

ION PETROVICI - PHILOSOPHER AND PROFESSOR "CONSCIOUS IN A CONFOUNDED WORLD"

GABRIELA POHOAȚĂ*

gabriela_pohoata@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Our research aims at achieving an authentic portrait of the professor Ion Petrovici, a reference point in the life of this great scholar, less known and approached, also maybe because of his political connotations that, in our opinion, only grow the authority of this master, no matter of the whirligig that he was exposed to, but that determined him to make the philosophy the origin of human dignity.*

Keywords: *philosophy professor, method, metaphysics, vocation, philosophical education, romanian culture.*

"A philosophical system is as a well arranged mountain: roads with gentle slopes, benches, shelters, terraces with large perspectives. All these can be part of a thought system; but we can't pretend to find in the summit a scale to take us to heaven."¹

He hasn't built a philosophical system like Lucian Blaga, but his philosophy has the greatness and originality particular to the ones that create systems. Ion Petrovici imposed himself in the cultural landscape of the inter-war Romania as one of the most important philosophy teachers, as an international intellectual that brought a remarkable contribution to the knowledge of the Romanian people, culture and civilization abroad.

He was born on July 14, 1882 in Tecuci and died on February 17, 1972 in Bucharest. He graduated the Faculty of Law (1903) and the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy (1904) and in 1905, Ion Petrovici becomes Ph.D. in philosophy (the first Ph.D. of the University of Bucharest at 24 years); he studied in Berlin and Leipzig where he hears lectures of Wundt, Volkelt,

* Senior Lecturer Ph.D., - "Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University, Bucharest.

¹ Ion Petrovici, *Așchii*, in: *Pagini filosofice*, Bucharest, Alcalay, p. 121-122.

Paulsen, Dilthey and Riehl. He is influenced by Kant and the spiritualist French philosophy. He teaches logics and psychology in Iasi. His main works in this direction are: *Paralelismul psihofizic* ("Psychophysical parallelism" - 1905) and *Spirit și corp* ("Mind and Body" -1906). In Iasi, between 1923 and 1926 he is the Dean of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy. In 1940 he becomes teacher of history of modern philosophy for the University of Bucharest.

The real path to theoretical and philosophical creation of the illustrious thinker is determined by his works that are dominated by an unflinching preoccupation to understand and justify the role of philosophy in contemporary culture and, most of all, in the assertion of the personality of modern Romanian culture and education. Petrovici thought (and said in a conference called "More philosophy") that "the regeneration of secondary education can be made only by reorganizing and broadening philosophical education. Here is the centre of rehabilitation and crystallization." ²

Specialist philosopher, he stands out mainly in the area of logics as an author of:

Teoria noțiunilor ("The theory of concepts"-1910 and 1924) and *Probleme de logică* ("Logics problems"- 1921, 1923 and 1928); he writes studies about the theory of knowledge and history of philosophy and is a defender of metaphysics (starting from Kant), giving it the deserved place within the philosophy of science and culture (*Introducere în metafizică*, 1924). He writes monographs about Schopenhauer (1923) and Kant (1936). Ion Petrovici is a prototype of a real intellectual of the Romanian inter-war period because he has European academic and scientific career. He holds conferences and courses in Vienna, Paris, Geneva, Alger, Prague and Brussels (he is the third Romanian scholar invited to hold conferences abroad, after A.D.Xenopol and Nicolae Iorga); he is also a collaborator of some important journals in France and Germany.

He is a correspondent member of the Romanian Academy since 1927 and in 1934 he becomes an active member. His great international openness is also confirmed by his presence as member in Munich Academy, in the Standing Committee of the Philosophy Congress of Paris (1936) and of the leading Committee of the International Federation of Philosophy (since 1940).

² Al. Boboc, *Nota asupra ediției*, in *Filosofi contemporani*, Bucharest, Ed. Garamond, 1997.

His great political career was stopped by communist prisons. He was convicted to 10 years of hard prison as dignitary in Antonescu Government, as Minister of Education and Religious Affairs. More precisely, Ion Petrovici was Minister in several governments in the inter-war period: of Education and Public Works (1921, 1926, 1937 and 1938) and of National Culture, Religious Affairs and Arts (1941). After years in prison, the ordeal continued – he had a mandatory home and after that, was sent in labour colonies.

What helped him to survive the hell of Aiud was his large culture, the fact that he had an intellectual preoccupation, something to process in his mind, where to escape, to break away from that place of fierce reality. It is for sure that the posthumous destiny of the work of Ion Petrovici would have been different if after August 23, 1944, in full creative force, at the beginning of the great political cleansing made under the communist regime, he wouldn't have been arrested and detained till 1964, when he and other political prisoners were liberated, at an age at which no one can restore the route of a thought that wanted to be consistent with itself.

Ion Petrovici embodies the great figure of the one that, step by step, becomes and justifies the human dignity as a supreme-existential dimension, offering to the human being handsomeness, beauty and relationship with Christ.

Master of existence – the great teacher and philosopher enjoys the authority of a widely recognized master, writes Ionel Necula³ about the course of lectures that Petrovici held in prison in Aiud – lectures that spiritually enlightened common law prisoners. He was a great lover of wisdom but he knew that wisdom does not distinguish through a seclusion attitude towards others, but together, in solidarity with them.

In the gallery of great Romanian philosophy teachers, Ion Petrovici remains by his vocation of apostle. In this end, Petrovici is part of those personalities with a rare spiritual wealth and intellectual generosity, where the deepness of abstract thinking is in association with the plasticity of style. The joy of sharing with others his gained knowledge and to awaken the interest for metaphysics is another sign of his mission. “Also in his vocation of professor – confesses Petrovici – I will signal the honest delight that I feel and always felt towards and flash of talent, towards any intellectual flash. In this domain, I have never felt envy or jealousy and there is no well endowed young person in whose path I put myself

³ Ion Necula, *Ion Petrovici-în vizorul securității*, Bucharest, Ed. Saeculum, 2005.

athwart; because I have always supported the efforts of young men in order to exalt.”⁴

Disciple of Titu Maiorescu and Nicolae Iorga, Ion Petrovici was, during the inter-war period, the best known Romanian philosopher abroad.

In philosophy, Ion Petrovici had original contributions through his researches about the theory of concepts and his metaphysical conception associated with rationality and faith.

After V. Conta and R. Motru but in a more explicit manner, Petrovici is the one that raises in the Romanian philosophy the problem of metaphysic legitimacy, formulating the question: “Is metaphysics possible, what are its rights and causes?”⁵ In a period in which metaphysics was not completely bounced back after the strong hits given by the positivists, he tries to prove the necessity of metaphysic research and pleads for a positive valorisation. Petrovici distinguishes two types of objections that can bring justification to metaphysics: some of them consider metaphysic problems as absent and some accept them as real but say that they exceed our possibilities of solving them.

A very important problem for the existence of metaphysics as a self-standing theoretical discipline is the one of the method. One of the main premises that Petrovici uses to find the method of metaphysics is the one of the oversensitive character of its object: “The condition of existence of metaphysics is and will remain *overtaking the experience and the observable world*”⁶. So, the method can’t be experimental. The pre-requisite rationalist method is also considered inadequate because, accepting the Kantian distinction between shape and matters of knowledge, Petrovici also takes from Kant a criticism related to pre-requisite traditional metaphysics. But, he disagrees with the German philosopher about the restriction incumbent to metaphysics of taking care only of pre-requisite forms of knowledge because the meant of metaphysics is “a research of reality in the substantial essence”⁷.

The method belonging to metaphysics is, considers Petrovici, the empiric-rationalist one, because it cannot be “*toto genere* different from the one of positive sciences”. The more we rise from sensitive to oversensitive,

⁴ Petrovici, I., *Prefața la Douasprezece prelegeri universitare despre Imm. Kant*, Iași, Ed. Agora, 1994, p.9.

⁵ Petrovici, I., *Introducere în metafizică*, Iași, Agora, 1992, p.11.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 60.

⁷ Ibidem, p.61.

the more increases the role of rationality and decreases the one of experience, but neither in science nor metaphysics we can absolve either of them.

The analysis of the relation between philosophy and science is approached by Petrovici from the perspective of main components of the first one: metaphysics and the theory of knowledge. Showing that the main fulfilment of philosophy is the birth of positive science thereof, he argues that nowadays, not being able to re-establish the union between them, it must be replaced by the coordination between them. If metaphysics mainly takes profit from scientific fulfilments that permanently lends materials for its constructions, not giving back anything else than suggestions and hypothesis, the theory of knowledge influences conclusively the evolution of science, playing the role of a court judge for different competitor scientific theories. So, the relationship that should exist between philosophy and science is one of collaboration and not of adversity.

So as the originality of thinking to have an echo in the conscience of the listener or reader, the teacher should have the rare gift of arraying the ideas in fascinating expressions, without making them too common and without bringing prejudice to the exactitude and clarity. Several profound ideas acquired radiance when they were exposed with oratorical grace. Shown with passion and enthusiasm, original beliefs exert a true magic and generates the impulse towards new original creations.

From this point of view, professor Petrovici is original. His style has an extraordinary power of suggestion even when he approaches sober ideas of Kant's philosophy. The oratory of Petrovici is elegant and full of substance; that is why the ones that listened to him have spoken about a true charm that his words disengage. His oratorical talent comes from an artistic sensitivity and an internal vibration, from a heady joy of knowledge that he managed to pass on to others. For him, being a teacher is not a profession but a vocation.⁸

Tenacious and passionate, together with C.R.Motru (to which he showed a profound admiration) managed to "bite off the cliff of indifference of the public towards philosophical works". When he started to write articles and philosophical studies, in our country the interest for metaphysics was extremely low. Even though, Petrovici managed to discover the existence of a philosophical tradition marked by Kantianism, from which there weren't missing great names like Gh. Lazar, Eminescu, Maiorescu and C.R. Motru,

⁸ Petrovici, I., *Douăsprezece prelegeri kantiene, op.cit.*, p.10.

the creator of Kantian-inspired metaphysics. The fact that Gh. Lazar introduced in the Romanian education system logics and metaphysics and taught them according to Kant means to Petrovici that it is a crucial moment of the approach of our culture to the one in the occident. During the “intellectual grope”, a rationalist philosophy had the power of making an intellectual revelation with a more trenchant character and faster than in any other orientations. From this perspective, in his Kantian philosophy lectures, he makes a deep analysis of transcendental Aesthetics⁹, the favourite part of initiations in philosophy because it produces the impression that a metaphysic thinking dashes the most deeply rooted prejudices of common conscience. And gaining this feeling is a real intellectual renaissance, a real philosophical baptism.

Professor Petrovici is convinced that the Kantian transcendental idealism composes the New Testament of modern philosophical thinking, idea that was also expressed by another great toiler of bringing Kant in the Romanian culture, Mihai Eminescu.¹⁰

For Petrovici, as for Eminescu, the assimilation of Kantian philosophy is a necessary moment not only for the development of a culture but to a spiritual accomplishment of human personality. In his opinion, criticism is an a priori form of the modern philosophical spirit. Petrovici offered to his students a coherent introduction in the great work of Imm. Kant. *He had the conscience of an intellectual missionary work, that is why he tried to head towards great creations of universal philosophy, but this thing could not be accomplished without clarity of his exposure, because “the philosophical deepness cannot be based on turbidity”*¹¹.

The concepts and basic ideas of Kantian transcendental idealism are exposed with a remarkable clarity, but it is sometimes obtained with the price of a simplification, not always according to the criticism. Ion Petrovici confesses that the simplification that he made knowingly has the advantage of eliminating several contradictions within Kant’s system that appear “if you don’t make an indispensable selection and you don’t separate the essential of secondary”¹².

But all contradictions that were pointed out have both positive and negative meaning. As they appear in Kant’s works, they are the mark of

⁹ Kant Imm., *Critica rațiunii pure*, Bucharest, Ed. Științifică, 1969, p. 67-91.

¹⁰ Eminescu, M., *Lecturi kantiene*.

¹¹ Petrovici, I., *op.cit.*, p.11.

¹² Petrovici, I., *ibidem* p.12.

the biggest assumption of human spirit. When thinking approaches the worst metaphysic problems, contradictions, circularities and paradoxes are unavoidable.

To the ones that affirm (based on the Kantian criticism) that the limits of our knowledge are an argument against metaphysic possibility, Petrovici answers by highlighting that from knowable to unknowable we can only pass step by step, and that we can't draw a limit beyond which knowledge would be impossible.

The dilemma that could appear if we would accept the positivist interdiction to transcend the field of possible experience is, according to Petrovici: "you either forbid any type of overtaking and then you give up science, or you allow it and you can't establish a limit, *the limit of speculation being decided by the material impossibility of going further*"¹³. In the same order of ideas, Petrovici argues the thesis according to which the relative and the absolute are not perfectly detachable, the absolute being involved in the relative. That is why it is possible to see that science and metaphysics have as object the same reality; between them there is only a degree separation. In order to ignore the sceptical argument after which philosophical systems get into contradiction, what should discourage the metaphysical enthusiasm, Petrovici finds himself on a similar position with Hegel saying that: "Systems don't only combat, but they cope"¹⁴. Even if it defends the right to exist of metaphysics, he admits that the ideal of knowledge, "a whole, full and absolute knowledge" cannot be reached. But this doesn't threaten the aspiration of reaching it and even if metaphysics cannot answer the question "What is the universe itself?" it can answer to another one: "What is the universe for the human being?" question that isn't meaningless. Metaphysics is not an "exceeded phase" of human thinking and experience because otherwise it might need a re-evaluation of all data that it can offer us. This latter goal has the answer in the work *Introducere în metafizică* ("Introduction in metaphysics")¹⁵ in the dedicated chapters: *Metafizica și legitimitatea ei* ("Metaphysics and its legitimacy"), *Metoda în metafizică* ("The method in metaphysics") etc.

I brought into discussion these ideas in order to prove that Ion Petrovici was not a regular philosophy teacher but a real theoretician that pleaded in his lectures and conferences for the value of philosophy, of

¹³ Petrovici, I., *Introducere în metafizică*, Bucharest, Casa Școalelor, 1924, p.60.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p.67.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

metaphysics for the human being life and of the given society. No matter if they were lectures of logics, psychology, metaphysics, history of philosophy; they had a great mean for the philosophical education because they used analysis with a rationalist methodological background. In this way, they managed to keep awake the interest of students of thoroughgoing study of philosophical rationalism, of the dispute rationalism-irrationalism. It is unfortunate that such a professor hasn't shown interest in creating a philosophy school with disciples to continue his work and develop his ideas. Beyond any other speculations with political connotation, we consider that this is a real reason for which the philosophy of Ion Petrovici is too little known and studied. Yet, it is enough to read his work and get yourself tested by the regret that you weren't his disciple, because without doubt Ion Petrovici remains a model of professor-philosopher part of the Romanian inter-war intellectual elite.

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