at the age of 90 - the age of patriarchs! - wrote to me: "Only those who are forgotten die!". This is an interesting consensus between a Christian writer and a Jewish one in relation to death and the possibility of saving a human being through memory.⁷

Throughout his literary work, Wiesel asks himself how the Western Christian world could be so indifferent to the extermination of so many people who had lived among Christians for centuries. The writer believes that this indifference is justified by the fact that *Christianity is based on the sanctification of death* (the crucifixion of Christ). This is the interpretative tradition of Judaism. However, as far as Christian theology is concerned, *Christianity is based on the sanctification of life, not death*. It was not Christianity that created the pyramids which sanctify death, but other religions. Easter, for example, celebrates the Resurrection of Christ, in other words, Life. Given his philosophical education, Sandu Frunză should have made this necessary distinction. It is true that he cites John K. Roth and his work *A Consuming Fire. Encounters with Elie Wiesel and the Holocaust*,⁸ which mentions how Wiesel has chosen to interpret Christianity; however, it is not clear whether he accepts or rejects this point of view. As the aim is to stir the Christians' awareness by highlighting their indifference towards those who died during the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel shows that, in the death camps, "the responsibility for the other person's life is replaced by the responsibility to preserve your own".

As we all know, Judaic philosophical thinking revolves around two symbol-cities: Athens and Jerusalem.⁹ Being born in Sighet, a Jewish town from Transylvania, (at present still inside Romania's borders), Elie Wiesel, for whom his roots are very dear, uses the symbolism of the two cities, by replacing Athens with his native Sighet, which he presents in a *dark* light, resulting from the deportation of its Jews to concentration camps. As the deportation was conducted by the Hungarian-Horthyst authorities, Sandu Frunză, with due respect for the historical truth, highlights that "the atrocities experienced by part of the Transylvanian Jews in that period are the responsibility of the Hungarian administration"¹⁰. Jerusalem, on the other hand, still preserves a *shining* appearance and thus the two cities

become symbols of “memory, confession and responsibility”. After the war, when he returned to Sighet, Elie Wiesel started to look for the lost paradise of his childhood but was unable to find it. The nostalgia for his loss makes Wiesel superimpose the images of the two cities: „Sighet and Jerusalem – at time it seems to me as though I have written all my life about one or the other, about one within the other”.¹¹ Assuming his condition of a Wandering Jew, the writer will travel between the two symbol-cities, aiming to convince the world that it must come out of its indifference and take on the ethic of responsibility.

Other chapters of the book bring into discussion the relation between humans and God after the Holocaust, the singularity of the Holocaust, the terminology relating to the Jewish genocide (the choice between *Shoah* and *Holocaust*), the absolute Evil and the banality of Evil, memory as nostalgia for a lost paradise, human death and the death of God, etc.

Even though the volume brings together studies that were written and published along many years¹² as well as some novel chapters, it presents as an accomplished structural and stylistic unit. Written with academic rigour and based on an impressive bibliography, the book can be read with ease, displaying a clarity which most philosophical writings usually lack.

There is one more thing I need to mention. As a philologist familiar with literary criticism, I am used to reading pages upon pages before I find an idea worth remembering. Sandu Frunză's book is obviously more than literary criticism. It represents a personal reflection regarding the major issues arising from Elie Wiesel's theological, philosophical and literary work. Every sentence is a verdict, a reflection (in fact, Sandu Frunză mentions at the beginning of his book that this is “part of *his reflections* – I.R. highlights - on Wiesel's work”). It is also a challenging invitation to read *Night* – and more.

Personally I am not aware of other Romanian interpretative works dedicated to the great Nobel Laureate. As for Elie Wiesel, he might rejoice that he found, within the Romanian cultural space, an intellectual equal, an analyst who masterfully matches his impressive work.

Notes:

¹ Vladimir Tismăneanu, “Barbarism, poetry, salvation”, *Hotnews.ro*, Sunday, January 2, 2011, <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-opinii-8173933-barbarie-poezie-salvare.htm>

² Constantin Noica, *Stories about Mankind: Based on One of Hegel's Books*. Prologue - Sorin Lavric. Epilogue – a letter from Emil Cioran, (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2009).

³ “Eugen Ionesco's Will”, published in 04/01/2011 by Robin Molnar, *Robintel*, <http://www.robintel.ro/blog/primate/testamentul-lui-eugen-ionesco>

⁴ Sandu Frunză, *God and the Holocaust in Elie Wiesel's Work. An Ethics of Responsibility* (Bucharest: Contemporanul Publishing House, 2010), 85. See also Sandu Frunză, "Inexprimabilul: cu Elie Wiesel despre filosofie și teologie (The Unspeakable: With Elie Wiesel on Philosophy and Theology)", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, Vol. 7, No. 19 (2008): 3-29.

⁵ Sandu Frunză, *God and the Holocaust in Elie Wiesel's Work*, 86-87.

⁶ Sandu Frunză, *God and the Holocaust in Elie Wiesel's Work*, 93. As the Romanian analyst cites philosopher Emmanuel Levinas due to the fact that his vision is similar to that of Wiesel, it would have been worth mentioning the monograph of a young Romanian philosopher, Vianu Mureșan, author of an excellent analysis of the French philosopher's work: *Heterology. An Introduction to the Ethics of Levinas*, (Cluj-Napoca: Limes Publishing House, 2005).

⁷ Ilie Rad, *De amicitia*. [200] letters from Ștefan J. Fay to Ilie Rad (1988-2009). A tribute to Ștefan J. Fay on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday. Prologue by Irina Petraș (Cluj-Napoca: Accent Publishing House, 2009), 17.

⁸ John K. Roth, *A Consuming Fire. Encounters with Elie Wiesel and the Holocaust*, Prologue by Elie Wiesel, (Atlanta: John Konox, 1979), 78.

⁹ Sandu Frunză, *Philosophy and Judaism*, (Cluj-Napoca: Limes, 2006). See also Sandu Frunză, "Jewish Philosophy and the Metaphor of Returning to Jerusalem", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 5, No.13 (Spring 2006): 128-138.

¹⁰ Sandu Frunză, *God and the Holocaust in Elie Wiesel's Work*, 47.

¹¹ Elie Wiesel cited in Sandu Frunză, "Elie Wiesel and Nostalgia for a Lost Paradise", *Transylvanian Review*, vol. XVIII, No. 2, (Summer 2009): 101.

¹² Readers can find the following texts in English: Sandu Frunză, "Celebrating a storyteller: Elie Wiesel", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, Vol. 7, No. 21 (Winter 2008): 106-111; Sandu Frunză, „Elie Wiesel and Nostalgia for a Lost Paradise”, *Transylvanian Review*, vol. XVIII, No. 2, (Summer 2009): 101-105; or Sandu Frunză, "Ethics, Religion and Memory in Elie Wiesel's Night", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, Vol. 9, No. 26 (Summer 2010): 93-113.