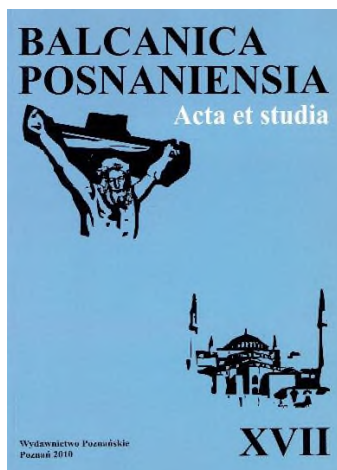




Ivancu Emilia, *The art of survival between the religious and the aesthetic in the communist prisons in Romania. Diary of Happiness by Nicolae Steinhardt*, „Balcanica Posnaniensia. Acta et Studia” 2010, vol. 17, p. 249–258.

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THE ART OF SURVIVAL BETWEEN
THE RELIGIOUS AND THE AESTHETIC
IN THE COMMUNIST PRISONS IN ROMANIA.
DIARY OF HAPPINESS BY NICOLAE STEINHARDT

EMILIA IVANCU

ABSTRACT. Emilia Ivancu. *The art of survival between the religious and the aesthetic in the communist prisons in Romania. Diary of Happiness* by Nicolae Steinhardt.

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Art is God's nostalgia.

Nicolae Steinhardt

*Once a man has been tortured, there is a part
of him that never stops feeling the pain.*

Salman Rushdie

In time, in diverse locations or historical moments, writing has represented both a form of resistance to various types of government, either dictatorial or absolutist, and the creation and maintenance of a spiritual line within them. Moreover, writing in the form of diary, memoirs, hence autobiographical writing, has the particularity to propose a game between reality and the illusion of reality, that is between a subjective, personal reality offered by first person narration – a way to find the Self – and the illusion of this reality, the convention of the form of expression, which, on the other hand, represents a form of estranging the Self. The contemporary literary market in Romania has brought an infusion of such texts with a memorialistic character, all written in the Communist Romania. Their peculiarity inside this type of writings is that of representing, most of the times, a form of survival and affirmation of a relation with divinity and thus a re-construction and re-creation of the world according to an ethical and aesthetical code, exclusively spiritual, which lead to the

affirmation and survival of the saved soul, which results in the confession-writing. Consequently, the present paper aims at analyzing this type of resistance, survival and confession of the Self through the prism of the *Diary of Happiness* written by the Romanian intellectual Nicolae Steinhardt who, as many other Romanian intellectuals of that time, found his spirituality exactly in the dark depths of the prison where, converting to Christianity, he wrote a unique diary.

In his very recent *Critical History of the Romanian Literature*, the Romanian critic Nicolae Manolescu speaks about, while also quoting another contemporary critic Eugen Negrici, the instauration, after 1948, "of a political religion in Romania,"¹ by this referring to the Communist political regime that took over all aspects of the Romanian society. Another Romanian critic, Alex Ștefănescu, in his *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature*, compares the instauration of the Communist regime in Romania and other countries with a scene in the movie *Viridiana*, by Luis Buñuel, where in a castle prepared for a wedding, the owners had to run away just on the eve of the wedding and the castle was invaded by the beggars around it, who started their own party, and thus defiling and caricaturing the castle and its interiors.² Moreover, the critic says, the impostors, the Communists, always lived with the feeling of their imposture and of their illegitimacy (through secretly), and attempted to erase any mark or remain of the previous epoch. Consequently, they started an aggressive and malevolent isolation both from the non-Communist past and from the civilised world. All this had to start with the burning and forbiddance of certain books and the arrest of the *intelligentsia*. Consequently, between 1945-1948, a number of 8,438 literary and scientific works were forbidden, and after 1948 new rules and regulations were produced so that to forbid and censure new and new titles, thus creating prisons for books.³ The octopus extended its tentacles to manuscripts and other writings that were not yet books. While the Communists created prisons for books, they also stuffed prisons with people, intellectuals considered to be threatening for the regime. According to data offered by Alex Ștefănescu, between 1944 and 1964, there were imprisoned a number of people between 1 million and 2 million on political grounds, and between 200,000 and 500,000 died in prisons (numbers differ according to the criteria historians used – prisoners both in Romania and Basarabia, the number of dead people being considered either as dead in the prisons or after being released).⁴ Consequently, just before 1964, a great number of the most valuable writers and intellectuals from all domains had been or were imprisoned, and after 1964, the so-called regime becoming milder actually turned into an even scarier instrument – that of trying to convert the former prisoners into collaborators of the Communists, a move which turned some of those who suffered in prisons and were tortured into informers of their friends, family, colleagues.

¹ Nicolae Manolescu, *Istoria critică a literaturii române*, Pitești, Paralela 45, 2008, p. 889.

² Alex Ștefănescu, *Istoria Literaturii Române Contemporane 1941-1990*, București, Editura Mașina de scris, 2005, p. 23.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 26.

As a consequence of the diabolical forms Communism took, up to 1989, when the regime finally fell, and when a process of exorcising started especially at the level of movies and then at the level of literature, the whole Romanian book market was invaded by autobiographical, memorialistic books, correspondence and discussions, all being testimonies of one of Romania's darkest periods of time – Communism, something which made the Romanian philosopher and one of Steinhardt's disciples, Virgil Ciomoă, state in the afterword of the *Diary of Happiness*: "We are living in an age of confessions."⁵ What is even more interesting is the fact that not only victims came out in the daylight and confessed the tortures and suffering they had to go through, but also their torturers. The Romanian critic Daniel Cristea Enache says that all these books with an auto-biographical character have the same scope but tackle the same essence problem which they tend to solve in a different manner: they have all been projected on an axis of recuperating some truths and traumas indexed in the past regime.⁶ Moreover, these autobiographical books, through the simultaneity of the period approached, shock just through the variety of perspectives and approaches, weaving a common past in a multitude of threads.

One of the first books of this kind is *Diary of Happiness*, a book written by a former Jew in Romania who converted to Christianity in the Communist dungeons, and changed this traumatic experience in a book of transfiguration. The story of the book and the story of its writer are equally interesting and atypical.

First of all, who was Nicolae Steinhardt? Nicolae Steinhardt, a writer, publicist, literary critic and jurist, was born in 1912, in a family of Jewish people, with his father, Oscar Steinhardt a manager of a wood and timber factory. According to his own short autobiography written when asked to do penance by the Archbishop and his confessor, Father Serafim Man two years before he died, in 1987, in high-school he was the only Jewish boy who attended the religion classes, and got very good marks. He passed his Baccalaureate exams in 1929, afterwards reading law and letters, and became a Doctor in Juridical Sciences in 1936. He continued his studies abroad in France and England. During war, due to the fact that his father had been an officer in the Romanian Army in World War I, they had not suffered very much because of the repercussions of Antonescu's regime, and after 1947 when the Communist regime took over, he was not among its believers, partly because of his father's influence. In the meantime, he was feeling closer and closer to the Orthodox Christianity, and his visits to the church became more and more frequent, nevertheless, as he himself writes in his autobiography, he could not find the courage or the strength to make the step and become a Christian through baptism. At the same time, he became one of the group of intellectuals produced by and educated in the interbelic period, together with Constantin Noica, Emil Cioran, Mircea Eliade, Emil Ionesco and others. In 1959 the members of the group he was part of started to be arrested one by one, beginning with their leader the philosopher Constantin Noica, and then the rest of them, Nico-

⁵ Virgil Ciomoă, *Postfaă sau despre curajul de a crede* in Nicolae Steinhardt, *Jurnalul fericirii*, Foreword and notes by Virgil Ciomoă Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2000, p. 417.

⁶ Daniel Cristea Enache, *Toate-s bune (I)*, *Idei in dialog*, 5.01.2009, *Idei in Dialog*, October 2008.

lae Steinhardt being the last one; he was then asked by the Communist security to become a prosecution witness, which he refused after three days of thinking and his father's advice not to accept this by any means. As a consequence of his refusal, he was condemned together with the lot of intellectual prisoners named 'Noica-Pillat', a lot of 25 intellectuals, who were framed in this process which was meant to imprison them as they represented a threat for the regime, another wing of thinking. In prison, after being condemned to 12 years of forced labour, fearing he might not survive, he converted to Christianity being baptised in prison, and when being liberated, he wrote the *Diary of Happiness*. He was released in 1964, when all political prisoners were absolved of their penalty, that is when the regime changed its leaders. The first manuscript was nonetheless confiscated by the Security in 1972, and the second, rewritten out of memory, as well, and given to friends to preserve, got in the hands of the security again, as he was betrayed by one of these friends, Ion Caraion, a poet and a former tortured prisoner, turned by the regime into an instrument of terror himself. Also after going out of prison, he wanted to become a monk, which he did, after some time of searching for a monastery to settle down. He did find it and became a monk, at the Rohia Monastery, in Transylvania, at the same time continuing his literary preoccupations. He died in 1989, the year of the fall of Communism.

From the point of view of the discourse, both the diary and the memoirs have a profound autobiographical character, as they are, together with the autobiography itself, the most personal and subjective types of writing, being what James Olney called *periautography*⁷ i.e. "writing about or around the self." Nevertheless, while the discourse of the diary means the narration of the lived experience while living it or at least in the nearest most possible past, memoirs mean narrating the past events in an updated present, sometimes even with the change of perspective or opinions on the lived experience, as it has been filtered by the passage of years and by memory itself. As we find out in a book on autobiographical discourse, De Ronald Bedford, Lloyd Davis and Philippa Kelly emphasize one thing saying that

In comparing the diary mode with that of autobiography, Dean Ebner makes the interesting point that an autobiography is a life review, in which an individual undertakes to examine a personal life history. A diary, in contrast, purports to record a life in progress. Elaine McKay concludes on this basis that as readers we do not expect the same level of retrospective analysis in a diary that we do in an autobiography.⁸

Nevertheless, in Steinhardt's case, even though the book bears the title *Diary of Happiness*, and it has the form of a diary – the events have a date (sometimes the day, the month, the year, sometimes only the month and the year) – the diary is writ-

⁷ James Olney, *Memory and Narrative. The Weave of Life-Writing*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. VI; "The term was coined by Count Gian Artico di Porcia, when he issued the 'Proposal to the Scholars of Italy', calling for the scholars to write their intellectual memoirs for the educational benefit of the young."

⁸ De Ronald Bedford, Lloyd Davis and Philippa Kelly, *Early Modern English Lives: Autobiography and Self-Representation, 1500-1660*, Ashgate Publishing Company, Hampshire/Burlington, 1959, p. 185.

ten in retrospective, rather in the form of memoirs, so out of memory, narrating the things past in a time present, not as a proper diary which normally narrates events in their progress. Moreover, this auto-biographic diary, if we can call it that way, does not follow the chronological mode of diaries, it narrates an event, for example, of the narrator's childhood, then it narrates some event in prison, then again it goes back in time to a moment in the narrator's youth and so on. The self, which comes out shaped by the events told in the past, is a self that follows the mode of consciousness and memory, which do not remember life things chronologically, but rather an inner order of their own. The discourse becomes thus the discourse of the self to the self, and a confession addressed to God.

Moreover, among the different events narrated in this apparent chaos of the mind, there are also a set of strange insertions, all having the funny non-sense title: BUGHI MAMBO RAG, and which, as the reader figures out himself or herself, are the reproductions of the discussions or contests of general culture prisoners used to practise in prisons (a fact narrated in many other confessions and diaries) as a way of putting the mind to exercise so as to save themselves from rotting. These insertions have no dates, they are just sentences taken out of the context, mingled, they represent a plurality of voices that shapes a body of minds and souls who all struggle and become one in their attempt to survive. Here is one example:

BUGHI MAMBO RAG

I for one am from Brăila, but I was born in Buzău, in '77. There had come a Turkish war ship on the Danube to attack Brăila and my mother, skittish by her nature, ran away to Buzău where she gave birth to me... The bisector is the straight line that bisects an angle in two equal parts... There is no Romanian word for garrigue⁹, this is a phenomenon specific for the Karstic regions around the Mediterranean Sea and especially in the South of France... I have been thinking about it all night long and I remember: Simplizissimus is by Grimmelshausen, Der grüne Heinrich is by Gottfried Keller, and Galgenlieder are by Christian Morgerstern... If you don't mix the cocoa and the butter well, then you're trying in vain... yes, you know, it's true, sometimes when he pleased, the merchant went in the carriage alone, and behind him, in another carriage, his hat, and in a third carriage, all in a line, came his walking stick... what times!... we consider the circumcision a ceremonial rule, so it's out, but the Sabbath is in the Decalogue, so it stayed... You're killing me with your moral and ceremonial laws, you Adventists... tells Demetrios to Marcellus...¹⁰

These are the sort of discussions that represented the transcendental aspect of the prison, of those whose spirits and minds were strong and free enough to think of

⁹ *Garrigue* refers to the low-growing vegetation on the limestone hills of the Mediterranean coast. There are a bunch of bushy, fragrant plants that grow wild there, such as juniper, thyme, rosemary and lavender, and *garrigue* refers to the sum of them. Think herbes de Provence, or a mix of fresh minty-herbal notes with more pungent, floral fragrances.

¹⁰ Nicolae Steinhardt, *Jurnalul fericitii*. Foreword and notes by Virgil Ciomoă Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2000, p. 177 (my translation).

such aspects in the darkness of the prisons. Nicolae Steinhardt himself tells in another place of the diary, when recalling the moment the prisoners were transported from the prison of Jilava to that of Gherla: "Moved from Jilava to Gherla. In the police van we are sitting tightly packed like sardines in a box, over pressed by I don't know what kind of new electronic procedure of great efficiency, with laser, stereophony, hi-fi; unbelievable. May not God give man what he can endure: instead of groans and lamentations you can hear political or spicy memories, poetry, scientific controversies... I am stuck to Al. Bic., a writer and a poet, journalist and humorist, and has a great Masonic grade. I am unlucky, as he is a fat man, but I am lucky because he is merry and he can't keep his mouth shut."¹¹ These are just a few lines among many other, and the prisoners' activities were more often than not lectures on different subjects, according to the specialisation of each of them – literature, art, engineering, medicine, law – as the prisoners represented Romania's best intellectuals.

St. Augustine, one of the forerunners of Christian diary writing, writes the following:

There too [in the huge court of my memory] I encounter myself; I recall myself – what I have done, where and when I did it, and in what state of mind I was at the time. There are all the things I remember to have experienced myself or to have heard from others. From the same store too I can take out pictures of things which have either happened to me or are believed on the basis of experience; I can infer future actions, events, hopes, and then I can contemplate all these as though they were in the present.¹²

Nicolae Steinhardt can be inscribed in this line of tradition of Christian diary writing, where the self is shaped by the things he remembers, and thus it is memory itself which evokes and confesses, narrating things of 50 years before as if, just like St. Augustine, they were in the present:

1924 or 1925

Trip in a car. (A huge Pierce-Arrow in a light colour). I am on the back seat between my parents. On the road, suddenly, a church and a cross in the light of the sun. A strong sensation produced by the shining of the metallic cross and by its uniqueness in the scenery where everything is natural, only the cross is hand and soul made.¹³

Such memories from the childhood contrast powerfully with the sordid experiences in the prison, with, for example, the description of the guards:

Gherla, October, 1963

There humans among people. There is one rule, and the orders are the same. But not all the guards apply them in the same way. Some of them do it with ardent care, with diligence, with joy. A whole scenery. The Church, in the prison of Jilava, whose nickname is due to

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 209 (my translation).

¹² St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.20, 273 quoted in James Olney, *Memory and Narrative*, p. 3.

¹³ Nicolae Steinhardt, *Jurnalul fericirii*, p. 222 (my translation).

the fact that he swears only using this word because he knows he offends the believers (and he imagines that all political prisoners must be religious). The Marshal, a short man, unbelievably satisfied with his job and with himself, with high, cold, despising looks; he walks with a swagger as if he had swallowed an umbrella, a lance, a crankshaft; on the report, he walks in front of the line of prisoners with a satisfied smile, as Napoleon on the eve of the battle of Austerlitz – which, (without his aware), produces a great relaxation. The Cat, whose pleasure is to sneak in the cell and catch red handed those overcome by dozing off. And the rest: the cruel, the wild, the beaters, the distributors of isolation days and kneeled or under-the-bed hours. [...] We learn everyone's manias; so as to protect ourselves; so as to adjust ourselves; just like the girls in the brothel who know each client's hobby horse. [...] But life is not only in black and white and not all people are the same. There are also guards who don't apply the rules with the same diligence and who do not obey the orders without reflecting, [...] such as the one who tells us when he knows there are no informers around: 'If I were to apply the rules strictly, none of you would get out of here'.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the central point of the diary, which shines and eliminates all the dark aspects of the prisons and life, and which changes the whole experience in the prison in a transcendental one is the moment of baptism, which takes place behind the back of the guards. The lines which describe this moment is of extraordinary emotion, and they illustrate the existence of another reality in the reality of pain and suffering. Baptised by an Orthodox Christian priest from Basarabia, father Mina Dubzeu in an ecumenical gathering with two more Greek-Catholic priests, father Nicolae and father Iuliu, the act of baptising is performed. Bad luck turns into a happy twist of fate, darkness turns into light and sufferance into happiness:

15th March 1960

The catechisation is over. The baptism, planned for the 15th of the month, takes places as planned. Father Mina chooses the moment he considers most proper: upon the return from the air walk, when the guards are busier, when the agitation is maximum. We have to work fast and act clandestinely in front of everybody. Wells's conspiracy. Something similar to the manoeuvres of Antonov-Ovseienko. I for one won't go out to have a walk. (That's easy, as the boot robbed my right foot sore the day before). I couldn't go to the infirmary even though I went to report every morning. Doctors Raileanu and Al.-G. treat me by applying a piece of cloth dimmed in wormy water on my swelling. [...] So I stay alone for about fifteen minutes as the air walk lasts – that is almost alone as there are still some more prisoners in the cell who were also allowed to stay for different reasons. Empty by noise and fuss, the room takes an even stranger aspect, like an empty scene where the properties find their place at random. And what is even more striking is the sonorous difference from the full room and I have the feeling of an absolute silence – the silence becomes, as Cervantes says, a performance and I can calm down, recollect my thoughts for a while. When the flood of people comes in with great noise, carrying in pairs the trough, the tub, the bucket and a reserve of water, father Mina, without taking off his coat, rushes to the only cup in the room – a red small cup, with the enamel broken, filthy and

¹⁴ Ibidem, pp. 234-235.

repulsive, and fills it with wormy water newly brought by the reserve he was carrying and by another prisoner. He, with the two Greek-Catholic priests and the god-father come to my bed. Two prisoners go in front of the peep hole, to cover it. The guard could come any time to look inside, but now, when the prisoners are taken out or back in, is less likely. In a rush, but with a priestly mastery where haste does not embarrass clear diction – father Mina utters the necessary words, marks me with the sign of the cross, pours over my head and shoulders all the content of the cup and baptizes me in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. I have also confessed briefly: baptism clears away all the sins. I am born again out of wormy water and fast spirit. [...] Who was christened as a child cannot know what baptism is. I am overcome by waves and waves of happiness. [...] So it's true: it's true that baptism is a holy sacrament, that there are the Holy Sacraments. Otherwise the happiness that surrounds me, embraces me, dresses me up, wins me over wouldn't be so unbelievably beautiful. Silence. And an absolute carelessness. Towards everything. And a sweetness. In my mouth, in my veins, in my muscles. [...] And the novelty: new, I am a new man; where do these freshness and novelty come? [...] Baptism is a discovery.¹⁵

And it is this discovery, this novelty and this happiness that urge Nicolae Steinhardt to confess in the form of the diary, and through the new feelings that embrace him and the lines also sprung from the novelty of the being and of soul his new self comes out happy, new and with a gratitude to the life that made him know this experience. His new baptised self creates a balance between the code of the prisons and the aesthetical and ethical code of religion and art. For Nicolae Steinhardt art is God, culture is God and this is the reason why the escape, both for him, and for the rest of the intellectuals, his colleagues imprisoned with him in the lot Noica-Pillat is the refuge in conversations about culture, art and religion: "The work of art offers a state similar to the (Greek *isihia*) (Peace + Peace of the Soul + Happiness, that is religious LPSF, parallel to the basic formula CHON in the organic life)."¹⁶ Moreover, the aesthetical code is made up of quotations and reflections from and on both literary or artistic texts and the Biblical text, for Steinhardt there being no rupture between the two aspects – the religious and the cultural-artistic one, both being ways for the spirit to overcome the body:

Bucharest, 1971

Sin against the Holy Spirit: the one which cannot be forgiven. I wonder whether this means the abasement of our fellow creature – who is God's image and likeness. Since we prove our love to God by loving our fellow (this means His being), the proof of blasphemy isn't it in this case hating and scoffing him, reducing him to an object, that is treating him as if he were spiritless? Isn't really the Christian able to understand what Simone de Beauvoir formulated so well: that the basis of any moral is respecting the other's freedom, considering him as a being whose freedom cannot be taken?¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibidem, pp. 83-85.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 240; CHON stands for carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, azoth.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 249.

This is the context in which Nicolae Steinhardt writes the spiritual map of his becoming a Christian and the reflections embedded in the structure of this map. He manages to turn sufferance into happiness of the spirit in a way similar to that of another Jew who yet remained, as she preferred, on the threshold, Simone Weil, who stated that “the most terrible paradox of the Christian freedom is that being chosen by God means being left by him.”¹⁸ In a similar manner Nicolae Steinhardt transfigures the physical experiences and even thanks life for the beauty it has brought him.

Among the elements that create the universe of the diary, beside the transfiguration that the moment of baptism creates in his mind and soul, there are certain ideas that represent the backbone of the text: one of them and which is also to be found in Simone Weil’s texts is the intelligence of faith – an admirable apology of the intelligence of action needed and sometimes understood as a promotion of inactivity by some Christian priests and even believers:

29th August, 1964

I see red when I see people taking Christianity with stupidity, with a sort of dumb and cowardly piety, a sort of *bondieuserie* (aunt Alice’s expression), as if Christianity is meant to let the world be defiled by the forces of evil [...]. Denis de Rougemont: Let us not judge the others, but when my neighbour’s house is burning, I don’t sit and pray and be better; I’m calling the firemen, I’m running to the fountain. If not, it means I’m conceited and I don’t love my neighbour.¹⁹

And he goes on giving examples from the Bible in which people are told to take action and not to accept the forces of the evil. What Nicolae Steinhardt does all along the diary is eliminating time in its chronological, emptying form and creating a universe of spirituality over that of the cruel reality: he thus opposes the harsh and beastly interrogatories at the security to the intelligence of faith, the cruel condition of physical suffering to the act of baptising and happiness, the trauma and torture to love, the code of the prisons to that of art, culture, religion. At the end, the self, stranded in the apparently scattered lines of his story, is born new and ready to smile to the world. As we are suggested at the beginning, where we are given three types of surviving a concentration universe (Soljenitin’s solution- the accepted, assumed, anticipated, provoked death; Zinoviev’s solution – carelessness and insolence; Churchill’s and Bukowski’s solution – courage accompanied by a crazy merri-ment – we are free to choose a solution to survive, that is to re-act.²⁰ To the solutions proposed, in a political testament at the beginning of the diary, Nicolae Steinhardt proposes a fourth, indirectly, through the diary: culture, art, religion which ensure transfiguration and happiness. His solution had been told to him by his own father, in those three days which the Security had given him to think: to become a prosecution witness or not? The answer was simple:

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 257.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 18.

²⁰ Ibidem, pp. 6-9.

31st December, 1959

It's true, my father says, you will have very difficult days. But you'll have peaceful nights (I have to repeat what he told me, I must, otherwise I would be unfaithful to God) you will sleep well. While if you accept to become a prosecution witness, it's true, you will have pretty good days, but your nights will be awful. You won't be able to wink an eye. You will have to live on sleeping pills and sedatives; tortured and dozing off all day long, while terribly awake at night. You will toss and turn, like a lunatic. Come on! Don't hesitate!²¹

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²¹ Nicolae Steinhardt, *Jurnalul fericirii*, p. 24 (my translation).