

„ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA” UNIVERSITY, IAȘI
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LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF REFLECTIONS ON JEWISH MYSTICISM:
GOG UND MAGOG (BY MARTIN BUBER) AND
ELI - EIN MYSTERIENSPIEL VOM LEIDEN ISRAELS (BY NELLY SACHS)

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Introduction

When someone who appreciates art looks at a painting, the person has an aesthetic experience on two levels: on the level of the whole painting, and on the level of the details of the painting. On the one hand, a work of art is viewed as a whole – having coherence from the standpoint of the artistic message and being convincing from the standpoint of the use of colours. At the same time, however, after this first level of the aesthetic experience, the work begins to give expression on the level of details in the work: the identity of colours, their immediate context in the painting, the chromatic themes that put the painting in comparison with other works. Between these two levels of the aesthetic experience there appears an interdependence, in which each of the levels gives value to the other. Even if the aesthetic experience is many times limited to the perception of the whole, only when the value of the details is recognized can something be said about the authentic reception or appreciation of a work of art.

The examination of a literary text implies a similar experience. This study proposes the identification of these „details” regarding the examination of the literary text and the mystical Jewish tradition. Our analysis will focus upon two texts that are similarly related to both German literature and Hebrew tradition: the novel *Gog und Magog* (by Martin Buber) and the work *Eli – Ein Mysterienspiel vom Leiden Israels* (by Nelly Sachs). These texts will be studied – each in a distinct section – from the perspective of the author’s position regarding the German culture and also regarding the Hebrew culture. Although throughout the study there will be mentioned correlations between the approaches of the two authors, we have dedicated the last section of the thesis to a more elaborate comparative study that identifies the similarities and the differences regarding the literary transposition of the authors’ reflections on the Jewish mystics.

The interpretation of a literary work is a complex process in which the author, the text, and the reader meet in an apparently neutral ground in which each one assumes a superior position. Diverse hermeneutical theories have proposed – and continue to propose – ways of understanding this point of coming together. There are, however, examples in which this dynamic connection between the three interpretive „instances” is significantly determined by deep roots that connect the text (and the author of the text) to a particular mystical tradition. The echoes of such a tradition in the literary text, demands in the interpretive act a minimal knowledge of the concepts, the images, and the symbols from the respective tradition. Such a knowledge is not limited to the creativity of the one who interprets, does not diminish the horizontal significance of the text, but, instead, opens the text up toward areas of unexpected understanding, toward correlations and an interdependence which an absolute „supremacy” of the reader would be incapable to discover.

This study intends to illustrate these reflections through the analysis of these two texts – the novel *Gog und Magog* and the work *Eli* - which are different as types of literature, but are similar from the standpoint of the universal spirit to which they are associated (that of the Hebrew mystics). We consider, however, that this relationship between the mysticism and literature is not limited to the Jewish culture; for this, in the annex of this paper there is presented a study that brings together two authors of different traditions, in which each is connected to the mystical tradition of the culture from which each comes: Paul Celan and Paul Claudel. The study devoted to these two poets illustrates the same basic principle on which the entire thesis is constructed, that is the fact that the anchoring in a tradition - particularly in a tradition of mystical nature – is enriching for the literary text. Furthermore, any interpretive process requires an authentic understanding, not only of the given literary text, but also of the „echoes” of a particular mystical tradition that are found in the literary text.

Argument

The analysis devoted to these two texts - the novel *Gog und Magog* and the piece *El* – underscores the ways in which relating to a mystical tradition might be determined both in the composition of a literary work, and also in the complexity of the significant aspects that the text might have once it is composed. Both texts allow for an „open” interpretation, something that depends only partially on the immediate context to which they refer. In the case of the novel *Gog und Magog*, there is a precise historical demarcation, that is the period of Napoleon’s campaigns, Napoleon being the personification of the bad that precedes the messianic age. However, Buber himself confirms the fact the novel might also be read in light of the „key hermeneutic” representative of the national-socialistic period. In the case of *Eli* by Nelly Sachs, the trans-historic application of the text is more evident, by the fact that the author rightly uses the expression of temporary demarcation „Nach dem Martyrium”.

We consider that the coming together of the two authors in a comparative study – dedicated to the ways of reception and interpretation of the Hebrew tradition on the level of literary text – is at all groundless. This coming together is not grounded in the simple affiliation of the two authors – Martin Buber and Nelly Sachs – being in the same German language community of Jews. Although there was not any correspondence between them, although their life experiences were substantially different, although they were dedicated to different types of text, a number of aspects can be identified that validates a comparative study. The two authors „meet” – through their texts – in the world of Jewish tradition, in the world of Hasidic values, in the drama of the Holocaust, in the preoccupation in language, in the value given to dialogue.

It is true that one cannot speak of a *relationship* between Nelly Sachs and Martin Buber compared, for example, to that between that of Nelly Sachs and Paul Celan. However, one can speak about a *meeting* – a meeting in the spiritual sphere, a reflection of the Jewish tradition, and at the same time a connection with a suffering and threatened humanity finding its own identity in the horrors of the Holocaust. Still, it is not totally insignificant to be reminded that the name Nelly Sachs was not completely foreign to Buber. In one of the letters written by Hugo Bergmann to Buber (January 26, 1948), he testifies to Buber about a letter received from Nelly Sachs. The poet, following a presentation by H. Bergmann about M. Buber, speaks of her affinity to the Hasidic spirit (which she rightly considers the only viable way of Judaism), as well as her effort to promote Hasidic stories of Buber within the Swedish culture. It can be presumed that Buber was not foreign to public recognition that Nelly Sachs began to have at the end of the 1950's; but he died a few months before Nelly Sachs received the award „Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels“ (the same award that was given to Buber in 1953), and an year before the poet received the Nobel Peace Prize in Literature – along with the Israeli writer S.Y. Agnon (who had been a friend of M. Buber).

Yet the coming together of the two authors in this study is justified in the first place through the influence that the writing of M. Buber had on Nelly Sachs. His Hasidic stories open up a new world to the poet's extension of the culture to which she identified. This spiritual and cultural meeting with Hasidism will have a double effect. On the one hand, Nelly Sachs finds in the Hasidic spirit values which possibly are truly identified in her struggles regarding her own identity. On the other hand, M. Buber's full preoccupation with language, meeting with dialogue – a preoccupation that transpires also in the way in which he interprets the Hasidic tradition – will stimulate Nelly Sachs's own reflection of language. The poet, however, does not transform this reflection into a theoretic discourse, but transforms it into artistic creation.

Conclusions

Throughout Section I of this study we have approached religious mysticism – particularly that of Jewish mysticism – in the tradition and in the texts which spring from this mysticism. In a culture based on the word, as is the case with Jewish culture, the text had and continues to have a fundamental role in the definition of its own identity and in the search for ways of expression of this identity. The text associated with a particular mystic tradition – whether it is also a literary text that takes only certain concepts and symbols – must be analyzed in the light of the respective tradition. Even if such a reading does not appear to take into consideration the ultimate directions and theories in literary hermeneutics, we consider that the reading of such a text in the light of tradition to which it is tied does not restrain the spectre of interpretation, but actually amplifies it; because only in

understanding the ideal richness of mystical concepts used in the respective literary text, will the reader be able to discover, with each reading of the text, new exegetical keys and new interpretive viewpoints. Such a text is the novel *Gog und Magog* by Martin Buber. This novel needs to be read and interpreted in the light of the connection – often of a special complexity – which Buber had with Judaism, and in particular in light of the connection of the text with the history and heritage left by the most recent mystical movement in Judaism, that is Hasidism. Establishing a connection between the novel *Gog und Magog* and the tradition of this movement makes it possible to understand the ideal substratum of the novel and also opens the way toward the comparison of this novel with other literary texts in which images, concepts and reflections are tributaries of the same spiritual viewpoint.

Thus we have the reason why, in view of the realization of such a comparative approach, we proposed, throughout Section II of the study, a look into the universe of the work *Eli - Ein Mysterienspiel vom Leiden Israels* by Nelly Sachs, a work which we consider connected, through ways less visible, to the same special tradition of the Jewish mystics. Just like *Gog und Magog* by Martin Buber, the work *Eli – Ein Mysterienspiel vom Leiden Israels* by Nelly Sachs opens up the act of reading to the point in which the reader engages himself in the effort to understand the “details” of the artistic creation.

All these details bear the mark of a meeting between a personal destiny, a historic destiny and a poetic one. These meeting – that reflects always the concepts of suffering and exile – portrays in a unique way the Jewish tradition – a tradition that Nelly Sachs discovers on the road of searching for her own identity. In a paradoxical way, through the fact that she chooses to become the voice of many, she finds her own poetic “voice” and discourse, in which personal suffering, the Holocaust and the drama of exile are presented through the means of poetic language.

The comparative study in the third section underlines different aspects in which the two texts studied “meet” on the basis of the fact that each one of them is rooted in the same cultural and mystic tradition. During this comparative study we have identified both ideas that are presented in similar way, and ideas that bear the mark of the author’s originality and life experience. We developed the argument of this section (and of our entire research) making constant reference to the hasidic movement in Judaism and to the way in which this movement is particularly reflected in the two texts studied here.

One can say that the hasidism gave a theological and mystical identity to Buber, while to Nelly Sachs it gave a poetic identity. Nelly Sachs does not discover the hasidic movement in the same way as Buber does. She initially related to it partly due to the constraint of finding a Jewish “mark” in her existence. Although her “discovery” of hasidism will play a significant role in the

imagery of her poems and in the poetic language she uses, Nelly Sachs confers to concepts and ideas from hasidism a distinctive meaning of mystic reflection – a meaning that echoes other mystical traditions as well, particularly that of Christianity. For Buber, the hasidic movement is a philosophy of life; for Nelly Sachs, the hasidic movement is a source of poetic language and of understanding her own destiny as poetess. The hasidic world opens – for both of them – the door towards the world of mystical reflection – a reflection that, for Buber, describes the communion between the human person and God, and that, for Nelly Sachs, describes the communion between the poet and the word.

In a contemporary context that seeks to “free” the language from any connection with tradition, considering that, in this way, the language will attain and affirm its own identity, the human person of our century feels quite the opposite effect: he (or she) is a witness of a process in which the language is reduced to a functional dimension and in this process it gradually loses its capacity of representation. Being no longer rooted in traditions that were conferring wide spectrums of meanings to the concepts used, the language risks to become a powerless presence, being reduced to the status of an instrument and seeming to survive only due to its still existing binding with image.

Studying texts as the novel *Gog und Magog* and the play *Eli* has the role – beyond providing a valid research topic for a doctoral dissertation – to underline the expressivity and the creative force that the language has when it is rooted in a mystical tradition (through the author’s existential or at least poetic approach). Through the relationship with the concepts and the images provided by such a tradition, the language remains in the same time revelation and mystery, maintaining in this way its capacity of expressing the human spirit in the most authentic way.

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