

THE CHRISTIAN POETRY AND THE FORMATION OF AN INTERCULTURAL ATTITUDE. "THE LITTLE BLACK BOY" BY WILLIAM BLAKE

MAGDALENA DUMITRANA

mdumitrana@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Children, at least until their adolescence, are not really accessible to the theories and theorizations. The present paper considers that the school experience must address to a large extent, mostly the right cerebral hemisphere, which is responsible for intuition, artistic emotion, art, as a whole. It presents a simple and adequate way for making children understand that to be different is not an inessential detail, if reported to the plane of spirituality. The main instrument in this demonstration is represented by poetry – poetry that unfortunately is ignored or wrongly used in our school.*

Keywords: *difference, poetry, understanding, hope.*

A short introduction

Our paper brings together some concepts which usually are approached separately. What would have in common, at a first sight, the laic pedagogy of our century with Christianity, with the concepts concerning the intercultural communication and poetry? Especially, with mystic-romantic poetry, as William Blake's work is characterized. Indeed, the relation does not refer too much to concepts, ideas, to the phenomena of the reality – because, actually the expressed idea, the concept built by the human mind, are only the surface of the profound reality; there are changeable phenomena looking for an adequateness which is also mobile, as searching for a truth which is gradually revealed. However, knowing "in part" can lead, united to some other "parts" to the desired goal.

One of the most powerful instruments of humanity is education – a process through which man can reach to know his own essence. Nobody must think of himself that he is indeed human, but only the one who learned to act as a human, that is who was educated to be a human

* Senior lecturer Ph.D, - University of Pitești, Pitești.

person, said Comenius in his *Didactica Magna*.¹ From the position discussed here, humanity means knowledge, understanding and faith; faith, not necessarily in a certain entity, bearing a certain name, promoted by one or another culture, but mostly, a faith in man's spiritual call, in his capacity of transcending the limits through inner "instruments, given to him by birth: mind and heart, thinking and emotions. Perhaps there is not more sensitive carrier of these tools of the spiritual humanity as poetry. There is no more direct way of penetrating the human understanding than the rhythm and melody of the poems. Perhaps, there is no more appropriate vehicle for the education of the human as the poetry bearing the truth.

Education today

The major complaint made against the modern education refers often to the existence of excessive information, of a multitude of data in the school curricula; it refers also, to a certain difficulty of the selection, of the prefiguring of the necessary knowledge for the student as a future adult. This objection, as well as the difficulties signalized in this context, is close related to the intellectual values promoted by the Western culture, mainly; the reasoning, logic, the combination of the data in coherent intellectual and measurable structures is the ones giving the standards of all the appreciations related to the progress. Despite that, the research in the fields somewhat distanced from pedagogy and psychology, has pointed out the overwhelming importance of some other factors which can lead to the personal development and implicitly, to the enhancement of the learning capacity, with all their consecutive positive effects. The excess of the rationality - of the left cerebral hemisphere, responsible for logic and language, denies the human individual (the student, in our case) the utilization of an important part of the human psyche: art, emotion, intuition, music and musicality in its widest sense, of the harmony.

A very clear characterization, comparing the traditional education, based on information on one side and the one, let's call it the education of the future, one can found in the work of Georgi Lozanov, the creator of an original educational alternative. This alternative, the Suggestopaedia/Reservopaedia is the fundament of all the accelerative learning trends, spread today all over the globe. Here are some of the educational practices which are not coherent with the personality's

¹ Comenius, J.A., *Didactica Magna*, Bucharest, EDP Publishing, 1970, p. 32.

physiological and psychological functions:

"1. It is well known that in no case does the brain function only its cortex structures, or only with the subcortex, or with only right or the left hemisphere. The functional unity of the brain is unbreakable, even if in some cases one activity or another comes to the fore. Therefore, the emotional and motivational complex, if thinking and logical abstraction must be activated simultaneously, their complexity, in indivisible unity. But most often, there are the following two kinds of deviation from this natural pattern:

a. teaching is addressed only to the cortical structures and the hemisphere of the student as if he/she were an emotionless motivationless cybernetic machine;

b. at best, the student is taken as a psycho-physiological entity, but the educational process is not directed globally - to all parts of the brain simultaneously - but in steps: subcortical-reticular (emotional) stage; concrete-image (visual) stage; abstract-logical ("cybernetic") stage.

2. It is well known that analytical-synthetic activity in the brain under normal conditions is accomplished simultaneously - there is not such a thing as a stage of pure analysis, or a stage of pure synthesis. This simultaneous and indivisible connectedness of the physiological processes has its own psychological expression. It also underlies cognition - from the general to the particular (but as an element of the general) and back to the general (as a rationalized structural unity of the elements). But these natural laws often undergo "correction" - pedagogical practice in one of the following ways:

a. elements are studied separately, in isolation from the sense-bearing, meaningful whole; they are automated through tiring exercises and only later are they connected one to the other systematically to form the whole;

b. the whole is studied without paying attention to its component parts and to the mistakes arising as a consequence.

In both cases, attempts are made to break up the natural simultaneity of the processes of analysis and synthesis.

3. A person's personality takes part in every communicative process simultaneously at numerous conscious and paraconscious levels. This nature-granted fact is "utilized" in pedagogical practice most often in the following two ways:

a. the principle of conscious participation in the educational process is formalized and turned into a fetish. According (to it, the students must learn and automate each element of the material in a strictly conscious and rational manner, in spite of the fact that it can be learned to a certain degree spontaneously and intuitively at the first perception of the globally given lesson; b. importance is attached only on the paraconscious and intuitive capacities of the student and the necessity for a conscious finalizing and creative reassessment of the material is neglected.”²

His only research and applications, as well as the research developed in many parts of the world, have demonstrated the importance of the utilization of the both brain hemispheres in the learning process (and not only this process). Art, music, harmony, all of them essentially contribute to obtain an efficacy much more over the expected standards in any human activity. Coming back to our topic, we understand that, though indirectly, these researches form a strong support for advancing the idea that poetry (of course, art in general) must constitute permanence in school. From this point of view, the present state of the things is in fact, far from fulfilling this condition. Poetry is “sectored” in the reading and literature books, seeming that it has no relation with the other human products - psychological and cultural. The poem is analyzed and cut into pieces as a dead body, pieces that are placed back as in a failed jigsaw puzzle. There is nothing left from the melody, harmony, from the sentiment. In other words, everything belonging to the right hemisphere, the “artistic” one, is “transferred” and “operated” in the right hemisphere, the “logic” one.

Poetry and inter-culture

One of the most unfailing means to know a nation means knowing its poets. Its poetic spirit is able to penetrate the different cultural layers deposited through the changes of the civilizations during time. It can rake the archetypal meanings, dormant but not forgotten. The poetic metaphor reacts directly to the reality, passing, of course, through a certain logic process – a logic that has not much in common with the reason but which uses a shortcut, an emotional one, to reach the essence. The direct and

² Lozanov, G., *Suggestopedia/Reservopedia. Theory and Practice of the Liberating-Stimulating Pedagogy on the Level of the Hidden Reserves of the Human Mind*, Sofia, St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2009, pp. 138- 139.

mutual knowledge, the most firm bridge between cultures, is undoubtedly constituted by the literary translation, in our context –by the translation of the poetry from a language to another. The translation, affirmed Paul Ricoeur, is the answer at the confusion generated by Babel, it “constitutes a paradigm for all the exchanges, not only from a language to another, but also, from a culture to another culture [...] The translation is the mediation between the plurality of the cultures and the unity of the humanity.”³

We understand now, how important is poetry in the education of the inter-cultural sentiment. If there is no communication without knowledge as a first step in the building of the intercultural relation, nor reciprocity can exist also, without stimulating the emotions.

If the life of a society is regulated by legislation, if the analysis of the social politics can identify the degree of the tolerance inside a community, of small groups or at the individual level, and psychology can analyze the tolerance of a child of different ages, still, the things are more complex. The individual attitude cannot be constructed only by norms, even if an individual conduct is shaped also by external constraints. Precisely here the education, by its most structured form, the school, can successfully intervene. Here, poetry, transmitted with intention and efficacy finds its place, too.

It is good to remember that that the poetry sphere includes almost everything – from Lucretius’ philosophical poem to mystical poetry, with representatives in every culture, until the “mathematics” poem, if we think at Ion Barbu. Any domain can be known (speaking psychologically-emotionally) by poetry and any relation can be sensitized using the poetic sentiment. We talk therefore about the instrument and not about the specific goal of poetry (esthetical, etc). We talk about the poetic method which can break down the cognitive barriers, the prejudices and uncontrolled rejections. Obviously, the educator’s task is to use not the poems but Poetry. Though the reception of this Poetry should be initially included among the family’s tasks, the educator is responsible for bringing the poetic sentiment in the light of child’s consciousness.

The little black boy

Let’s attempt an exemplification: William Blake’s small poem, romantic poet and painter, could serve, we think, to reaching our goal – the inducing of the feeling of intercultural understanding.

³ Ricoeur, P., *On Translation*, Iași, Polirom Publishing, 2005, p.130.

The text presents a simultaneous simplicity and complexity, so that, sequentially, it can be approached at different ages, even distant in time. It is significant the fact that the poem is part of the *Songs of Innocence* cycle, but we must not be under an impression that it addresses to the early ages; indeed, the main character is a child, his voice is naïve and direct in expression, but the meanings are multiple, the levels of the spiritual discourse are different, too, so, the reader to which are addressed the poems is also, of different ages, from childhood to the adult youth.

At the first sight, *The little black boy* refers to some ethnic relations, with social implications. In a period when the black slaves, most often violently kidnapped from their native land of Africa have constituted a “normality”, Blake advanced in a poetic form, the Christian idea of the equality. An equality related, first of all, to the common source of all the beings from Earth:

“Look on the rising sun: there God does live
And give his light and gives his heat away;
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
Comfort in morning joy in the noon day.”⁴

The goal of the people living on Earth is also common:

“And we are put on earth a little space
That we may learn to bear the beams of love.”⁵

The ultimate destination, after everyone would accomplish his/her mission, is the same, too: “... we shall hear His voice, saying”, from a place were, all of us: “..round the tent of God like lambs we joy”⁶

The main criterion of the relations people should have one for each other must be, therefore, a spiritual one.

This is the first plane, the basic one, of decoding the poem, which can be approached at earlier ages, obviously, accompanied by more concrete explanations. As a help, for a more explicit explanation, one could call the last stanza of another poetry (*The Divine Image*):

“And all must love the human form,

⁴ Blake, W., *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Bilingual edition, Bucharest, Rao Publishing, translated by Iana Maravis, 2006, p. 41

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Ibidem, p.45.

In Heathen, Turk or Jew.
Where Mercy Love& Pity dwell,
There God is dwelling too.”⁷

On another plane one can identify the philosophical ideas, indirectly expressed, at least on two levels. At the first level we read:

“And I am black, but O, my soul is white!” [...]
“Look at the rising sun: there God does live,
And gives His light, and gives His heat away,
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
Comfort” [...]
“I’ll shade him [the white child] from the heat till he can bear,
To lean in joy upon our Father’s knee.”⁸

We understand here that, white or black or any other color would appear to the human eye, the essence is the same. The Creator of everything and everybody holds the world in His hand and watches its good development. The beings of the whole world are equal by the fact that they are the same Father, are born in the same place, “in the sun”. Our mission is therefore, to watch ones over the others in the same way the Supreme Watcher looks after the Earth. “As in Heavens is on the Earth” affirms the Christian wisdom, as guiding the human action.

The relationships between people must be seen with the profound eye and not with the surface one. The little black boy is the slave, is the servant, the “weak” one par excellence. In fact, if we use our capacity to catch a glimpse of the essences, we see that the report is precisely, the contrary. It is he, the little black boy having the strength, force and wisdom to protect the one who apparently, is his maser. We do not have here a banal assertion that the servant is obliged to work for a master, but we do speak about the genuine strength of the independent person, who is aware of his mission, who assumes the role of serving for noble purposes; in this action, this person is guided by a superior model. We found here a kind of ‘imitatio” summarized in few verses.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 77.

⁸ Ibidem, pp.40- 44.

On the second level of the discourse is approached the goal itself of the human life on the earth (*And we are put on earth a little space/That we may learn to bear the beams of love*⁹).

Man must face the obstacles of the mundane life for learning. And learning does not refer to positivist knowledge, to information, technique, to the intellectual expansion of any kind. It refers to only one thing, possessed by any human being but being used wrongly, in a large measure-that is love.

We meet here another idea, closed to what the first Christian fathers were saying: we are peregrines in this world; to us, there is another reality, before as well as after the earthly life finds its end. We are shadows, hiding an essence that must be unveiled (*And these black bodies and this sunburnt face /Are but a cloud, and like a shady grove, ibid.*).

We can notice here, a very interesting relation between apparently different images which in fact follow a metaphoric logic: God-sun-beam (of love)-the black body- sun-burnt face – the protecting shadow (of himself and of others). The link is almost a mystic one in its Christian depth and made us to move to another image, in another context – the Sermon from the Mountain (Mt. 5, 1-10). There is, in Blake's poetry, the person to whom Jesus addresses (the poor, humble, believer), the duty that he has to fulfil along all his life (Thou shalt love the Lord thy God..[...] Thou shalt love thy neighbour [...] (Mc., 12, 29-31) and there is also, the promise of the "eternal life", that is, of a life in the very essence of reality.

The colours, the social position, the financial situation, the power of any kind which is manifested in the people's life on the earth, are all, illusions. All of them are parts of the "Maya's veil", to use an expression (and not only) from the Hindu vocabulary – a veil of the delusive that has to be removed.: "When I from black and he from white cloud free,/And round the tent of God like lambs we joy."¹⁰

We notice that the lamb metaphor is very clear; also „the golden tent“ could be in a free translation, the "roof of God" – a very clear image of Blake's intentions in his poem.

In addition, one can see in the small poem the presence of the

⁹ Blake, W., *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Bilingual edition, Bucharest, Rao Publishing, translated by Iana Maravis, 2006, p. 41

¹⁰ Blake, W., *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Bilingual Edition, Bucharest, Rao Publishing, Translated by Iana Maravis, 2006, p. 45

Christian virtues triad: love, faith and hope, virtues that can be perceived in the “black” boy’s discourse. And all this knowledge, of which he has no doubt, comes from his mother, easily identified as The Mother of God.

Here there are, on short, a few levels of the discourse that are approachable in Blake’s poem and of which wide addressability can be sub sequenced according to the receiver’s ability of understanding. We think firstly, at his/her age but not only.

Some final words

Coming back to our main theme, we must specify that our intention was not to introduce religion in the literature lesson or in the moral education one, not even in school, as such. Our intention was to emphasize the Christian attitude in school which is very different from a dogmatization or introducing religious ideology in classes.

Concerning the specific of our topic, the one of the interculturalism, perhaps there is no instrument with a greater power of convincing as is poetry. And William Blake’s small poem seems to be the ideal example in this direction– readable in any key, in relation with all type of reference and adaptable to any religious and/or spiritual context.

The poetic message is absolute the same, despite of the variety of the “shades”, mirroring the different ideologies: and this message is that there is the same essence in every human being, no matter “unusual”, “strange”, “odd” could be his/her appearance as perceived from outside and that there is one single duty for each of us- understanding and observing this truth.

Behind the norms and traditions of a community, behind the more or less democratic legislations, which have all, as an ultimate goal, the regulation of the behaviours in a community and the prevention of the attitudes of rejection under any form, behind all of these, there is an infallible mean of obtaining these conducts –that is Art; in our argumentation-poetry.

REFERENCES

1. Blake, W., (2006), *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Bilingual edition, Bucharest, Rao Publishing, translated by Iana Maravis.
2. Comenius, J.A., (1970), *Didactica Magna*, Bucharest, EDP Publishing.
3. Lozanov, G., (2009) *Suggestopedia/Reservopedia*. Theory and Practice of the Liberating- Stimulating Pedagogy on the Level of the Hidden Reserves of the Human Mind, Sofia, St. Kliment Ohridski University Press.
4. Ricœur, P., (2005) *On Translation*, Iași, Polirom Publishing.