

BOOK REVIEW

Ștefan Afloroaei, *Privind altfel lumea celor absurde. Experiențe ce descoperă o altă libertatea și deopotrivă, limitele înțelegerii noastre*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2013

Lev Șestov does not appear in any page of Ștefan Afloroaei's latest book, *Privind altfel lumea celor absurde (Taking a Different Glance at the Absurd)*¹, but it seems to me that his approach stands under the same logic as the one of the Russian philosopher. Precisely, the revelations in front of death are similar to the ones of thought towards his own limitations; similar in the sense of the method (approach), not of the conclusion (the end result): something completely different happens when facing death; something completely different happens when thought meets its limitations. I would stop the analogy between Șestov and Afloroaei² here, especially due to the ultimatum-like feature which the thought of death brings with itself, but I would keep the similarity of the approach: Șestov shows us how thinking, with its limitations, cannot

reflect on death, and it demands other frameworks from itself (it does not matter, here, what kinds of frameworks are in question), as long as Afloroaei shows us how the limitations of thought (the non-sense, the lack of sense, the paradox and the absurd) transmit something different, completely different, to us, than what they usually seem to tell us.

However, there is also another reason why I dared the present analogy. On page 187 from the last section, in the penultimate subdivision, there is a sentence that discusses a sequence from a short story written by Kafka³. Here, Afloroaei states

¹ Ștefan Afloroaei (*Privind altfel lumea celor absurde*). *Taking a Different Glance at the Absurd. Experiences which discover another type of freedom and, at the same time, the limitations of our comprehension*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2013.

² In fact it is Afloroaei who stops it when stating: "speaking of the absurd, I do not consider some terrible things happening in people's lives." *Taking a Different Glance at the Absurd*, ed. cit., p. 16. See entire fragment, pp.16-17.

³ A brief summary of the said story: a common country man wants to meet the Law (in itself). Thus, he decides to pay it a visit. Yet in front of it there is a guardian who dismisses him for the moment and tells him that he might be received later. The man keeps insisting; the guardian keeps dismissing him. The man understands that everyone can be received by the Law, yet there are several gates, all guarded, which lead into several halls; nobody knows how many gates or halls there are. The man waits, asks, bribes the guardian (who takes the bribe only to humor the man and make him believe he has done everything possible to get to the Law), he keeps waiting, his eyesight weakens, he dotes and dies. Yet, with his poor eyesight he glimpses "an unwithered glow shining through the door of the Law" and be-

the following: "if I were not afraid of words, I would say that it is almost *revelatory* (my emphasis)". What exactly is revelatory? The fact that the common individual lives an experience that is outside the "common sphere of the sense and the nonsense", outside the "area" of the metaphysical and religious experiences, even outside the sphere of absurd experiences (as they are theorized by the existential philosophers), but not entirely meaningless.

I will revisit this example, but now it is necessary to establish that, in this sense, the limitations of thought are revelatory, and, in fact, it is in this sense that Stefan Afloarei's entire book is written: everything that at the first glance may seem as lacking any sense, apart from the sense, the nonsense, the paradoxical or the absurd, has a sense or, if we want, it has a *different* sense. Obviously, a sense against the Aristotelian logic, yet a sense which remains very close to that which we could call, maybe a little bit pretentious, the perfectly human logic of the absurd (or the perfectly human logic of the nonsense, of the lack of sense, of the paradox etc.). It is about this *different* kind of logic that Stefan Afloarei writes.

Yet this other kind of logic which we usually call lack of sense, nonsense, absurd, paradox etc., gives the individual

fore he draws his last breath he manages to ask the guardian why no one else has ever tried to enter, "especially, he says, since every man is trying to find out what is the Law". The guardian answers: "No one else was meant to enter through here, because this entrance was meant only for you. Now I am going to shut the door." Kafka, *Before the Law*, apud Ștefan Afloarei, *op. cit.*, Section four. *Paradox and nonsense*. 23. *The Law – a name of the nonsense (Kafka)*, pp.182-187.

"essential" experiences – and it is here that Stefan Afloarei's book stands out. The human's "own" experiences which cannot be comprehended but as nonsense, absurd etc. Because of this reason does Afloarei rehabilitate the whole "pantheon" of fallen concepts. In other words, Stefan Afloarei tries to reconstruct the sense of those without sense and show that these belong to the individual's life. But how is it possible that such a reconstruction can prove that those without a sense, the paradoxical, the absurd involves a second sense, or another kind of sense, which fully belong to the individual and at the same time deeply marks his life?

I think that we can identify two reasons that work together, and they function as one. First, it is never very clear what has a sense and what lacks sense,⁴ or in fewer words, between the two (sense and nonsense) there exists "a forever unstable border". And it is unstable due to our own positioning within the registers of our own life: if a statement such as, "that which is everywhere, is nowhere"⁵ lacks sense within our pragmatic life, it is filled with sense, as we may all infer, within our life projects (we infer that being everywhere, like we usually are, we are in fact nowhere); or an entirely absurd gesture like that of Erostrates (who, "considered to be alone and unknown", "wishing to escape the anonymity which brought him on the verge of despair and made him unhappy",

⁴ "For, taking a slight risk, that which seems to have sense in a certain sense of the word "sense" can prove to be devoid of sense in another sense of the word "sense". Afloarei, *op. cit.*, p.23.

⁵ Ștefan Afloarei, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

is said “to have set fire to the wonderful temple of Artemis of Efes”⁶) which loses from the very beginning its quality of real fact (but, Afloroaei says, it is precisely because of this that it is so real), says something extremely concrete in each an everyone’s life: who amongst us, “considered to be alone and unknown”, is “alien” to the “hubris” such a gesture brings along⁷; or pundit Nagarjuna’s “tetralemma which was considered to be negative”, “One should not say void./One should not say non-void./One should neither say both, nor none./These are mere designations”, and which seems complete devoid of sense, actually proves “the limitations of expression itself, at the same time with those of the human desire to express oneself”⁸; etc. etc. etc. Examples, in the same register, are present throughout the book, and it seems like all are trying to prove something decisive, something which belongs only to man, in terms which defy the logics of the four principles. But all these examples (and it is here, I repeat, the entire thesis of Afloroaei’s book) consider a certain register of human life which cannot be understood/explained but in this manner which usually we call absurd, paradoxical. In other words, both nonsense and the absurd and the paradox (literary, religious, philosophical) have a particular intentionality: they express something which cannot otherwise be expressed, or, in other words, indicate towards something which cannot otherwise be indicated. And, maybe, there is nothing more important than these glimpses that cannot be expressed and

cannot be indicated but this way - completely *different*.

I would stay for a while in the sphere of the intentionality of the absurd as we find it in literary, religious or philosophical examples, which Afloroaei uses.

This is about an intentionality which somehow escapes the subject, with a sense above it (or, if we want, on its edge), which can be comprised in the registers mentioned above, only because other registers deny it. Here, however, through these examples, Afloroaei shows the limitations of reason (I would say epistemological ones), in trying to understand what happens to us there, where no answer is possible any longer. Of course, it is about experiences built on the edge of reason, or at the limit of our comprehension, but – and this is the second fact that Ștefan Afloroaei points out– there are certain things that are beyond humans’ comprehension. A little more clearly: when faced with these situations, human thought recognizes exactly what is recognizable, that nothing is possible any longer, and that *something else* expressed in *another way*⁹ takes its place. And with this *something else* built by means of nonsense, of the paradox, the absurd, situated at the limit of comprehension, intrinsically human experiences are revealed.

Actually (and let us return to the example of the common man), Afloroaei

⁶ Ștefan Afloroaei, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁷ Ștefan Afloroaei, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁸ Ștefan Afloroaei, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁹ One might understand that here we might be referring to a plan which belongs to the religious. Yet Afloroaei doesn’t slide in this direction. In simple words, here it is all about admitting a common fact: not all things are within the grasp of man. Here in *Differently about...*, one can find some of the motifs Ștefan Afloroaei develops in *Our metaphysics...*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2008.

wants to respond to those situations that cannot be comprised in a philosophical, literary or religious register. In other words, it seems to me that, Afloroaei asks what kind of intentionality life situations have, those that do not get an answer in the philosophical, literary or religious registers. Is it not here the most appropriate time to discuss about nonsense, the paradox and the absurd? But of course, yet it is difficult to imagine experiences that lack sense (in the common sense), are metaphysically neutral and outside religion.

Only the aesthetic ones remain. Yet Afloroaei, in the example of “the common man”, does not count in any way on these ones. It is not even about an ethical experience that the “common man” might have felt. Despite all these, the experience he goes through is revelatory. In what way revelatory? If we accept the logic of neither/nor to the end, we are left with two answers: (1) “a religious-like experience” (yet with the important observation that religious-like does not mean religious) or (2) an experience which observes “the idea that the man choose in life that which is given to him”. Afloroaei leans towards the former, yet in fact it makes no difference which interpretative variant we accept, or what other variants we might consider; what counts is the fact that the said experience reveals a “religious-like experience” or something like “man becomes that which he is”. How could one name these experiences more precisely?

Or, in other words, how could one explain them perfectly clear? Exactly in the absurd manner in which they occur: perfectly precise and perfectly clear in their specific opaqueness (against all logic) (as sometimes it happens that we can see

everything at once - especially in real life situations – without a particular reason, without any methodology, and against any indictment). Yet as we easily understand by now, this is precisely why they are filled with sense, revelatory. A marginal sense, or more clearly a sense outside thought, at its edge, yet no less of a sense.

One final remark: this book is, somehow, at the limit. How can one recognize something that goes beyond the limits of sense or the limitations of human comprehension (here, the two seem to be perfect synonyms) besides a rudimentary finding? And, if one does so, how one restores those beyond the limitations of thought in forms with sense? It feels as if it were a surgery in vivo in which you can no longer tell who the doctor is and who the patient. I would call it a frozen whirlpool¹⁰, at the limit of breath; it pesters you; and if it were not excessive, I would sometimes compare it (as a reading experience), dramatically speaking, to *Notes from the Underground*; other times, speaking slightly more freely, to *Dead Souls*. It is just that the natural effect is that Ștefan Afloroaei shows that which cannot be shown and proves that which cannot be proven.

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¹⁰ And “the starlit sky” on the cover of the book is, in this sense, I think, revelatory.