THE NEO-CYNICAL WISDOM OF FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

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Abstract: This paper approaches the twisted philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche considering the interpretation of Peter Sloterdijk, who asserts in his Critique of Cynical Reason that the philosopher from Basel is in fact a Neo-„Cynical" thinker. For instance, the „Eternal Recurrence of the Same" is one of Nietzsche's most subversive thoughts that reflects a description of a resurgence of „kynical" motives. Though often overlooked, we must say that Nietzsche himself occasionally practiced Cynicism as a strategy of survival. We know that he lived modestly and had no fixed abode, wandering from city to city with all his notes and just a few books. Because Nietzsche rejected not only the Academic style, but the citizenship in any one country just as much as Diogenes had protested against Plato's philosophy and had declared himself a „citizen of the world", we can affirm that he was a true cosmopolitan, namely a modern Cynical philosopher. That is why, before his mental breakdown, he ostentatiously stylized his fight against Western metaphysics, Christianity and Christian morality into Cynicism. Thus, I emphasize that „the transvaluation of all values" is an unfinished project about the virtues of Neo-cynical wisdom. Besides, his basic concepts – „the Overman", „the Eternal Recurrence of the Same", „the Will to Power" – are nothing more than metaphors for „the love of fate" or for the acceptance of the idea of Becoming.

Keywords: irony, cynicism, neo-cynicism, Friedrich Nietzsche, Diogenes of Sinope

In an excerpt from his provocative autobiography, Nietzsche writes: "People have told me that once they begin it is impossible to put down a book of mine – I even disturb a peaceful night's sleep...There is absolutely no prouder and at the same time more refined kind of book than mine are: they attain here and there the highest that can be attained on earth, namely, cynicism; even so, to conquer them one must have the softest fingers as well as the bravest fists."[1] In the same book, he also throws out a warning: "I have a terrible fear that one day I will be pronounced *holy*: one can guess why I bring out this book *beforehand*, it should prevent them from doing mischief with me...I have no wish to be a saint, I would rather be a buffoon... Perhaps I am a buffoon..."[2] This confession or, rather, desire formulated by Nietzsche – "I have no wish to be a saint, I would rather be a buffoon" – might be similar to "I am not a common wiseman, but a cynical philosopher." By saying that, despite the fact that he is a buffoon, "however […] the truth speaks out of me", Nietzsche suggests that he could not be more honest, the truth he alludes to being not a last resort, but the expression of reality itself, free from any evasions. On these lines, I assert that the strength and charm of

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo.* Romanian translation: *Ecce Homo,* Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 1999, pp. 42-43
2 *Ibidem,* p. 93

Nietzsche's philosophy is a recommencement of the old cynical thinking, enfolded on the politico-philosophical doctrines of modernity.

In this vein, Jacques Derrida suggests the fact that not only the Nazi ideologues' reading of Nietzsche's work, but also the Heideggerian reading is flawed, since it balks the eminently ironic character of Nietzsche's texts. According to Derrida, the philosopher's allusive writing must be interpreted in a certain way: "his text invokes a different type of reading, more faithful to his type of writing: Nietzsche *has written* what he has written. He has written that writing – and first of all his own – is not originarily subordinated to the logos and to truth."[3] Biding, thus, the mark of ambivalence, Nietzsche's thinking must be understood in the spirit of irony. Obviously, it is not the case to extend this idea to all his writings, since there are some more "serious" ones, like his debut texts. For instance, as Giles Fraser remarks, „*The Birth of Tragedy* is Nietzsche's least ironic work. Only later does he develop irony as a significant aspect of his rhetorical technique"[4].

In close connection with Derrida's remarks, a researcher concerned with the irony phenomenon as a whole suggests the fact that the ambiguities in Nietzsche's work are not random. They would be generated by the very limits of human language. „To say that there is no truth itself becomes a truth, and to continue speaking of language as *metaphorical* or other than the real chaos of life, still places some reality outside language. Nietzsche dealt with this paradox in a number of ways, one of which was to write ironically. [...] Nietzsche's irony attempted to affirm the forces of life and will that extended beyond any creative self. He may not have been able to name or speak about the forces that lay beyond language and the human viewpoint, but by writing aphorisms, contradictory observations, retractions and manifestly absurd histories he showed that language was not master of itself."[5]. Against these interpretations, we can understand, for example, why in *Ecce Homo,* Nietzsche presents himself as being a destroyer of illusion, contrary to his most important writings, in which, nevertheless, he signaled some "prophecies". For instance, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil* or in *Genealogy of Morality*, the German philosopher stresses the importance of the "superior people", announcing the emergence of a different kind of man, of a new "savior", in other words, of a new "idol". However, this inconsistency is explicable. While some exegetes argue that Nietzsche falls into the idolatry that he had initially condemned, others think that Nietzsche's writing style is unusual and that is why „we should not take passages like this all that seriously"[6]. In such cases, Nietzsche suggests that „we should use language ironically, being aware that it creates an illusion of relative stability. But we should not think that there is a truer world *behind or before* language, for it is only through language that we can have any priority of before and after, original and secondary, literal and figurative, subject and predicate"[7]. Thus, "salvation" must not be understood in its proper sense and, much more, must not be interpreted in a Christian sense. And the

3 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Romanian translation: *Despre gramatologie*, Tact Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2009, p. 41

4 Giles Fraser, *Redeeming Nietzsche. On the piety of unbelief*, London & New York: Rotledge, 2002, p. 56

5 Claire Colebrook, *Irony (The New Critical Idiom)*, Routledge: London and New York, 2004, p. 98

6 Giles Fraser, *op. cit.*, p. 74

7 Claire Colebrook, *op. cit.*, p. 100

"overman" is, by no means a new idol, but the metaphorical representation of that man who has freed himself of all idols, namely of the ideals that value more *the after-life* than the *hither life.*

In Nietzsche's case, the Socratic criticism links to that of Platonism and, tacitly, of Christianity. His disdain targets those philosophical, religious, or political systems that, beneath their surface, merely deny the positive values of life. Through his *fröhliche wissenschaft* ("the gay science"), he revives the playfulness of Diogenes of Sinope who resisted systematic philosophy and, therefore, Plato's "serious" philosophy. For that purpose, Nietzsche ridicules the conceptions or visions which disregard common sense and which place the *ideal* before the *real*. "Mystical explanations are considered deep; the truth is that they are not even superficial"[8] he writes, mocking those who put their hopes in another world, super-earthly, so reminiscent of the way in which Diogenes was "faithful to the earth", when he ridiculed Plato's philosophy. Thinking of Diogenes the Cynic, Nietzsche remarks: "Before we look for man, we must have found the lantern. – Will it have to be the Cynic's lantern?"[9] Subsequently, he is the one who, of course, answers this rhetorical question, who sounds more like a challenge or some sort of invitation to reflect upon man, according to the same type of rhetoric: "What do you consider most humane? – To spare someone shame"; then, in the immediately following aphorism: "What is the seal of liberation? – No longer being ashamed in front of oneself."[10] These short, purely *cynical* fragments can be considered as clear evidence in supporting the tenet according to which Nietzsche has developed his philosophy consonant with the cynical doctrine.

On a level with Nietzsche's writings, we catch glimpses of the cranky philosopher's playful and, at the same time, serious thinking. Through the so-called "gay science", Nietzsche opposes the common idea according to which work would be incompatible with the game and that one cannot have positive results from such approach. And because it is a fruitful way of expressing the existential thoughts and anxieties, aphorism is often used in his texts. This type of writing itself represents a form of ironic expression; it is the "writing the will to power itself, affirmative, casual, innocent. It cancels the game – seriousness, surface – depth, form and content opposition, spontaneity and what is reflected, entertainment and work."[11]

Concerning the "master slave morality", so passionately described by the German philosopher, it must be said that the "master" is not the one holding the political, financial, or muscular power, but rather the cynical philosopher, free and autonomous both in thinking and in action. The "master's" fierce morality does not characterize neither the rich, the poor, nor the powerful alpha male, but the wise cynical aristocrat. And the "slave" Nietzsche refers to

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8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science.* Romanian translation: *Ştiinţa voioasă,* Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006, p. 139

9 *Idem, Human, All Too Human. A Book for Free Spirits II,* in *Complete Works*, vol. III. Romanian translation: *Omenesc, prea omenesc. O carte pentru spiritele libere II*, în *Opere complete*, vol. III, Hestia Publishing House, Timişoara, 2000, p. 372

10 *Idem, The Gay Science*, the same ed., p. 171

11 Sarah Kofman, *Nietzsche et la métaphore*, Payot, Paris, 1972, p. 167 *apud* George Bondor, *Dansul măştilor. Nietzsche şi filosofia interpretării/The Dance of the Masks. Nietzsche and the Philosophy of Interpretation*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2008, p. 227

may even be the one we usually consider as being the "master", because the latter tries to lighten his existence, making it more bearable through moral usefulness.

Thus, Nietzsche disputes the exact type of morality against which Diogenes of Sinope, the philosopher who admonished those around him just because their existence depended on so many things that he had given up already, had also risen. In the famous excerpt entitled *The Madman*, the wandering thinker from Basel discusses the "cynic's lantern", which in *Human, All Too Human*, he had suggested that should be the royal path of a man's self-knowledge. Nietzsche's "madman" is, actually, the modern version of that philosopher Plato had called a "mad Socrates", namely Diogenes of Sinope. If, for the latter, looking for people with the lit lantern in broad daylight represented an irony that revealed how difficult it could be to find a man in the deep meaning of the word, for Nietzsche's "madman", to use a lit lantern at midday to seek God is an irony that, this time, reflects the fact that God Himself is the one not to be found. Following the same ideas, „the lantern became the ironic metaphor of the pointless search for God."[12]. Taking into account the existential side of the Nietzschean philosophy, it can be said that the "madman" who desperately seeks God is Nietzsche himself.

Regarding the "overman" concept, Nietzsche suggests that it would be an ironic metaphor addressed to man and humankind, "an antithetical stream" whose purpose directs against the human "machinery" who is increasingly interested in preserving its current bio-philosophical state: "in the following stream a *stronger* species will emerge, a higher type that arises and preserves itself under different conditions from those of the average man. My concept, my *metaphor* for this type is, as one knows, the word «overman»"[13]. We notice that even the word "stronger" is written in italics, the author hinting at the fact that he is not talking about a superior species in the evolutionary sense, namely a being endowed with the muscular strength, necessary in order to adapt to the environment. Its superiority is philosophical and, therefore, purely intellectual.

While not having an end in itself, the idea of *becoming* teaches us that we must look forward, as if there is one. Hence, besides the idea of the "eternal return of the identical", it is important to note that it must not be interpreted in the strictest sense of the word, especially as being the Nietzschean ontology. Here`s how Peter Sloterdijk understands this metaphor: „The eternal recurrence of the Same, Nietzsche's most subversive thought – cosmologically untenable, but culturally and morphologically fruitful – is an apt description of a resurgence of «kynical» *(«kynisch»)* motives that had developed to conscious life especially during the time of the Roman emperors, but also to some extent in the Renaissance. The Same: Those are the rappings of a sober, pleasure-oriented life that has learned to live with circumstances. To be ready for anything, that makes one invulnerably clever. Live in spite of history; existential reduction; socialization «as if»; irony about politics; mistrust toward «plans.» A new heathen culture that does not believe in life after death and so must seek life before

12 Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting, „The Modern Reception of Cynicism: Diogenes in the Enlightenment", în: R. Bracht Branham, Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics. The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, University of California Press: Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1996, p. 361

13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power. Transmute Attempt of All Values (posthumous excerpts).* Romanian translation: *Voinţa de putere. Încercare de transmutare a tuturor valorilor (fragmente postume)*, Aion Publishing House, Oradea, 1999, p. 561

death"[14]. In other words, for Nietzsche, who is aware of the fact that people do not believe anymore in the *after-life*, finding some solutions to make, nevertheless, the joy of living possible becomes a *per se* purpose of his neo-cynical philosophy. Given the "madman's" finding in the cited passage – «"What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?"»[15] – the philosopher realizes that Christianity itself is guilty of the "God's death", because it has secularized the sacred through the institutions and religious hierarchies that it has created. For him, the Christian Church is akin to the state, because it has arrived as terrestrial power, overly terrestrial. Therefore, he exposes the flaws of the institutionalized Christianity, being obvious that in the onset of *The Will to Power* he is to use the characteristic irony of cynicism: "Of great things one should not speak at all or speak with greatness: with greatness, i.e., cynically and with innocence."[16]

But leaving aside what he wrote, Nietzsche did not limit himself to the purely theoretical aspect of cynicism, trying in some way and to some extent, to appropriate it. According to the data that we hold, it seems that „Nietzsche himself occasionally practiced Cynicism and the Cynic reduction to the minimum necessary for life as a strategy of survival and a self-assertion against suffering"[17]. In a fragment laconic entitled *At the Sea*, for example, Nietzsche argues the following idea: "I would not build a house for myself (and I count it part of my good fortune that I do not own a house). But if I had to, then I should build it as some of the Romans did – right into the sea. I should not mind sharing a few secrets with this beautiful monster"[18]. Very likely, keeping in mind the picture of Diogenes' simple lifestyle, whose housing property consisted of a mere barrel, the German philosopher suggests the fact that he aspires to a type of housing as modest and subject to the ephemeral, hinting at how little things man needs in order to be happy.

Symptoms regarding the cynical aspect of Nietzsche's existence must be therefore sought especially in his biography. The fact that he gave up his academic career could be regarded as the beginning of his adventure. The main reasons for this decision are twofold: on the one hand, the serious health problems that he had and, on the other hand, the "philosophical problems" that tormented him. „Renouncing the cult of «scientific results» just as much as Diogenes had protested against Platonic Ideas, Nietzsche required a fluid mode of expression commensurate with a philosophy of Becoming and his new gospel of «Dionysus»"[19]. On this line, he could not establish in a particular place, living in the southern areas of Europe, in different cities, carrying with him his only fortune: books. We can also add that he was never married and that he did not have any long-term relationship. This means that he has enjoyed a considerable individual freedom, which allowed him to freely draw his "cynical" vision of the world.

14 Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis and London, Fifth printing, 2001, pp. XXVIII-XXIX

15 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, the same ed., p. 139

16 *Idem*, *The Will to Power. Transmute Attempt of All Values (posthumous excerpts)*, same ed., p. 1

17 Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting, „The Modern Reception of Cynicism: Diogenes in the Enlightenment", în: R. Bracht Branham, Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, *op. cit.*, pp. 358-359

18 *Idem*, *The Gay Science*, the same ed., p. 166

19 William Desmond, *Cynics*, Acumen Publishing Limited: Stocksfield Hall, 2008, p. 230

Taking into consideration philosophical anthropology, how can we interpret Nietzsche's cynically inspired irony? If in the past the "bloodthirsty" deities were brought great sacrifices (animals and sometimes human beings), nowadays, man symbolically sacrifices his entire life on the altar of some ideals, such as: scientific progress, the State or the Church. Every one of us hopes that, *someday*, the world will be better. Therefore, what exists in the present is not important, but what it does not *yet* exist and what it *should* be. In other words, *the nothingness* is worth more than *the being*, and man no longer truly lives in the *real* world, but in the *ideal* world. Nietzsche rises against these new idols, for whom the apology of the irrational (namely of god Dionysus) is not an attempt to turn man into a being who says "yes" to all instincts, but to free him of repressing his passions, of the resentment towards life as such. If it were not so, his entire endeavor would merely be a returning to the primitive state plea.

Nietzsche opposes the will to affirmative power, specific to "the masters' morality", namely to people who are not ashamed to exalt their creative potency, the will to negative power (which is directed against vital instincts). Therefore, we could say that *the will to power is*, in fact, the will to create, the power consisting of the ability to achieve a work of art. For this very reason, instead of the idealist philosopher, Nietzsche praises *the artist-philosopher*. In conclusion, his neo-cynical critique aims at replacing the metaphysical or the religious concepts with some that do not oppose the *inexhaustible becoming of the world*. In fact, for Nietzsche, even the denying of reality instead of the ideal is the true *nihilism*, a state of affairs that he wanted to overcome through atypical "concepts" as: *the transmutation of all values, the will to power, the eternal return of the identical, the overman*. Because these are nothing but the ironic metaphors of love for its own destiny *(amor fati)*, in other words, the "salt" and "pepper" of *this* life.

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