

UNIVERSITY OF ART AND DESIGN – CLUJ NAPOCA

VISUAL ARTS DOCTORATE THESIS

- ABSTRACT -

THE MYTH OF SACRIFICE –

CONTEMPORARY FIGURATIVE ART METAMORPHOSES

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The Doctorate Thesis in Visual Arts, entitled “The Myth of Sacrifice-Contemporary Figurative Art Metamorphoses” is comprised of five sections,

fifteen subsections, appendixes with references and aspects of the last two personal exhibitions in a structure whose contents we present below:

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The doctorate thesis “The Myth of Sacrifice – Contemporary Figurative Art metamorphoses” is meant to carry out an introspection into the subtle morphology of creation, of artwork, having as key references, named in the second part of the paperwork as *case studies*, some artists of contemporary figurative art, ending in an exemplification of a synthesis of the personal creation whose subject is explicitly developed within the proposed theme.

The first section – *Myth of history, legend and art*, after a brief review of some universal myths including the sacrificial phenomena, Orpheus, Prometheus, Pygmalion myths, we referred to the two fundamental myths of Romanian culture, the myth of Romanian ancestral specific, *Miorița* and the myth of walling, of creation, by assumed oblation, The Master Builder Manole myth. The creation myth with the sacrifice implication refers to the man capacity to find the truth by absolute devotion when the essentialized cosmic forces, in the categories of time and space, participate to the staging of sacrifice long before the act itself occurs. Only in this way, the human being is really integrated in the superhuman, managing to animate both the architectonic body raised as axis mundi and the cosmic wholeness. It is a vocation of Romanian spirituality to renew itself by oblation, by tenacious practice of perpetual return to the original and inexhaustible beginnings of the myth. The same section includes a vision on cosmic transcendental and dimension of the myth, as well as a current perspective on sacrifice myth. The myth embodies a cultural form that reflects or directly refers to ancestral, archetypal phenomenon, to actions repeating the primordial creation, setting transcendental spiritual references which become existential models. Unfortunately, “avant-garde” orientations emerge in contemporaneity sacrificing the tradition and desacralizing the sacrifice, in artistic trends that can be only ephemeral.

In section two, *Sacrifice, condition of creation*, starting from researching the first meanings of sacrificial phenomenon, we followed the various forms and connotations during history, trying to actually decipher the primordial meaning, of profound significance, the sacrifice, in its atemporal

transcendence. The sacrifice meaning is radically changed by Christian morale, projecting it to the absolute good creation, of the creating creation in its turn, the sacrifice becomes a symbol of an immortal embryo just by providing immortality by cultivating the gift, of positive giving of each one, we are born with and with which we have to enter in a natural harmony from the beginning. The sacrifice is integer part of intimate mechanisms' structure of human consciousness, of human definition; it is just the cultural expression of ontological mutation that detached the man from the universe, from the nature, from any other terrestrial being. The sacrifice is for human being a destiny both individual and social, as well as a historical destiny. If the archaic sacrifice, as fundamental anthropological act, was in essence violence, more or less aware by itself, during the time, it experienced in various cultural areas, various transformations, tendencies generally ascensional to a more profound understanding of the ancestral bond between human, divinity and creation. Therefore, the new meaning of sacrifice brought by Christianity actually offers us the meaning of a spiritual ascension which the human being should follow, the entire mankind, for as much the art that has an overwhelming role even in this mission of perpetual ennoblement of human sensitivity.

J. Grenier notices some of the most important connections of sacrifice with the complex process of the creating act: "Destruction is not a terminus, as we can believe at first sight, but a starting point, a stimulant. Either if it is about a victim actually sacrificed or only symbolically, the destruction action triggers all kind of things that are creations, material creations, spiritual creations, social creations... Therefore, there is a way of creation that is the destruction, however strange may look, and we begin to understand due to the notion of sacred. The sacred offers a regeneration possibility by the way of destruction¹"

It is obvious that this organic connection between sacrifice and creation is a universal phenomenon that was and will be the reason of great civilizations' development, of mankind masterpieces. From the perspective of psychology,

¹ Grenier, Jean --, "Art and Its Issues" - Ed. Meridiane – Bucharest, 1974

Ștefan Odobleja gives us a similar concept: “Any creation must be preceded by a negation. Everything should be criticized, not to trust anything, to doubt everyone. Automatically, like in suction, the personal thinking shall fill the gap created by the critics. The creating activity is directly related with the critical spirit... Avoiding the common, at the same time, we must avoid the fall in abnormal. The sacrifices the creator imposes to himself do not remain without compensation.” Manole is the example of the artist whose personality is transfigured by the revelation of creation by reaching the absolute in love, as a consequence of assuming the sacrificial gesture. He identifies himself at the same time with its creation and with the supreme sacrifice for this. The perfect communion of the two entities offers him the necessary energy to complete his work. The sacrifice becomes, in this way, the real and supreme measure of human nature.

The third section, *Creation, existential premise*, proposes, in the three subsections, the deciphering of creation interconnections with the dimensions of temporal and atemporal between mystery and reason. J. Grenier notices an aspect that we later identify in the statements of some artists or other authors, and namely, the fact that the route of the entire approach of creation, which is not but a continuous self-becoming, a leap of knowledge, appears in the end, more important than the work itself. Relating his research to the fundamental characteristics as universality, absolute, atemporal, he reaches considerations, otherwise logically grounded, integrating the art, creation, in a life attitude the historic time is modulating without changing its essence. One of the first features of the artist he shows in relation with divinity is the fact that the artist is a “secondary cause – is a subordinate”, having at the same time a “certain liberty of creation” ... likewise, “the creating act is more important than the creation... (this) is a consequence, a resultant”², statement aiming at a profound introspection of the creating act, we can find also in the assertions of H. Bernea and Marin Gherasim. This alchemy of the creating process, these explorations

² Grenier, Jean –, *Art and Its Issues*” - Ed. Meridiane – Bucharest, 1974

of an abyssal dialogue more or less tormenting between the inside world and the outside world of the artist, haunted not rarely by contradicting anxieties, by existential anguishes, by obsessive dreams, we could say that, most of the times, it begins with an introspection type which we can call a meditation by inside self-censorship, an act inside light “cleaning” of shades or darkness. Henri Delacroix, in *Psychology of Art*, makes a series of remarks in this respect, researching the creation phenomenon with a peculiar spirit of analysis delimiting specific typologies, one of them being as a religious type meditation – “mystic contemplation”. In his opinion, “a part of creation is completed ... in a kind of dream. Even when we have the impression that we select a subject by a sort of decree, we could say that the subject selected us first...The artist conquers inspiration; he connects an analysis to an ecstasy. But we can not deny the fact that an important part of a work of some importance ... is carried out under the control of labor and reflexivity. If there is delirium in art, it is always a dominated delirium, but for many artists, the difficulty consists in granting an extraordinary spontaneity with the imagination always awake, with critical judgment and with rational order of thinking. The artistic creation resembles, by some of its aspects, to mystical contemplation that, in its turn, can go from confused discourse to accurate visions.³”

We consider that this basic human phenomenon can be identified in *an essential dimension of human existence in universe, dimension placed at the borders between lucidity and mystery, between science and religion, between death and immortality*. The creation is the natural breath of renouncing the earthly limits, the sterile ephemeral, the natural breath of gaining self-consciousness and consciousness of the other in the abyssal profoundness, is the ascendant transfiguring act of cultural value amplification. *The creation is the second half of the sacrifice, as the sacrifice is the other half of the creation.*

³ Henri Delacroix, “Psychology of Art” Ed. Meridiane Bucharest983

The masterpiece is the fruit of this communion emerging when the creator is merged with this antinomic entity.

In the fourth section, *Romanian Meaning of Sacrifice Myth*, we return within the Romanian mythical thinking in which the self-sacrifice becomes in this way the oblation, offer freely consented or imposed by the conjuncture in which what is sacrificed exists. On all levels, macrocosmic, medium and microscopic levels, Creation is permanently renewed, its changes assuming sacrifices the man projects them in a sacred dimension when he hopes for their recovering in the respective religious dimension, considered of a superior quality than the concrete, terrestrial one. The belief in sacred thus becomes a bridge between the creation giving and the sacrifice act, in popular tradition, many daily actions being loaded with sacrality. The Romanian meaning of sacrifice myth is differentiated by other hypostases and meanings through establishing a conceptual balance avoiding a sacrilegial extremism, the nature usually being the ones that takes the oblation, in order to absorb it in a regenerating way in its repetitive immanence. Because the Middle Age art, by the biblical representation specificity, remains a reference of the sacrifice myth in the deep layers of the consciousness of any creator, we dedicate a section to some exemplifications of its area, examples offering iconographical models from the Christian areal and permanently circulating since ancient times, giving ideational and visual sub-stratum to the sacrifice theme, becoming myth when it is correlated to some popular concepts and digressing its expressions to atemporal.

The fifth section, *Sacrifice myth – Contemporary Figurative Art Metamorphoses*, illustrates in the most consistent part of thesis just the sacrificial phenomenon transcendence in contemporary art by bringing some examples of contemporary artists and, in the end, to make up an analytical synthesis on the personal creation explicitly illustrating the basic theme of the present thesis. In the area of Romanian contemporary figurative art, there are not so many artists with constant consequent interests and referring directly to

the sacrifice theme. Sometimes, the idea of sacrifice is present in mythological or religious influence subjects, the interest for myth introspection in general, being more or less frequent in artists of surrealism or belonging to the postmodernism of Romanian art. From various generations, with approaching tendencies of different creation, we could name a series of artists in whose creation the area of search in the mythological field (sometimes with references to the sacrificial field) takes a certain place, especially mentioning several outstanding personalities in whose creation we find out reference works that are placed more or less obviously in the universe of sacrificial phenomenon: **Vladimir Zamfirescu, Paul Gherasim, Marin Gherasim, Horia Bernea,**

Without observing a special iconography, mostly in the Orthodox space, the painting of Vladimir Zamfirescu has a spiritual, Christian component, its universe is mostly made on biblical reality (Eve, Expelling, Cain and Abel, Moses, Salome's Dance, Jacob's Ladder, The Kiss of Judas etc), accepting the feeling of guilt, mistake, sacrifice and the need of atonement.

The work of V. Zamfirescu brings us in front of a postmodern spirit that reevaluates well-known cultural segments, suggesting in his painting a theme invoking the great themes of humanity and intrudes in a history engaging the consciousness in a profound manner.

Paul Gherasim is a master of figurative synthesis. The artist permanently takes an initiatic journey to an archetypal spring of painting origins. From there he is "beatified" with the water of this spring and extracts the substance of its works of a transfiguring "simplicity". This apparent simplicity becomes a synthesis-symbol, transcendent message of light secret. In the cycle of "Octagon" works, the master focuses in a simple, clear image, at a first glance, the potentiality of an entire universe at the same time with his Master Builder. The artist searches to "stuff the world in a sign".

In the works of Marin Gherasim we discover since the beginning the transfiguration of the sacrificial element, by the central approach of his creation, "entanglement and disentanglement", construction and

deconstruction, approach which in fact is the inner mechanism of creation, just through these antinomic dimensions. The artist in “Workshop Diary” confesses the fact that this obsessive concern of reconstruction has become in time a main theme.

The concept of Marin Gherasim about the art status is the perpetual search of truth and morality. Therefore, the art (mostly the painting) has as main feature not the seduction, but *the morality*; the art is both beautiful and *true*. The art starts with sensorial but does not remain at this level. It starts from the surface of things in order to reach a level of profoundness and, in this way, to catch the essences. The Arch, the Gates, resembling the royal gates of the churches, the Threshold, the Throne, the Apse, the Armor – liturgical cloak, the Shield form the frame for searching the Truth. The forms are more and more purified, clear architectures, inside which, many times, the figurative accident becomes the sign of turmoil, of decrypting the life and soul moves.

Horia Bernea explored since the beginning the “unseen” and eternal depths of existentiality in its essentiality. Horia Bernea always had the deep understanding of the sacrificial phenomenon the creation imposes: “Each artist should consider his vocation as a gift from God, that is as a “burden” and as an obligation to be fructified. Such an artist has the mission of a guardian, keeper of a spiritual thesaurus, an identity source of him and the others. At the same time, he should help and incite the others to communicate with their own roots – a role that is essentially connected, for us, by orthodox tradition. The acceptance of this mission, engagement of his profound being in this respect, gives that artist his true investiture; facing a world threatened by disintegration, forced to deny the basic references of his existence, the artist should participate to **the sacrifice meaning** that redeemed the world, **he should “save” himself.**

The cycle of “Vexillum” and “The Columns” works, projected to the “unseen” transcendent conceptually arguments the artist: “This bi-dimensionality avoids ab initio everything that is an allusion to tridimensional, runs from idolatrous.

Therefore, it can not be but as the word... This could be an argument but it should be largely debated. Thus, to paint mostly by nature, means, in a way, to permanently contemplate the divine walling”.

Marcel Muteanu is a reference and remains a reference in eternity because he is in the same being with its creation from pre-existence. The sacrifice metaphysics is shown out in most of its works or cycle of works, in which he offers us an intuitive reading of an archetypal symbolistics. He remains a spirit designated to last in time memory, by the confessions of his art that seems to return to us an identity lost by revelation of an unknown, with own ways and means. The cycle of “shirts” works of the artist is a proof of the extraordinary sensitivity of recovering the central symbols of Romanian culture spirituality. The myth of The Master Builder Manole transferred into the artist imaginary the state and meaning of the sacrificial act, the artist creating his own esthetic coordinating on mythological revelation in the object art.

The end of this thesis research, whose theme can be a never-ending challenge of interdisciplinary analysis of sacrificial gesture implication in artistic creation, is the section dealing with personal creation, in which I was concerned by an apparently inexplicable course of the destiny that is, in fact, fully justified in the noetic plane of predestination. Understanding towards totality, of artistic creation, understanding in depth, that we can categorize it as a fourth dimension of understanding, is destined to the hidden essence center, or to the atemporal nucleus of the human being, to the place in which the Holy Spirit is living. In this place, our entity lives, of the MAN, the hidden one, the last profoundness level of our existence, the human being absolute with which the creator builds his work and with which the watcher onlooker perceives the created work world. On this last level that should be in fact a floor of a continuous spiritual ascension, our personality exists inevitably manifesting by “depth”. The never-ending spaces of creation emerge from these depths. Unfortunately, we do not understand always the profoundness moment, we

miss it many times, or we independently pass the will, over depths of perceived “reality” due to our internal inconsequence. The artist remakes with his material means the ineffable of these human being depths. Approaching for exemplification some essential themes constituting a concern not constant, but ascendant in my creation, an introspection of sacrificial phenomenon in the creative process, I synthesized an obvious theme in this respect: The myth theme of *The Master Builder Manole*, of *Icarus*, of creator’s *Condition*, of human destiny, as existential stage in Universe in *Final*, and implicitly other thematic directions that have the same “ascendant” concern, of human natural breath of its sacrificial nature: *Self-portrait*, *Apophatic Evidence of The Master Builder Manole*, *Creation*, *Work Making*, etc.

In *The Master Builder Manole* theme, the creator walls his work in the space that becomes in fact an atemporal dimensions, the two worlds being comprised one in the other. The seen things fulfill the unseen ones and the unseen ones fulfill the seen one. In this dimension, the two worlds are not divided by anything, the creator constructs his work just by the assumed

sacrifice or by its consubstantiality with the creation. Manole decides the destiny of its work in the moment in which he understands the mystery of the work immortality in itself,



he understands his destiny grandeur, consubstantial with his work destiny.



The creator's *condition*, of the artist, is that of always remaining with the internal being torn by the anxiety of expression towards totality, towards the absolute that remains always a chimera in a daring fight with the ephemeral. The metamorphosis of his being gets unsuspected forms in the effort of



remaining in being, simultaneous with the access in the work being and the comprising of the cosmic infinite of it.



The myth of *Icarus* is part of the same area of walling oblation myths but with other connotations other than of the Master Builder



Manole. Icarus and his father, Dedalus, construct as well as Manole a work that has to last. They were born to create the complete work but the unwritten law of great creation includes, in a form or another, the emergence of sacrifice in a certain step of work construction. The energy balancing the father disturbed transforms the existential course of Dedalus in a tragic Golgotha, Icarus signifying the sacrificed entity. Dedalus apparently stays alive after the flight in the labyrinth but, moreover, the punishment gets boundless dimensions.

The condition of Icarus of the artist is balanced only by his capacity to assimilate the wisdom of gradual knowledge, the sacrificial act being different by the leap in consciousness. The possibility of erupting towards the sun of the being can be concluded with a failure, not being yet prepared to assimilate the



new faces of universal truth.

„The Moment represents the very sign on

the absolute and the particularization of the Infinite. Any word or saying authentically tragic is a moment of this type; it represents the individual’s getting through as detaching from the Absolute. A new life is

consequently called for self-realization. We live this Moment as a dissolution



of the absolute within the reality, but in the same time

we live it as a reminiscence of this absolute. The new

element of this moment exists in the dimensional state

between Being and Non-being.”⁴ In the End the only

existing reality is the relocation and foundation of a

new knowledge. The limited existence can become non-

limitative or generating of “boundless” just by the

power of knowledge. The person that is “relatively” finite but its knowledge is

infinite. *THE END* “is that commutative moment of time: by death passing

from one existential dimension to another, from a time to another, from a life to

another.”⁵

“Collective dream of humanity”, as Eliade names it, the myth gets in *Apothatic Evidence* a connotation, a meaning of life already embodied in

himself, the human existence

living the myth in the stages of



ului, p.138, Ed. Paideia, București-2000
d. Humanitas 2005

predetermined transcendental. The simultaneous appearance of universality and personality coincides with a transfer of ontology that passes from the myths' exteriority to the consciousness in itself understood as a transcendental reference, as an expression of a profound anthropological structure. The supreme example of sacrifice, Christic example, was the crucifixion of Jesus that watches us in eternity, whispering in His hyper-humbleness that He stretched His arms in crucifixion in order to embrace us always, in eternity, in each moment. "Man belongs to the skies as well as he belongs to earth; he is the son of both. Man has detached himself long ago from the skies ... We leave a solar frame of time to enter a tenebrous frame – The Sun has darkened its light" – written somewhere in the Apocalypse.

The Sacrifice represents the transformation of the Creation process into a Sacred process. Through the sublimation of the inner feelings, the sacrifice becomes a continuous spiritual growth into the eternal abyss of Light, the very spiritual growth of the nucleus of light we are all born with.

This alchemy found in the creation process, these explorations of an abyssal dialogue between the outer and the inner world of the artist can be more or less painful, when the artist is haunted by contradictory anxieties, by existential anguishes and obsessive dreams. We could say that this alchemy starts with a type of introspection that could also be a meditation made through inner censor. This self-censor is in fact an act of 'cleansing' the inner light from shadows and dark. The side of the undertaken sacrifice is equal to a breath, being in fact the cause for why the creator disappears gradually within her/his own masterpiece, being the side of the energetic dimension that transfigures everything. The breath of the creator is the created masterpiece itself, the creation being nothing else than a transcendental exercise of continuous dance of life and death altogether, where a universal symbiosis is created for the creation of the masterpiece in the Infinite.

Concluding, we could affirm about creation that this human basic phenomenon can be identified in an essential dimension of human existence in

universe, dimension located at the borders between lucidity and mystery, between science and religion, between death and immortality. The creation is the natural breath of renouncing the earthly limits, the sterile ephemeral, the natural breath of gaining self-consciousness and consciousness of the other in the abyssal profoundness, is the ascendant transfiguring act of cultural value amplification. The creation is the second half of the sacrifice, as the sacrifice is the other half of the creation. The masterpiece is the fruit of this communion emerging when the creator is merged with this antinomic entity.

We conclude only apparently this study, considering the subject as permanently opened and inexhaustible of the existence of sacrificial phenomenon in creation, placing us in the ethnic concept universe of creation elaborated as supreme meaning of human existence according to which the historical destiny of people, full of vicissitudes, proposed to us a unique way to keep our ethnic identity, essential value of any civilization – surviving through culture. The destined historical unfulfillment could have been counterbalanced only the amazing vigor of creation, creativity feeling awareness, accomplished with the price of assumed oblation, condition of surviving.

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