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REINTERPRETING THE PHILOSOPHICAL CANON

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Review of Mircea Flonta, The Solitary Thinker. Criticism and Practice of Philosophy in Ludwig Wittgenstein's Works, (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008).

Key Words: practice of philosophy, philosophical canon, ideology, ethics, religion, aesthetics, Mircea Flonta

Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies, vol. 9, no. 27 (Winter 2010): 337-343
ISSN: 1583-0039 © SACRI

Published in 2008, Mircea Flonta's essay dedicated to the criticism and the practice of philosophy in Ludwig Wittgenstein's works, reveals a new face of the noble Romanian scholar, not only through his long lasting and systematic preoccupation for Wittgenstein's thinking, but also, as suggested by the first part of the title, through the speculative character of its premises, "the solitary thinker" reminding of the Romantic figure of the philosopher[1]. Moreover, the tradition of Mircea Flonta's interests (if we refer to his anterior book, entitled *Kant in his World and in Today's World* (Iaşi: Polirom, 1995)), assumes a rediscovery of our critical tradition and its reinterpretation through the modern's eye. This "radical renewal" of the themes, questions and practice of philosophy constitutes the central objective of the recuperations, or, better said, of the actualisations, while, the interest for the spectacular destiny of Wittgenstein's life and thinking betrays the necessity of acknowledging an exemplary canon in the history of the last century.

Straight from the "Foreword", the author admits that he is aiming at "two objectives difficult to harmonise". The first one presupposes a presentation of "the style of the Austrian philosopher's thinking", the pursuance of Wittgenstein's spectacular biographical evolution, in accordance with the fluctuations of his thinking and personal style. The second objective, as a normal continuation of the first one, is that of formulating "points of view and personal interpretation, confronting a part of the vast critical, exegetic literature".[2] The fact that Mircea Flonta's interest for Wittgenstein's philosophy started over twenty years ago, can be easily proved, through the dense bibliography, through the particular character of the analyses and the gradual and natural evolution from context to text, from the signified particularities of the philosopher's moral profile to the axiological and comparative analyses of his fundamental texts, especially the *Tractatus.*

Mircea Flonta states, in the study entitled "Philosophical Understanding «To See Better»", in the volume *Ludwig Wittgenstein in 20th Century Philosophy,* edited alongside Gheorghe Ştefanov, a fact that anticipates the publishing of a complex study on the work of the Austrian philosopher: "Wittgenstein is not only the most influential thinker of the century that has just ended, but, without any doubt, the most enigmatic". [3] This conjugation, less usual in the criticism of philosophy, generates the study on the "solitary thinker", associating his enigmatic biography, that of a "hero", with the destiny of his thinking and its impact on the 20th century philosophy. Wittgenstein's preoccupation to remove the current stereotypes of the dogmatised thinking, to eliminate the sterile comfort of philosophical clichés, is one of the major objectives of the present study and, in general, the objective Mircea Flonta has been pursuing for so many years.

In the first part of his research he grasps the biographical particularities of the philosopher and the formation of a particular way of

thinking, proposing "a re-education of our way of seeing (*Anschauungsweise*)."[4] In this context, in Wittgenstein's case and, through transfer, in Mircea Flonta's study, "the ultimate stake seems to be what Wittgenstein called *the change of his style of thinking*." [5] Unlike other biographers of the philosopher, such as Brian McGuiness, Elisabeth Anscombe or Norman Malcolm, Mircea Flonta describes a selective spiritual biography, the key moments that have influenced his becoming. The change of method, suggested by Wittgenstein in modern philosophy, is also sustained by his spectacular biographic evolution, by his atypical character, by his supreme wish to live "in an authentic way, meaning to be sincere with oneself and the others, meaning *anständing*."[6] The existence „through good and beauty" is the major objective of his existence, which Mircea Flonta will follow through relevant biographical data in the first part of his study, entitled „The Life of a Hero?", but, in the case of the other four parts, through relevant arguments referring to his philosophical practice.

In the preface of his biography, entitled *Wittgenstein: A Life* (Penguin, 1988), Brian McGuiness admits that: „I attempt to present his life (part of it, at first) as an intelligible whole, as something capable of being seen as unity, as the development of just such a *Daimon* as Goethe describes in a favourite poem of Wittgenstein's."[7] Even so, the daimonic image of the philosopher appears incomplete in this book, on the one hand because of the short period treated (1889-1921), on the other hand because of an insufficient reflection of the biographic elements in Wittgenstein's work. Thus, McGuiness acknowledges, with reference to *Tractatus*: "The book we treat separately because it had a career of its own."[8]

Unlike McGuiness, for Mircea Flonta there is no clear dissociation between biography and creation in demonstrating the creative daimon. The two perspectives are to be found in immanence, the creation becoming of a pharaonic nature, as Lucian Blaga would say. The death of the author (R. Barthes) means, only in this context, of the biographic, latent significations, resurrection. For example, talking about the *catalytic* meeting between Wittgenstein and Russel, both in the first part and in the final chapter, Mircea Flonta evokes the fertile moments of this reunion, but also the significant differences of Wittgenstein's "artistic conscience", that formed the basis of *Tractus*. "Wittgenstein, states Mircea Flonta, was not, like Russel, a sceptic rationalist, one of those who believe that only affirmations sustained by arguments should be taken seriously."[9] The spiritual *reunions* or *separations* from Kraus' anti-aestheticism and Weininger's moral idealism are also observed accurately. Moreover, Weininger's creed, "Be a genius or disappear" is considered, by Mircea Flonta, central in the philosopher's formation in the period of Viennese modernity, as "Such a way of assuming an idea must have had an overwhelming impression on the adolescent Wittgenstein, with his profound inclination on moral seriousness."[10]

Furthermore, if we were to follow the significant stages of Wittgenstein's evolution in accordance to the metamorphosis of creation, in Mircea Flonta's perspective, we could point out the next steps: 1.adolescence and formative influences from the Viennese period (Klimt, Schönberg, Brhams, Mahler etc.); 2.the period of studies at Cambridge and the first isolation in Norway; 3. being a volunteer in the Austrian-Hungarian army, participating in war and being a prisoner in Italy; 4. the experience as a teacher in Trattenbach, a small mountain village; 5. the teaching period in Cambridge and the important encounter with Russell, Sraffa, Pinsent, Moore, Engelmann, Ramsey, Drury or Skinner; 6.renouncing teaching; isolation in Ireland; the American period and his end in doctor Bewan's house. The conclusion of Wittgenstein's wonderful house, keeping in mind Weininger's advice, is that: "For Wittgenstein ethics and aesthetics represented one and the same thing"[11], this being the perspective that opens the subtle analyses of his philosophy by Mircea Flonta. Furthermore, the philosopher's meditations on ethics, as they are interpreted in his conference from 1929 or in the discussions with Schlick and Waismann, show his constant interest towards the limits of what is said and what is shown. The method of setting boundaries is, as his biographer admits, that of „a logical analyses of the language"[12]. From Wittgenstein's point of view, the attempt to centre the „good" in the context of the world of facts is a failure ab initio. „As opposed to Schlick, who wrote about ethics and the sense of life, Wittgenstein affirmed that he preferred to say that something was «good» because God ordered it, instead of saying that God wanted «good» because he was «good»"[13], just to avoid the explanation of "good".

Discussing „The Atomistic Ontology of the *Tractatus*", Robert J. Fogelin admits that the importance of Wittgenstein's work „lies in the way in which he develops the atomistic program co-ordinately both for language and the world."[14] Reinterpreting this tradition, Wittgenstein offers a new perspective on the dynamic understanding of the world, starting from the logics of the common language, a fact followed, with precision, by Mircea Flonta in the chapter entitled *Tractatus* and «the end of philosophy»". Looking at tradition from the perspective of a reanalysis of the common language, empiric rationalism, situates him in opposition to Bertrand Russel, as the author demonstrates. Therefore, we can understand that Wittgenstein's interest is not to purify or progressively refine common language, but that of seeing the simple games of language as a significant representation of humanity. For Wittgenstein, Mircea Flonta states, "what is really important and valuable from a philosophical point of view will be able to be obtained not through detachment from the common language, but, on the contrary, through a better understanding of the way its expressions work."[15]

"The end of philosophy", pursuing the method proposed by Wittgenstein in *Tractatus,* means the implicit annulations of the modern

understanding of "philosophy as science whose object is the theoretical analyses of significations and values."[16] For this, Mircea Flonta explains, the misunderstanding of the logics of common language, therefore of the permutations/ atomistic games of the language, generated the schism between philosophy, understood as knowledge of the human nature, and Man. If we accept such an approach, we can observe an indestructible unity of Wittgenstein's philosophy, in spite of the visible transformations from *Tractatus* (1922) to *Philosophical Research* (1953). Therefore, in the chapter "Is there a Wittgenstein I and a Wittgenstein II?", the author synthesises in an exact and relevant manner the contradictory opinions referring to the unity of Wittgenstein's thinking, starting with the disjunction from Bertrand Russell or Wolfgang Stegmüller, to the unitary character of creation, well-argued by Anthony Kenny and Rudolf Haller. The idea of fractioning his creation is generated by a certain hybridism of his writings: the final character of *Tractatus*, the students' lecture notes and the current notes dictated to his friends or/and the dynamics of *Philosophical Research.*

If close friends of Wittgenstein, such as Paul Engelmann or Alice Ambrose, had already expressed incisive opinions referring to the fact that for him *Tractatus* had become, at a certain point, "philosophy in the traditional sense"[17], Mircea Flonta observes a fundamental nuance, setting „the limits of comparison". He admits that: "the difference between *Tractatus* and the representative texts of Wittgenstein's late philosophy will be characterised by the difference between complete philosophy and philosophy in progress."[18] The fundamental difference between „the two Wittgenstein", in Mircea Flonta's well-argued opinion, relies in "the style of thinking", opinion that particularises the median position of the Romanian scholar.

Moreover, making sense of Wittgenstein's last position, Mircea Flonta, with axiological ability, not impressionistically, as any classic biographer of the philosopher would be tempted, starting from his last line, "Tell them that I had a wonderful life", sustains "the exceptional coherence of his life"[19], generated by his stable convictions. Nevertheless, we must notice a constant *sisyphical struggle* of the philosopher with himself, a Pascalian vocation of his „heroic" existence. Appreciating the „imaginative" and therefore „more ambitious" character of Wittgenstein's philosophy, through this constant struggle with tradition, through the eternal striving to find the truth and to explain it, Mircea Flonta tries to understand the truth from *a religious perspective*. „Drury tells that once in 1936, Wittgenstein cited vividly a passage from Lessing: «If God held in his right hand all the truths and in his left only the untiring desire of truth, even with the certainty that I would fail continuously, and forever, and if He said *Choose!*, I would go down with humility in front of his left hand and I would say: Consent with me, Father! The pure truth is just for you. »"[20]

Furthermore, just to point out more clearly a certain religious perspective of Wittgenstein over the world, Mirca Flonta entitles a sub-chapter, in his eloquent analyses on the rapports between „Wittgenstein and Russel", „The rationalist spirit versus a religious point of view". Russell' rationalism is replaced, in Wittgenstein's philosophy, with *a religious perspective* on the truth. He confirms, to the same Drury, that: „I am not a religious man, but I can not see any problem from a religious point of view."[21] As opposed to Russell or the Christian canon, „the religious attitude, *in Mircea Flonta's pertinent opinion*, was, for Wittgenstein, that of ethic seriousness."[22] Even the philosopher's view on divinity has its base in a strong moral character: „the truth Christian was for him the person that embodies love for people and exigency towards himself, a rigid intransigence towards the recognised weaknesses"[23]. His biographical destiny has a profound Christian meaning, as it is accurately analysed by Mircea Flonta, evident in his rejection of his father's wealth, his academic destiny, his constant confession of his mistakes, his renounces of himself in favour of the others, or in his existence similar to one of Dostoievski's hermits. „From Wittgenstein's perspective, *postulates Mircea Flonta*, in the modern world, only those people who have given up being content with themselves and their lives, but have succeeded to free themselves of any vanity, are truly religious."[24]

Reconfirming Wittgenstein's equivalence between ethics and aesthetics, Mircea Flonta analyses the meaning of recovering this "canonical" model, through the permanent need to exist in the world of the spirit. The sacrifice for ethic and aesthetic beauty, absolute morality, creative, *daimonic* existence, as Blaga would say, the courage of assuming decisions, dignity, pure friendship, altruism, are essential existential principles of Wittgenstein, the solitary thinker, a *Romantic daimon* recomposed in Mircea Flonta's fascinating critical history.

Wittgenstein's personal style seems invariably transferred into the purified, elegant style of the Renaissance scholar, Mircea Flonta, through the simplicity and care for the right and relevant expression. Both the silent flux of ideas, the compositional equilibrium, the synthetic capacity and the firmness of his critical positions, but also the unique personal style, the elegance of expression, with natural transitions from the empathic warmth of the living to the natural distancing of rational argumentation, make this essay an example, maybe insufficiently recognised, of new understanding of old topics.

The final commentary to the first part is eloquent for Mircea Flonta's whole essay, expressing, subsidiary, the secret motivation of such a research, the finding of thinking fundamental elements: "the unconditional respect of the truth and, equally, the courageous confrontation of misfortune are imperatives that one, for whom human dignity is a real value, must follow. Wittgenstein fought almost every day with himself, in order to live in accordance with these commandments. He

faced up the end, accepted it without illusions, remaining faithful to his convictions. He rightfully believed that his life was, in itself, a heroic one. And, if it was heroic, it was also «wonderful».”[25]

Notes:

[1] This paper was conceived in the context of the postdoctoral research, “The contradictions of the Literary Canon. Interdisciplinary Approach”, within the project “CommScie”, program co-financed by European Social Fund by POSDRU/89/1.5/S/63663, 2007-2013.
[2] Mircea Flonta, *The Solitary Thinker. Criticism and Practice of Philosophy in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Works,* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008), 8.
[3] Mircea Flonta and Gheorghe Ştefanov, editors, *Ludwig Wittgenstein in XXth Century Philosophy,* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2002), 93.
[4] Flonta and Ştefanov, 99.
[5] Flonta and Ştefanov, 99.
[6] Mircea Flonta, 13.
[7] Brian McGuiness, *Wittgenstein: A Life*, (London: Penguin, 1988), XI.
[8] Brian McGuiness, 296.
[9] Mircea Flonta, 31.
[10] Mircea Flonta, 23.
[11] Mircea Flonta, 97-98.
[12] Mircea Flonta, 231.
[13] Mircea Flonta, 232.
[14] Robert J. Fogelin, *Wittgenstein*, Second edition, (London: Routledge, 1987), 17.
[15] Mircea Flonta, 365.
[16] Mircea Flonta, 179.
[17] Alice Ambrose, apud Mircea Flonta, *The Solitary Thinker. Criticism and the Practice of Philosophy in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Works*, (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008), 206.
[18]Mircea Flonta, *The Solitary Thinker. Criticism and the Practice of Philosophy in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Works*, (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008), 209.
[19] *Ibidem*, 97.
[20] *Ibidem*, 241.
[21] Apud Mircea Flonta, *Ibidem*, 349.
[22] *Ibidem*, 352.
[23] *Ibidem*, 352.
[24] *Ibidem*, 357.
[25] *Ibidem*, 98.