

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

Kerstin W. Shands, *Journeys Within. The Contemporary Spiritual Autobiography*, Stockholm, Elanders, 2016, 229 pp.



This book is mapping the sphere of study determined by contemporary spiritual autobiography, through a sum of contemporary spiritual autobiographies (published after 1995).

The investigative method examines various theories, perspectives, and definitions, in order to define with more nuances the realm of the spiritual autobiography.<sup>1</sup>

Autobiographies are keys to subjectivity and to the spiritual preoccupations of the self. Extremely interesting for a literate, philosophical and theological audience is the topic of spirituality per se unveiled and defined approaching the illustrations of autobiographies with spiritual content, reference and purpose, compared afterwards to secular autobiography.

Autobiography is an intense personal quest for the more genuine individuality, for the ground zero knowledge of being, through written thought, through thought and emotion brought to the order represented by a clearer understanding of things. One finds and loses oneself in an autobiography.

One arrives to capture a more spiritual self in approaches and in exercises of sincerity and aspiration. The author shows: “Whereas the spiritual autobiography is often in one sense a success story, the texts chosen in this study will focus on introspective works by writers who embark on genuine quests and who do not know beforehand where they will end up. Spiritual autobiographies

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. <http://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:949567/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

that are sermons whose main purpose is to enlighten readers and set them on the right path, that are providence tales, wonder tales, or conversion narratives designed to convert others, are not a primary concern here, even though such aspects will surface in some of the texts, in particular in the near-death narratives..." (*Introduction*, p. 25)<sup>2</sup>

Certain personal narratives emphasize the quest for the capturing of the image of God and the role of metaphors in this process, following the convolutions of personal religious development. "*In Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, Sallie McFague makes a case for a metaphorical theology. Even though metaphors infuse and underpin all our thinking (with dominant root metaphors becoming models and 'abstraction[s] of the similar from a sea of dissimilars' becoming concepts [16]), metaphors – "seeing one thing as something else, pretending 'this' is 'that' because we do not know how to think or talk about 'this'" – are even more relevant and unavoidable when 'speaking about the great unknowns' (McFague 15)" (p. 28).

Cultural and social hegemonic perspectives influence the subjective sense of emancipation from sin toward grace. Extremely interesting are the autobiographical accounts of pilgrimages examined as a genuine journey, with analytical interest for the identification of the points of departure, turning points, milestones, and arrivals. Autobiographical words, and autobiographical wordy architectures of thought and emotion, are summoned in this book to bring together the travelling dimension and the symbolic and spiritual dimensions. "In pilgrim narratives, inter-personal and intra-personal aspects are important. Yet another level concerns the relationship to or experience of a transcendent dimension. Oftentimes, the first two levels are subordinate to this third level, as may also be the case with the narrative itself in its focus on spirituality and religion while downplaying other aspects. In these stories, the relationship to God or a transcendent dimension is more important than anything else. It suffuses the first two levels and determines how authors see themselves and how they interact with others. The relationship with a transcendent dimension may be precarious, it may appear in sudden glimpses or in unexpected mystic experiences, or it may be an imagined future point of arrival. A pilgrimage narrative, then, may be an account of a journey towards a real or a utopian future point. Although it is an outward, physical pilgrimage, it is always and primarily also an inner voyage." (pp.89-90)<sup>3</sup>

Spiritual and personal narratives are all journeys within in the spaces of introspection and conscience, bringing a surplus of awareness to the spiritual milestones that constitute the core of subjectivity.

Autobiographies are individual analyses. This work brings together a successful selection of spiritual autobiographies, witnessing the connection among

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem.*

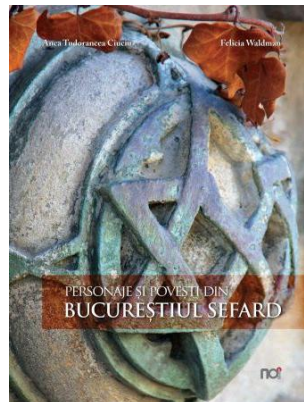
<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem.*

literature, theology and implicitly a wonderful kaleidoscope of subsequent philosophical perspectives over the narrative self and the role of religion and spirituality for the self, in order to emphasize how this “literature” brings to the fore one heroic epopee after another: there are narratives of the exit from solitude and confusion, toward epiphanies and illuminating conversion. This book captures the specificity of the genre of spiritual autobiography representing a true spiritual reservoir for contemporary times.

This “fabric” of journeys within subjectivity reminds us of the words of Antonio Machado: “Wanderer, your footsteps are the road, and nothing more; wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking. By walking one makes the road, and upon glancing behind one sees the path that never will be trod again. Wanderer, there is no road - Only wakes upon the sea”. Only that autobiographies are roads made by words, not by footsteps, made by emotion and thought, by the wakes upon the seas of awareness.

*Henrieta Anișoara Șerban*

Anca Ciuciu, Felicia Waldman,  
*Personaje și povești din Bucureștiul  
sefard*, Noi Media Print, 2016, 144 pp.



There was once a Spanish Street in Bucharest. A place where many residents were actually speaking a Castilian dialectal. It was the language of the Sephardic Jews (Ladino/ Judeo-Spanish), who arrived in the Romanian space on the Ottoman branch.

Following the 1492 expulsion edict, issued by the Catholic Kings Fernando de Aragón and Isabel de Castilla, many Sephardic Jews of Spanish rite fled to the Ottoman Empire, where the sultan Baiazid II guaranteed their security

and freedom of worship. From here they migrated to the Balkan Peninsula (especially to Thessaloniki), and then passed to Wallachia and Moldavia.

The Sephardic community of yore was a small one (compared to that of the Ashkenazi Jews, who later came on the Poland branch), and today it is just a memory. Maps like the Papazoglu map from 1871, old pictures depicting the Cahal Grande synagogue in the Popescu's slum (the nowadays Unirii Square), etymologies of toponyms that do not easily reveal to everyone (Mămulari Street, for example) or the silent gravestones in the Sephardic cemetery are witness to their past.

Significant sequence in the Romanian history (even limiting to the role of Jewish bankers in the creation of the Romanian banking system), the Sephardic history in Bucharest has been retrieved to the scientific present by publishing the volume *Personaje și povești din Bucureștiul sefard/ Characters and stories from the Sephardic Bucharest* (Noi Media Print, 2016).

Released on February 1, 2017, at the Cervantes Institute in Bucharest, in the presence of their Excellencies the Ambassadors of Spain and Turkey in Bucharest – Ramiro Fernández Bachiller, respectively Osman Koray Ertaş – and the director of the Bucharest Museum, the historian Adrian Majuru, this volume is the result of the teamwork of the researchers Anca Ciuciu (Scientific secretary within the Center for the Study of Jewish History in Romania) and Felicia Waldman (Lecturer within the Hebrew Studies Center of the Faculty of Letters at the University of Bucharest) and comes after another success book: *Istории și imagini din Bucureștiul evreiesc/ Stories and images from the Sephardic Bucharest* (Media Print, 2011).

*Personaje și povești din Bucureștiul sefard* brings not only the perfume of a past epoch, but also edited and unpublished documents: archival sources (Turkish Community Archives in Vienna, Archives of the Center for the Study of Jewish History in Romania), anthologies of historiographical texts and collections of documents (IMER - Sources and testimonies on Jews in Romania), memories and correspondence (Ángel Pulido Fernández, *Los israelitas españoles y el idioma castellano*, 1904), newspapers of that time (Romanian, French and British), as well as family archives.

Structured in seven chapters (*Itinerariu sefard: din Imperiul Otoman în Țările Române, Scrisori sefarde, Memoria străzilor care au dispărut, Povești comerciale de succes, Personalități ale Bucureștiului sefard, Istoria sefarzilor bucureșteni reflectată în The Jewish Chronicle, Proverbe sefarde*), illustrated with specially graphics, *Personaje și povești din Bucureștiul sefard* condenses 500 years of Spanish Jews history in the Romanian space.

According to the rabbi and the historiographer of the community, Mayer Abraham Halevy (1900-1972), the Sephardic history in Romanian Principalities began shortly after the ethnic group was displaced to the East. Merchants,

middlemen, usurers, doctors, jewelers and other artificers settled down here, and in 1730, persuaded by his counselor – the marano physician and diplomat Daniel de Fonseca, the Wallachian prince Nicolae Mavrocordat recognized as a self-standing entity the Sephardic community in Bucharest.

The volume points to the contribution of Sephardic families such as Halfon, Manoach, Bally etc. to the economic and cultural life of the capital; illustrates success stories such as the fabric store *La Papagal* from the Lipscani area, *High-Life* store or *Alcalay* bookstore from Calea Victoriei etc. – businesses run by the members of the same Sephardic community; reviews the biography of Sephardic personalities merged into the Romanian culture – the doctor Nicolae Cajal, the editor Simon Benvenisti, the pianist Dan Mizrahy etc. Finally, through the selection of proverbs in ladino (from *Trezoro Sefaradî*, Istanbul, 2006), the volume reminds the charm of a language that has perished with its people.

For this revitalization of the memory and exciting manner of reconstructing the history of the Sephardic community, *Personaje și povești din Bucureștiul sefard* appears to us both opportune and meritorious.

*Carmen Burcea*

Viorella Manolache, Ian Browne,  
*Orwell – Intellectul anti-intelectual*,  
București, Editura Institutului de Științe Politice și  
Relații Internaționale “Ion I. C.  
Brătianu”, 2017, 303 pp.



*Orwell – The Intellectual anti-intellectual* represents a successful approach assessing the various dimensions of a complex writer (utopian, liberal, socialist) whose works “endure” (Craig L. Carr, *Orwell, Politics, and Power*, Continuum, 2010) within a cultural space of great interest, where the artistic and political spheres meet.

The book is structured in two parts: “George Orwell’s retro-utopia (Viorella Manolache) and “Orwell – Satirical writer and socialist” (Ian Browne).

Under the sign of the “endurance of Orwell” we identify as foundation the endurance of the utopia itself, both in the artistic and political domains. Orwell’s work constitutes a particular political theory concerned mostly with the question of power closely related to a keen perception of the centrality, first, of the emotional dimension of propaganda as in *1984* and, second, of political analogy, in *Animal Farm*. The sensorial dimension of the contexts of propaganda is important, too, and the analysis mentions the obsession Orwell had for the sense of smell, and his “virtuosity of smell” (p. 36), which, in our view, in *1984*, not only succeeds to create a world of the organic, but it creates much more: a metaphor for the endangered and vanishing normality of a passing world of human spontaneity and surprise. Political analysis is ironically transferred toward “the ability to see whatever lies under your own nose” (p. 40).

Approaching another direction, namely that of the Orwell-from-the-Journals, the author of the first part shows that Orwell sustains with literary and cultural data, with explicit visual landmarks, with logical elements, but also with inconsistencies the analysis of propaganda.

Is Orwell postmodern? The first part of the volume offers various answers. The reader finds a postmodern Orwell engaged in the confrontation of the virtual with the real, and another one in the creative relation of this thinker to language (pp. 52-53) and to style, both seen as bearers of political causes and consequences. “Orwell is an author preoccupied with [a specific] metaphysics whose correlative sign is the political, with the mission of preserving and redefining the daily and tangible truth, as a part of the human experience” (p. 57). The human being becomes spoken by language.

The accent placed in the first part of this book methodically on fractures and discontinuities in the Orwellian works is hegemonic in the first part, signed by Viorella Manolache, and it represents a symptom of the strategies to conceal and retrieve utopia in various facets and aspects, for the most part, related somehow to a past which is endearingly lost, while pessimistically, the future is painted bleakly, having in store new and unimaginable sorts of evils (totalitarianism, World Wars, the crisis of rationalism). The world to come is opposed to the hedonistic utopias imagined by the former reformers; it is a realm for the arbitrariness of the human life, failing as keeper of human spirit, especially within a Bolshevik like context, where, as Panait Istrati, the writer and revolutionary, self-titled the “individualist-altruist”, watched by the Intelligence Service, cited by the author, here, in an extremely interesting parallel to Orwell, said “undoubtedly, the world of tomorrow will be the lower image of today’s world thinking itself as the best” (p. 101).

This is the reason why the Viorella Manolache speaks of retro-utopia: the implicit hidden behind the bleak visions of the future is that there is nothing worse than contesting the past, for this would be the contestation of existence. Even

more, whoever controls the past controls the future, and so, the totalitarian ideological control requires victories after victories on the very existence, on the self, reconstructed ideologically, *retro-topically* (Bauman), totalitarianism maiming both the self and the past by “impregnating the memory with selective amnesia” regulated ideologically (p. 127).

The second part of the volume, signed by Ian Browne, approaches the works of George Orwell thematically, and it describes them as having at their core the famous volume *1984* and the political analysis circumscribed to the notion of socialism, as understood by Orwell. *1984* was neither a prophecy, nor a close description of communism as present in the Soviet Union. In this work Ian Browne finds an evaluation of the nature of power and its relationships to language. Orwellian terminological creations such as *newspeak*, *doublethink*, *thoughtcrime* and *Thought Police* are perpetual presences within the intellectual discourse nowadays, returning in the present-day discourse to emphasize precisely this successful exercise of power via terminology, but also the successful control exercised by authority in terms of thought and speech found at the centre of ideological strategies, propagandistic strategies, and control mechanisms of power.

For Ian Browne Orwell arrives at the almost Nietzschean conclusion that the powerful people have the imperative to have power for its own sake, recognizing power only after its trail of suffering as in the following idea captured by James Burnham: “there is nothing outrageous in letting a few people die of starvation for governance reasons, but to let starve millions of people deliberately is a type of action attributed currently only to Gods” (p. 236).

The sub-chapter titled “The Aesthetics of Power” approaches power at Orwell as physical power, albeit grotesque and sadistic, at the same time a representation, provided repeatedly, constructing a dramaturgical cult of power emanating a typical aesthetics of the un-necessary cruelty in front of a helpless opponent. Here is the image of the totalitarian future: “If you want an image of the future imagine a boot crashing someone’s face – and this, forever” (p. 239).

As a critique of totalitarianism it captured the main traits of totalitarianism, which could be identified as present in the Soviet Union, but also in other totalitarian regimes of the time and later on, for, “totalitarianism, if not fought against, could triumph anywhere” (p. 159). The second part offers a complex outline of the British socialism, with interesting correlations with the European socialism, in order to both contextualize Orwell’s socialism and present it in its specificity. Orwell is interpreted as implacable anti-communist, anti-capitalist and anti-social and political *status quo*: a socialist. For Orwell, socialism is an intellectual socialism and a moral creed in a fair social model which is not impossible to put in practice, or, not an utopian socialism away from reality.

We agree with researcher Ian Browne upon the paramount importance to recall, as Orwell did, the importance of writing as moral force, as a “generous fury” summoned to sanction injustice (and, in our view, as importantly, to sanction cruelty as a distress signal for totalitarianism).

Cătălin Ghiță (writer and linguist) appreciates the book as indispensable for the East-European intellectual and for the literary critic preoccupied with the dimension of the fictional utopia. As a success of the European political thought the book establishes the present-day relevance of the political writings of Orwell and it elucidates important dimensions of the totalitarian past (Sabina Fati, writer and journalist). For Nicolae Drăgușin (political theorist), the book represents an editorial moment favoured by a complementary investigation, one introducing more profoundly George Orwell in the Romanian culture (Viorella Manolache) and the other capitalizing upon the reverberations of the Orwellian works in the British culture (Ian Browne).

*Henrieta Anișoara Șerban*